

The Top 5 Ways Retailers Can Effectively Communicate With Their Employees During COVID-19

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Despite the rise of e-Commerce in recent years, prior to COVID-19, a majority of today's consumers still wanted an in-store shopping experience. In fact, reports found that 75% of global consumers preferred an in-person sale. With customer service and personalization being integral to shoppers' expectations, retailers in 2020 are faced with the challenge of delivering high-quality customer service under the parameters of rapidly changing pandemic regulations.

As brick-and-mortar stores begin to open their doors after weeks or months of closures, management must adapt quickly to reacclimate workers to in-store procedures, while also introducing a litany of new health, safety and inventory protocols. In the retail industry, where workers are constantly on the move, employees are often difficult to reach. Traditionally, company news updates like these have been shared during brief store meetings, passed along via word of mouth, or simply announced with flyers on the break room bulletin board.

Without a standardized process, important updates may be overlooked and employees may fall through the cracks. Here, we'll explore the top five ways retailers can leverage technology in the workplace to circumvent these issues, helping employees to stay connected, receive

vital health and safety updates and access emergency plans during COVID-19 and beyond.

Establish A Centralized Method Of Communication

Any successful business leader knows the importance of playing to team members' strengths — and acknowledging that those strengths can differ. Managers are often responsible for delivering updates to in-store teams, and by nature some are much stronger communicators than others. To avoid misinformation, which can be particularly dangerous during a pandemic, retailers should consider implementing an internal communication platform.

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By using an app or mobile service to distribute updates, upper management can reduce instances of miscommunication and ensure that vital and often-changing health information and emergency plans are delivered quickly to retail workers. Given the speed at which state regulations are changing, conducting additional team meetings or training sessions may not be possible; using an app-based system ensures that each employee receives updates directly and immediately.

Larger organizations may also consider establishing a dedicated COVID-19 response team to manage policy updates and ensure social distancing and hygiene protocols are followed on the sales floor. In the event of an employee illness, having a dedicated team to enact your crisis plan and distribute the necessary updates can preserve the wellness and safety of team members who may be at risk.

Leverage Employees' Own Personal Devices

While introducing new technology like a communication app can be daunting, you can ease the transition by allowing workers to use the devices they are most comfortable with. As of 2019, over 80% of Americans reported using a smartphone device. At the same time, many frontline workers report that they spend up to three hours per week searching for the information necessary to do their jobs. The prevalence of smartphones among working-age adults opens the opportunity for retailers to implement a BYOD or “bring your own device” policy in the workplace.

Enabling associates to communicate securely with their teams on familiar devices encourages adoption of the new technology and reduces the learning curve associated with receiving an entirely new device. More cost-effective than investing in new equipment and software, a BYOD policy allows associates to carry only one device at a time while still achieving more effective communication than email or radio can provide.

By incorporating employees' own smartphones into the communication structure, you can create a direct channel between frontline managers and their direct reports. Managers can ensure everyone is on the same page with new and changing protocols, and employees can

share valuable first-hand insight and customer feedback instantaneously.

Empower Employees With Information

To be successful brand ambassadors, retail employees must be well-equipped with the resources and information to provide exceptional customer service. When teams rely on legacy methods like word-of-mouth updates, the flow of vital information will almost certainly be disrupted. In a global pandemic, communication breakdowns on the sales floor can damage both employee safety and customer satisfaction.

By introducing instant messaging, retailers can establish a regular flow of communication between managers. This empowers team members by ensuring that each time an issue arises or new information becomes available, they'll have the data and support needed to resolve it.

Certain mobile apps on the market allow retailers to create dedicated information streams to keep associates informed about regulatory updates as well as broader changes to the company's goals and store merchandise. Some app-based services offer digitized policy books and resource guides, which can allow workers to search for and answer customer questions related to anything from hygiene practices to inventory questions.

Facilitate Bottom-Up Retail Communication

Retail associates spend more time interacting with customers and merchandise than any other employee, and as a result are a critical source of information in understanding the impact of the pandemic on the day-to-day operations of a store. You can leverage these insights by encouraging bottom-up communication across teams, inviting workers to share their firsthand observations and experiences.

While staff meetings can be an excellent opportunity to invite your employees to share any issues or ideas, communication apps can offer a more effective method of sourcing that feedback. Employees may feel shy or hesitant to speak up during large meetings, and pandemic regulations have many teams avoiding close-contact situations.

Mobile platforms can bridge the gap and empower associates to submit feedback and ideas directly and in real time. Some platforms offer a mobile survey feature to allow for anonymous comments. By facilitating two-way communication, management can empower sales associates to ask questions or voice concerns, painting a more comprehensive picture of your employees' and customers' sentiments during this unpredictable time.

Combine In-Person Reassurance With Digital Recognition

With the health risks of COVID-19 for public-facing employees, alongside mass closures and layoffs, many retail associates are experiencing heightened levels of stress and worry. By establishing regular check-ins, managers can boost engagement among their retail teams and

address any concerns workers may have during this unprecedented time.

Managers can strengthen those personal employee relationships with digital tools. Technology like apps, instant messaging and mobile wellness surveys can make associates feel more seen and connected.

Retail leaders can augment that sense of community by sharing appreciation for your employees regularly in a digital format that the entire company can see. More far-reaching than traditional employee-of-the-month initiatives, sharing employee successes digitally can create a sense of camaraderie among associates and promote a sense of pride and motivation.

Technology also can ease anxiety by improving transparency. By democratizing company information in a shared employee app or platform, you can empower employees to understand the company's action plan, manage their schedules and access important information like HR updates, payroll and health procedures.

During COVID-19, and at any time, a strong communication strategy is integral in keeping employees safe, sharing vital information, and creating a sense of support and understanding for your teams. By improving communication, technology solutions like instant messaging and mobile applications can allow business leaders to create a more agile, connected workforce and help retail teams to cope with the unpredictable crisis landscape.

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