

COMMUNICATING CHANGE:

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL REOPENING

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COVID-19 has delivered a vicious blow to the public assembly industry. In speaking with some Professional and Allied members, 2020 was supposed to be an incredible year. Venues were booked and event related products and services were prospering. The economy was in great shape and companies were staffing up to prepare for the booming year. Instead, the advent of COVID-19 crippled the country, specifically, the airline, hospitality, and public assembly industries. Today, organizations are being forced to make tough decisions. Team members that have been employed with organizations for their entire careers are either retiring early or being forced to find other work. Many startup companies that looked to help our industry grow are not even able to get off the ground and may not survive. While things look grim for now, we will get through this pandemic and recover.

During this work-from-home experiment that we have been thrown into, numerous best practices are being learned that will be effective once a vaccine is introduced and things start getting back to normal. For instance, prior to the pandemic I have always had either Skype, WebEx, or Microsoft Teams installed on my computer. I would occasionally use it if I needed to make a call with two or more people. Never would I think about having my laptop camera turned on, sharing my screen, and using it to have a face-to-face meeting. After the first few weeks of working from home, I am now an expert in the ways of virtual meetings. In the future, I cannot see a department or staff meeting not having a virtual option. When our offices open back up to the masses, I can see our conference and meeting rooms having to be updated with the installation of audio visual to keep productivity as it is today.

The former work-from-home policies that were born from the advancements of technology and the employee's desire for greater work-life balance will have to be updated to account for the successes achieved during this pandemic. Leaders who have struggled with trusting employees as they work from home are changing their ways of thinking after seeing the productivity from the comforts of their homes. In the future, these changes will lead to higher employee morale. As the old adage goes, "Take care of your team and they will take care of your customer." When events return to your venues, you want to ensure that your staff is feeling the love.

As we continue the talks on reopening our facilities, we need to have a proactive communications plan in place. Over the last several months, I have been on many of IAVM's sector town halls and reopening meetings, listening to some compelling discussion. The Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC) has been a great resource for venue cleaning standards to prevent outbreak, respond,

and recover from the spread of infectious agents on surfaces. Allied members, like Irwin Seating, are hosting webinars that discuss how their products were intended to be cleaned and how venue managers should proceed in their new strategies. IAVM will be releasing their reopening guide shortly to provide venue managers and the industry guidance in establishing venue plans. As we start instituting change, it is going to be imperative that our communications and public relations (Comm/PR) teams are involved in these discussions. While the operations department will need to implement the changes, the Comm/PR teams are going to need to tell the story to your stakeholders. If this is not done thoughtfully and effectively, it may hurt the trust and confidence of show managers, exhibitors, and attendees coming back to your facility.

As a former venue manager and now the Vice President of Venue Services for *tsdesign*, I have had the opportunity to see the tools architects use and how they can help in the design of a reopening strategy. Over the past several months, I have been using my knowledge of crowd management to work with our architects to build queuing diagrams that will help visually communicate the recommended six feet of distance between guests. This is not only at the entry points to our venues, but the restrooms, concessions, and concourses as well. We are even focusing efforts on vertical circulation and parking lots.

Most venues have someone that can put together basic computer aided design (CAD) drawings, but nothing to the capability of an architect. While you are putting your plans together, think about using two and three-dimensional diagrams to help visualize the expected behavior of everyone coming back into your building. These visuals can be used on your website, reopening guides, and even in the media.

Communicating the reopening plans to stakeholders will be a critical part of your operation. Your team is working hard to get it right, so make sure that your hard work does not go to waste with a poor communications strategy. Do not let your message be lost in translation and do everything you can to control the narrative. **VP**

*As vice president of venue services for *tsdesign*, Erik Waldman, CVE, brings more than 20 years of proven experience overseeing guest services, operations and events at some of the country's top public assembly facilities. Prior to joining *tsdesign*, Waldman served as the senior director of special events for the Georgia World Congress Center Authority, overseeing special event operations for the top convention, sports and entertainment destinations in the world. Visit *tsdesign.com**