

Top tips: Managing difficult conversations as the COVID-19 lockdown evolves

As the COVID-19 crisis evolves, organisations need to be agile and responsive to the changing environment, act quickly and communicate clearly with employees and customers.

Many organisations have had to change the way they deliver service to customers, or offer reduced levels of service. Customers have been asked to change their behaviours and adjust their expectations. As the terms of the lockdown change and some measures are eased, there is a new layer of uncertainty and complexity for employees and customers. This evolving situation has created a range of communications challenges for organisations:

- How to encourage customers to follow guidelines or practise safe behaviours such as maintaining social distance, personal hygiene or using personal protective equipment
- How to discourage or even prohibit customers from certain activities, such as buying excessive amounts of essential goods or using public spaces or transport services that are obviously crowded
- How to manage expectations when customers want services or support that the organisation cannot currently provide or has chosen not to offer



In this guide we set out key tips for managing these potentially difficult conversations or interactions, in the context of the evolving COVID-19 crisis.

1) Be clear about your objective and rationale

Set out clearly and honestly how you need customers to behave and interact with you. Think about the different ways in which customers interact with you and whether the guidelines apply or need vary depending on circumstances. Set out a clear rationale for what you are asking, for example to protect other customers, employees or to ensure you can continue to provide service to vulnerable customers.

2) Provide clear information to help set expectations

If you need customers to modify the way they engage with your organisation or to change their behaviour in particular circumstances, give them clear information about what to do and the reasons why. Be transparent with customers about service limitations and advise them about the best way to engage with your service.

Select the most appropriate ways of displaying information depending on the way customers engage with you, for example signage in public spaces, email or written communications or website and social media updates.

3) Equip your employees with a clear message

Make sure everyone knows and can explain how you are asking customers to engage with you and the rationale. Think through different customer scenarios, how customers might react to your message, including any objections. Create a set of straightforward messages which employees can use to deal with questions or objections in a range of different customer scenarios. Encourage employees to ask challenging questions, practise and test the effectiveness of your messages.

4) Develop behaviours to handle challenging conversations with confidence

Train your employees to communicate potentially difficult messages and engage in challenging conversations in a helpful, straightforward, non-defensive way with a focus on the following behaviours:

- Use straightforward, non-confrontational language
- Demonstrate empathy and patience: acknowledge the frustration or confusion expressed by customers
- Remain calm and composed. Remember that customers' anger and frustration is borne out of the situation, not directed at you personally
- Give clear information and advice to help customers manage the situation including other options or support that is available



5) Check in and review with colleagues

Enable employees to share their experience of challenges, what has worked well and what can be improved. Use the feedback to refine and update messaging and where necessary take action to provide better information or service for customers.

6) Deal appropriately with abusive customers

Most customers will understand that during the COVID-19 crisis, many organisations are under pressure to maintain standards of service, may have reduced staff numbers and that employees are striving to do their best for customers in challenging circumstances. However, some customers may be angry about reduced levels of service or be unwilling to modify their expectations or behaviour. Sometimes this can spill over into abusive or unacceptable behaviour.

Employees should acknowledge and respond to customers who are exhibiting strong emotions, seek to understand the customer's concern and identify a solution or way forward. At the same time, everyone – employee or customer - deserves to be treated with consideration and respect.

Advise employees to follow existing guidelines for dealing with abusive customers, albeit recognising that both customers and employees may be experiencing high levels of stress because of the extraordinary circumstances

If necessary, deploy security personnel to ensure the safety of employees and customers.



7) Look after employees' mental health and wellbeing

Support employees proactively to manage their mental health and well-being and make sure they are aware of the support your organisation provides including line manager support, information resources, an employee helpline or counselling service.

If formal support is limited in the organisation is limited, or employees would prefer to access support independently, make people aware of trusted sources of advice. The NHS has published information about [how to manage anxiety](#) and a range of recommended helplines and organisations.

We hope these top tip are useful and we'd love to hear your feedback. Should you have any questions you would like to ask us on this topic, or for more information about managing difficult conversations with customers please get in touch at: enquiries@icsmail.co.uk