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The 4 C's of a Hotel's COVID Communications Toolkit: Important Messaging and Touch Points to Consider for Re-Opening

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Special Edition: COVID-19 Crisis



As destinations around the globe begin to “reopen” and lead the way toward recovery, branded and independent hotel operators alike need to ensure that marketing is in place to inform guests and encourage some semblance of the desire to travel again. With that in mind, consider the following: In traditional marketing, we learn about the 4 P’s of the marketing mix – product, price, place and promotion. As we have learned to flip this perspective to that of the guest, we replace these 4 P’s with the 4 C’s of a marketing mix: Customer Solution, Cost, Convenience and Communication. This approach to a marketing mix tells us to always consider the guest perspective first and enable a two-way relationship instead of a one-way “stand on your soapbox” approach.

There is also a formula for the 4 C’s of Marketing Communications: Clarity, Credibility, Consistency and Competitiveness. Since circumstances have dealt 2020 a gut-wrenching blow, we have envisioned a new set of 4 C’s -- the 4 C’s of marketing communications in a COVID and post-COVID world. Consider instead: Compassion, Comfort, Clarity, Credibility. To translate, this new set of C’s encourages public relations and marketing professionals to ensure that messaging shares a sense of care - for our associates, our guests, our stakeholders. We truly care about one’s situation. “Comfort” refers to sharing information about safety, security, sanitation – the practices a guest would want to understand before taking that first staycation, flight, train trip. “Clarity” means it’s very important, as it always has been, to be specific and transparent, avoiding ambiguity in the messaging one shares. “Credibility” refers to multiple criteria: 1) that the hotel is delivering the marketing promise and executes the safety, security and sanitation operational steps; and 2) that the hotel is communicating

and not “selling” or coming across as insensitive or inappropriate during a delicate and uncertain time in our history.

With this in mind, what steps should we consider to message? And does sequence of channels matter?

1. Operations and Training:

Safety precautions and hotel updates must be communicated clearly to employees before the property is externally marketed. Whether it's through the HR department or Executive Office, the operational changes and staff training are critical. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) can include and of course are not limited to: wearing gloves and masks; repeated cleaning of public spaces, guestrooms and more; installation of plexi barriers, hand sanitizing stations, checking body temperatures. Departmental discussions with staff are necessary in all areas: housekeeping, front office, reservations, and more.

Will buffets no longer be the norm? Will we find breakfast consists of individually wrapped items such as sandwiches, muffins, and granola bars? Will hand sanitizing stations be placed in high-contact public areas such as the lobby or meetings rooms? We must inform employees and internal stakeholders first. Ownership/management should also refer to the appropriate State guidelines and coordinate for implementation. What's key to point out here is that the operation implements modifications for COVID-19 first of course, and training must be in place before any marketing to external audiences.

2. On Property Signage / Reservations Department Scripting:

On-property information such as signage and posters are essential for communicating the hotel's new safety policies to guests. Signage should be located at the main entrance, front desk, and high contact public areas that outline the property's social distancing and mask policy. (A recent local “staycation” witnessed signage in restrooms communicating the importance of taking 20 seconds for hand washing). Ensure that when people call by telephone to connect with the front desk, PBX, reservations, or the concierge, that everyone is prepared to respond to all guest inquiries – consistently, compassionately, clearly and credibly. Frankly, all associates should be trained to speak to the specifics of the cleanliness and sanitation measures throughout the hotel.

3. The Sales Department:

There were likely some relationships hurt when clients requested monies back for their non-refundable deposits during the early weeks of pandemic. Hotels tried hard to keep these pieces of business on the books for cash flow. The sales department may need to keep the lines of communication open for relationship repair too. In other cases, the sales department was likely reaching out to clients since the beginning of the “shelter-in-place” orders – to connect, check in, and ask about clients' well-being. Or, sales

managers may have been furloughed or laid off, so there may not have been any client communications at all. Now it is time for those same sales managers to convey that the hotel is taking extra precautionary measures to ensure the hotel is as safe as possible for guests to help restore trust and confidence. Since many sales managers may have not been working, now is the period for renewed contact.

4. The Hotel Website:

Now that the internal communications is in place, time to focus on the digital footprint. It is interesting how this pandemic has flipped certain phenomena upside down. For example, in the last decade, the consumer trust of the proprietary website has waned as the reliance on user-generated content was found to be a more objective and credible resource. Customer reviews are trusted 12 times more than marketing coming directly from an organization (CrowdRiff.com, 2018). Now, however, as hotels are just starting to reopen in some markets, and more eyes will certainly scrutinize website content for COVID best practices, the need for compassionate, comforting and clear communications directly from the hotel is critical.

What should be included on the website? How specific should the information be? As specific as necessary to demonstrate thoughtfulness and detail of precautions in place. For example:

Housekeeping and sanitation practices:

- What measures will now be in place to clean guestrooms?
- What measures for in-room and/or public (space) restrooms?
- Will hand sanitizing stations be available throughout the property?
- Will temperatures be checked – of employees, guests?
- Are rooms vacant for 24 hours between guest visits?

Preventive Measures:

- How are we reducing contact between guests and employees or amongst employees?

Change in policies:

- Is there a new cancellation policy?
- Can guests check in on their phone?
- What other steps may be replaced or relaxed to encourage physical distancing?

Food and beverage options:

- Will meal options be modified? Temporarily?
- Will restaurants serve breakfast, lunch and/or dinner?

- As a value-add, can the hotel provide a list of restaurants nearby which deliver or provide a pick up option?

On-Site and Area Activities:

- Are on-site or town beaches open? Is there parking?
- Are local museums open? If not when will they open? Any restrictions for guests?
- Should activities/reservations/tickets be booked online and in advance?
- Can we provide a list of activities to do in the area?

Contact information:

- Be sure to provide an email address to encourage feedback which will help fill any gaps in the communications proactive outreach. The key takeaway here is that however much information can be shared, should be shared.

Examples:

most important consideration is the health and well-being of our community, and as the COVID-19 situation evolves, we continue to update our policies and procedures with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). We have taken every step possible to ensure your safety, from check-in to check-out, including the addition of rigorous cleaning protocols, increasing the frequency of cleaning, and placing hand sanitizing stations throughout the property.

We have implemented a flexible reservations policy for May and June, and reservations can be changed or cancelled at no charge up to 24 hours before your scheduled arrival.

Steps we are taking for the reopening on May 15, 2020 include:

- Self Parking
- Hand sanitizing stations, antibacterial wipes and masks throughout the property
- Arrival package inclusive of your room key, letter from your Resort Manager, and details on our in-room programming offerings
- Complimentary mask and sanitation wipes provided in each guest room
- In-room programming including expanded in-room dining menus, curated playlists and kids in-room activities
- Robust room service and grab-and-go menus
- Utilization of additional outdoor spaces throughout the resort
- Restaurants are closed but the seating areas are available for proper social distancing
- Due to state regulations, spa, pools, and fitness center are closed

For further questions, please contact the resort directly at: 631.668.2345

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Other changes and steps

- Natalie's restaurant will offer dining at the restaurant, in-room dining and take-out starting June 1st (until June 1st Natalie's will continue take-out and delivery only). For our menu please click [here](#). Menus will be also posted on Opentable.com, Facebook and Instagram. The restaurant will be open daily (except Wednesday) between 5pm – 9pm (last reservations. You can pick-up your food or have it delivered between 4pm and 7pm. We only offer restaurant dining based on reservations. Call 207 236 7008 or [online](#)
- The hotel opens per June 1st, 2020. Our guests are able to enjoy breakfast daily and in-room dining all evenings except for Wednesday. Our innkeepers are also able to assist you with a variety of take-out options from restaurants in the area. In addition ,the inn offers a private chef table at the hotel's farmhouse or at your home for a max of 8 people.
- All team members undergo temperature screening each day to ensure a healthy work environment.
- At the hotel we created a health station for our guests with handwipes, disinfecting gel and we have temperature readers available. We urge guests not to travel when they have been exposed to COVID-19 infected people or have/had a temperature, flu symptoms or a respiratory illness within two weeks before traveling.



5. Social media

Along with using the hotel website, hotel status updates should be shared on social media platforms. Along with COVID-19 information, post pictures and when possible, videos, to show how precautions are in place to keep guests safe. It is crucial to stay socially connected to guests to help foster digital word of mouth.

Hotels using social media should immediately implement a digital customer service strategy. People have questions – lots of questions – and these inquiries will come through Facebook Twitter, Instagram. Questions should be answered in a timely manner to boost trust prior to guest arrival.

How should social media be utilized?

- Indicate COVID updates, including opening dates and precautions taken;
- Interact and engage with followers; answer as many questions as possible;
- Share virtual tours of the hotel;
- Display images of outdoor seating areas;
- Post an FAQ sheet with responses to help educate;
- Post new hotel policies.

Today, the use of iPhones make enable businesses to create quality videos that can be easily edited to show b-roll. Video messaging that can be linked in an emailer to a YouTube channel can also help share and show how the operation is handling COVID requirements.

6. Third Party Distribution Channels / OTAs

Whether it's GDS channels, booking sites or online reputation management /review sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp (which also have booking/reservation channels too) – utilization of these outlets is critical for awareness and information sharing.

What is interesting to consider now, will OTAs remain as significant in the booking process moving forward? Will guests trust the opaque sites in a time of COVID? Or will guests use other OTAs because they display more information about the individual properties than the branded hotels which cannot have native websites? Either way, it is critical to have clear and comprehensive information shared through these channels too.

Remember that internal communications should occur before external, and that the information should be as compassionate, comforting, clear and credible as possible so that when guests begin to arrive, they see first-hand how the operation delivers the marketing promise. The six outlets listed here may not be exhaustive, so if there are other channels of course add to this list. The goal though is to remember that the relationships between the guest and the hotel – or restaurant – or attraction - or event – is all about trust now, isn't it?

References

1. Edmund Jerome McCarthy was an American marketing professor and author. He proposed the concept of the 4 Ps marketing mix in his 1960 book Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach, which has been one of the top textbooks in university marketing courses since its publication.

2. The **4Cs** to replace the 4Ps of the **marketing** mix: Consumer wants and needs; Cost to satisfy; Convenience to buy and Communication (Lauterborn, 1990).

3. The **4Cs** for **marketing** communications: Clarity; Credibility; Consistency and Competitiveness (Jobber and Fahy, 2009).

4. Crowdriff (2018).



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Leora Lanz would like to thank **Kayla Schwartz**, '22, a public relations major in Boston University's College of Communications for her contributions to this. Kayla is Social Media producer for Spoon University and for HER Campus BU.