



# Emerging from the pandemic

Communicating with customers and employees post-COVID-19

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BY ANDREA LEKUSHOFF

Checking in on team members to see how they are feeling is important, especially as people slowly return to work.

**A**fter many months of COVID-19-related shutdowns or modifications, Canadian franchises have now re-opened to varying degrees across the country.

As they work to balance guidance from their parent companies with the needs of their local communities, franchise owners are grappling with how and what to communicate to employees and customers alike.

If and when this pandemic passes, employees and customers will have long memories. To successfully navigate the transition back to regular business, franchisees must demonstrate compassion, empathy, and a real human touch. The following are some critical factors franchise owners should consider to communicate effectively with stakeholders throughout this transitional time.

## Be open and honest with the public

People appreciate honesty, especially now. Let the public know the franchise is doing everything possible to keep them safe, and ask for their assistance in return.

The smallest incident could cause tremendous harm to one's reputation, so be clear and forthright. Franchisees should use social media and their website to explain plans to bring people back to the premises, set expectations up-front for what the experience will be like, and what will be expected from them. Sharing this information up-front will help customers prepare for their visit, which will help to smooth the whole interaction.

This is an opportunity for franchisees to demonstrate how much they care about their customers. Every health-related measure implemented is another way

to partner with the community to avoid spreading COVID-19, and it will go a long way to upholding a positive reputation.

## Work with the parent company

Franchisees are naturally required to follow the guidance from their franchisors. But one size no longer fits all.

Local business owners will likely have a better perspective on what is going on in their community than a national or international company. Open clear lines of communication with the parent will help a franchisee apply specific regional requirements in accordance with the franchisor's expectations.

Also be sure to talk about what the parent company is doing to drive business back locally. Customers have spent most of 2020 unlearning the habit of coming into the business, and now is the time to bring them back. Work with the franchisor to develop communication strategies that will assure the public it is safe to come back.

Something the parent company could also help franchisees with is to understand their obligations and rights. For example, can they insist customers


wear a mask and sanitize their hands, or only strongly suggest it? What are the liabilities if such rules are not enforced, and what are the best practices in communicating them?

## Find new ways to be a local champion

Whether by sponsoring kids' sports teams or setting up a booth at a neighbourhood event, small business owners have traditionally played a big role in their local communities. Now, of course, many of those opportunities no longer exist. But to keep local ties alive and vibrant, it is important to find new ways to offer support and be visible in the community.

Think about ways the franchise can show compassion for its city or town by helping protect people from COVID-19. That could mean donating personal protective equipment (PPE) to a long-term care facility, delivering food or supplies to those in need, or donating funds to groups of individuals who are at risk and need even more support right now. These efforts, of course, should be in line with the parent company's guidance.

The more franchisees can remain visible locally, the more the community will remember them as



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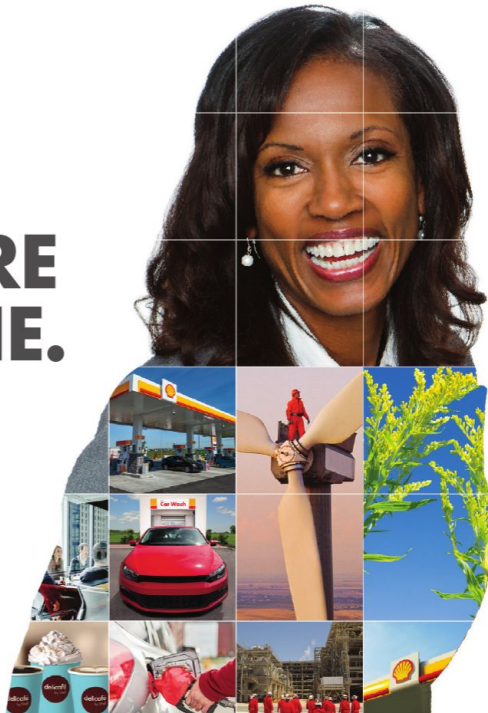






Photo by Elle Hughes from Pexels



Working with your team to help the community goes a long way towards establishing a positive reputation with your customers.

a caring, involved business owner, and they will reward them with their patronage. In doing so, the franchise is building a reputation today that will last long into the future.

### Bring humanity to communications

As a local business owner, putting a real face on all communications is critical. This is true when communicating with the public, of course, but also with employees.

Do not worry about ‘massaging the message,’ focus on showing one’s true self. It is okay not to have all the answers. The team will respond well when an owner acknowledges how hard things are, speaks from the heart, and makes sure employees know how much everything they are doing is greatly appreciated.

Because actions speak louder than words, there are things franchisees should just do because they are the right thing to do—that is where the focus should be. For instance, work alongside the team while respecting public health guidelines for distancing and mask-wearing shows everyone is in it together.

### Be prepared with basic crisis-communication principles

The following is a list of basic behaviours business leaders should include in their plans. They sound intuitive, but when a crisis comes up, it can be hard to remember the basics.

Keep these close at hand when needing to respond to a specific local crisis, and be sure to work with the franchisor to ensure a co-ordinated and endorsed approach.

- Face the problem directly. Ignoring an issue only prompts the media to keep asking more questions.
- Make sure to comment, as being silent only invites others to interpret one’s thoughts and actions for themselves; get out in front and communicate what is important, and avoid ‘no comment’ responses entirely.
- Preparing communications in advance allows one to respond quickly by getting statements out as early as possible.
- Acknowledge the severity of the problem. Be candid about how serious the situation really is, letting people know they can expect openness and honesty from the franchise.
- Take control of the story. Do not just let the story evolve; own it from the start, explaining what is happening and what is being done about it.
- Correct lies and misinformation. Narratives change throughout a crisis; however, franchisees should make sure theirs remains true.
- Commit to honesty and transparency at all times, across all audiences. Lies or half-truths are hard to recover from once they are discovered.
- Do not play the blame game, and vow not to create hostility by assigning blame or avoiding responsibility. Take ownership and be accountable.
- Speak plainly, openly, and with empathy, because people can spot false optimism or ‘spin’ in an instant; it will almost certainly come back to hurt the franchise.
- Make the leaders visible. The more leaders are seen, the more people know they care.

### Listen, get personal, and prioritize people’s needs

Franchisees have surely been working extraordinarily hard these last few months, making plans, adjusting schedules, trying to make it all work. That said, franchisees should consider if they have remembered to take the time to really listen to their people. It is important to talk directly with the teams to get a sense of how they are feeling.

Respect the new realities that people are facing. Instead of dictating the terms of their return to work, ask the team for their input, and be open to creating individual solutions based on individual needs.

Many are taking care of children or loved ones and cannot commit to their work the way they did before. Others could have lingering anxieties

or might be willing to work on a revised schedule. Others could have suggestions on improving how to serve customers, so do not neglect this great source of information and connection. Be willing to explore options that will make the team feel comfortable and safe.

Also, encourage employees to take time for themselves when not at work—to go for walks, work out, or whatever they need—and personally model that behaviour. One can talk about how their personal activities are helping him/her stay healthy, sane, and productive.

As employees return to work, provide PPE and ensure the business follows all the recommended protocols for distancing and cleanliness. Make it clear people's health and well-being is of utmost importance.

### Teach the team to act healthy

It may take franchise owners a little out of their comfort zone, but now is a great time to assume the role of health and wellness coach for employees. Health advice could be exactly what the team needs to get back to feeling themselves, so look for ways to provide it. It can be as simple as sharing links to

online workouts, healthy cooking tips, or information about boosting their immunity through food, exercise, and sleep.

Share resources with the team which are trustworthy and valuable. The internet is overflowing with advice, so make sure the experts are respected in their fields.

It has never been more critical to be intentional about health. The more franchisees can encourage their team to take their health seriously, the better they will feel and the more productive they will be at work. **CBF**



Andrea Lekushoff has almost three decades of experience as a trusted advisor for some of the most respected national and global brands, and her team has a range of franchise experience. As president of Broad Reach Communications, she focuses on corporate communications, brand building, and crisis and reputation management. She can be reached via email at [alekushoff@brpr.ca](mailto:alekushoff@brpr.ca).

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