



*You've, no doubt, received many emails from companies since the COVID-19 pandemic began – many from companies you've not interacted with for years, and many of them cringeworthy in their blatant opportunism.*

*A well-written email to customers, employees and other stakeholders can be helpful and welcome. Below are tips from writing this kind of email from two well-respected PR pros.*

## **THE COVID-19 EMAILS: SET A STRONG FIRST IMPRESSION IN THE NET IMPRESSION OF CRISIS RESPONSE**

Posted on [March 20, 2020](#) by [Ron Culp](#) and [Steve Johnson](#)

Your inbox got a beating these past couple of weeks from any company or organization that happens to have your email address. Everyone is getting letters about COVID-19 response plans and recommendations as the pandemic sweeps across the U.S. None of us can honestly say we've seen a single crisis with such a blanketing impact that compels most every organization to communicate with key stakeholders.

A strategically penned letter is critical in setting a striking first impression in crisis response.

With an interest in how letters were constructed, we have been shuttling back and forth the 100-plus that collected in our inboxes. A few were really good; others were mediocre to bad. We've looked at letters from major hotel chains, utilities, healthcare facilities, grocery and drug stores, high-end retailers, mom-and-pop shops, non-profits ... even from a local guitar store (thank you, Guitar Works of Evanston!). Full disclosure: we've also crafted several for clients.

In crisis and issues response, audiences are forming a net impression – a general collection of all the signals sent – with regard to how your organization is responding. They notice the speed, tone, brand personality, actions taken, calls to action for us. That net impression is the platform for recovery once the crisis has passed, or the issue finds some resolution. The letter or statement often is that first impression – something that hardens quickly – of the net impression – something much more fluid throughout the arc of communications. It needs to be strong.

Although we are discussing entities that actually sent letters, every single one first needed to answer the question, "Do we need to send a letter?" That question also was posed by a peer of ours. "Just because an organization can doesn't mean it should," he noted. We agreed. Like every other communication, there needs to be a business objective in mind. Why send one? What is the expectation? Do our audiences need to hear from *us*?

The owner of a Chicago-based craft distillery noted on Facebook, "Wash your hands first, and then I'll tell you what a tiny business down an alley is doing to save the world." His customer

reach, company focus, and his own objectives don't require his company to send an email to his consumer mailing list. However, Guitar Works is a very hands-on retail spot. Those on its B-to-C mailing list want to know every guitar, and every amp is getting a good wipe down throughout the day.

The letter – like all crisis and issues communications – needs to reflect four critical elements: **empathy, actions, cooperative efforts, and resolve.**

Remember, the letter is about customers – their understanding of the issue and how your actions will impact them. Empathy is critical here...and is critical always. It is the key to connecting with the audience. How does that customer feel? What is top of mind to them? How may they be impacted? Remember this phrase: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

- “The world is grappling with an issue of enormous scale and human impact, and our hearts go out to all who have been affected by the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19).” – Starbucks
- “Our hearts go out to everyone impacted.” – DSW
- “Your family is likely extremely wary of the growing health crisis created by COVID-19 – especially as you have a loved one living in our care.” – National Assisted Living Organization
- “I'd just like to put out into the ether that I'm re-upping my quest to be kind, as I have no idea the battle you're facing, or the anxieties, or your personal 'heightened risk factors' that may/may not be visible (or certainly for ones that are).” – Wine Goddess Wine Store

That last one. Not generic. Extremely heartfelt, and that comes from a mom-and-pop shop that is facing its own anxieties. Empathy may be a shared perspective or experience, but it doesn't have to be. And your empathy should match where your organization lives in your audiences' minds. General Motors can't write that line.

Second, ensure you're communicating a critical message that brings focus on how your organization conducts business. If you needed to write a letter with only one sentence, what would it be? Be thoughtful in your word choice but be declarative. The sentence shouldn't read like a topic but as a statement.

- “Your health, welfare, and safety are paramount when you stay at a Best Western hotel.” – Best Western
- “(We) want you to know that your health and safety is our first priority, too.” – Target
- “The Chicago History Museum remains committed to providing a safe environment for our visitors, staff, and supporters.”

- “In the wake of this pandemic, we are focusing on the health and safety of our members.” – Phi Delta Theta Foundation
- “We are trying to balance our responsibility to keep our customers and our staff from unnecessary exposure with our commitment to keeping our staff employed and our business protected from financial catastrophe.” – Bookend & Beginnings Book Store

Actions and cooperative efforts (how the organization is working with authorities or expert partners) need to be demonstrated. The level of specificity in describing these action items will depend on the kind of organization you have. A major corporation like Target can be more general. We all have a choice to visit Target. It likely isn't so woven into our lives, and the relationship isn't so personal. Nevertheless, there may be critical elements of the business that need to be called out for consumers.

- “(We are) closely monitoring the advice and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO).” – Lettuce Entertain You Restaurants
- “In addition to training on housekeeping and hygiene protocols, hotel associates are also completing enhanced COVID-19 awareness training.” – Marriott
- “Any employee who is experiencing cold or flu-like symptoms are being told to stay home and self-isolate.” – Subaru
- “The Studio Zone link that provides a variety of workouts for you to do on your own...will be available at no cost to all of our active members.” – LA Fitness
- “(We are) voluntarily suspending service disconnections for customers who cannot pay, and waiving new late payment charges, through at least May 1, 2020.” – ComEd

Organizations like assisted living facilities need to be *much more specific*. The intimacy of the relationship requires it. Names and memories are wrapped up in every communication a facility makes to family members. One hyper-specific action item a national organization used: “Identifying opportunities for residents to connect with families through video and other digital technologies.”

In crafting a letter for Meals on Wheels Northeastern Illinois, we presented action items that included language focused on the organization's mission. “This will also necessitate more phone visits with our clients, who are already prone to the ill-effects of isolation and loneliness.”

The more detail and specificity an organization can include will make an effort more memorable.

- “Rentals items, including scooters, wheelchairs, and strollers, are disinfected after every use. All drinking fountains are sanitized a minimum of once per day.” – Desert Botanical Garden

In the end, there may be an opportunity to communicate how the organization is looking beyond its business or how the audience can play a role beyond CDC and WHO recommendations. This is where one can leverage resolve in an engaging way specific to the business.

- “As of late, I’ve been reminded of WBEZ’s earliest days in the 1940s, when our service provided instructional information on the air to maintain continuous learning for students homebound during the polio outbreak.” – WBEZ\_FM (NPR)
- “YOU need fun, diversion, uplift, and constructive family activities. WE are going to fatten up our inventory of puzzles, games, flashcards, activity books, crosswords, and guided journals.” – Bookends & Beginnings Book Store
- “Third, Dollop supports non-profits and community events whenever possible – especially arts and civil rights groups. A fundraiser Dollop was planning to sponsor was canceled this coming weekend due to concerns over Coronavirus. We are still supporting this important initiative that uplifts the voices and stories of women and non-binary folks.” – Dollop Coffee
- “(Following only good information) Yes, there are systems that can be installed on your forced-air HVAC system to help kill viruses in your home, but not all systems are the same. We can answer any of your questions.” – American Vintage Home
- “Tip generously if you can afford it. Tipped workers are some of the first to suffer in times of economic distress.” – OpenTable

Take another look at some of the letters you’ve received. What was it the organization was trying to express? How did that letter set the tone for subsequent communications via email, social channels, or its web site?

In this COVID-19 crisis, most organizations saw a benefit in communicating early with their customers and other audiences. Be strategic in your approach and tone no matter the crisis or issue your organization may face. A strategically penned letter is critical in setting an effective first impression in crisis response.