ECAC COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

COVID-19: STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE
(version 2, 9 June 2020)

INTRODUCTION

*Cooperation, collaboration and communication are the core functions
that should be addressed in global crises,
including COVID-19 outbreak.*

The COVID-19 outbreak has a major impact on transport and connectivity in Europe. Measures to contain the outbreak have resulted in a dramatic reduction in transport activity, especially in passenger transport.

The COVID-19 crisis situation can be defined as a complex phenomenon, which consists of an unforeseen situation and development in means of the solution of a severe global health issue. The uncertainty may undermine public opinion on the safety and security of the civil aviation (airlines, airports, ground handling, crew etc.). This may severely impact commercial air transport traffic, leading to massive financial loss, impaired quality of life and negative symbolic effects.

The COVID-19 outbreak has led to major disturbances and strong reactions among the public. It is therefore critical to strengthen public confidence as soon as possible.

SETTING COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

Communication is most effective when working based on clear communication objectives; these objectives will likely change through the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic (different pandemic stages that a state may progress through[1]), in close connection with the measures taken by the States to limit the spread of COVID-19, national and regional efforts and also with the recommendations coming from the World Health Organization, EASA/ECDC, etc. European and international organisations play an important role in coordinating industry stakeholder efforts, which will be particularly important when restarting the aviation system.

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[1] No cases reported, Sporadic cases reported, Community transmission, Active cases declining, New cases reappearing

Harmonised European-wide approach will be critical to reduce complexity for operators and travellers and strengthen public confidence.

A thorough understanding of the role played by other national non-aviation organisations such as public health authorities, military authorities, and customs and immigration authorities as well as establishing coordination is crucial for ensuring that strategies are implemented effectively and seamlessly. The structure of preventive measures should be in coherence at all levels: before airport; at airport facilities; staff and crew; on-board the aircraft, at transfer airport; post-flight, upon arrival at destination.

In the strengthening of the confidence in civil aviation, the main priority is the health of passengers and transport workers. Special regard should be given to high-risk groups, such as elderly people and those with underlying medical conditions. Easing restrictions on travel and transport shall go hand in hand with frequently updated communication campaigns. This ensures that travellers have sufficient and updated information on what to expect (e.g. before arriving at airports, at check-in, in the aircraft), and what is expected from them (e.g. wearing of face masks), on which to base their travel plans, as well as ensuring their awareness of the individual required health and safety measures. Information should be provided to future passengers on what should be considered regarding COVID-19 symptoms. Promotional material should ensure that passengers are aware of and adhere to the preventive health measures put in place and encourage symptomatic passengers not to present themselves at the airport for flight.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on all passenger flights in Europe and around the globe. Strengthening public confidence in aviation is critical and is key to the recovery of the sector. This is confidence in the following elements:

- the effectiveness and efficiency of measures in place to protect passengers and aviation personnel (e.g. crew, screeners) interacting with passengers, which enable the mitigation of health risks associated with COVID-19;
- the fact that measures are based on currently available scientific data, and continuously reviewed; and
- the measures and procedures are in place to address/respond to any possible case of contamination and/or passengers showing symptoms to avoid risk to other passengers.

It is acknowledged that "confidence" is hard to pin down, and public confidence can be measured in different ways.

In order to strengthen the passengers' confidence in air transport and to stimulate their willingness to fly and thus minimize the adverse effect on civil aviation, it is critical to respond in an organised and coherent manner. Simultaneous to the gradual lifting of the ECAC Member States' restrictions as the public health situation begins to improve, it is imperative to ensure that the passengers:

- experience honest and open interaction on behalf of the authorities regarding the measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 associated risks;
- receive clear, detailed and supportive information, adapted to diverse groups to meet different needs, on the civil aviation's measures regarding health safety; and
- get realistic and practical guidance on an individual's actions to meet the responsibility of their own and others' health and safety.

European civil aviation has a solid foundation, based on the continued development of a safe, efficient and sustainable European air transport system. Strengthening trust requires cooperation, collaboration and communication which are the core functions that should be addressed in global crises, including the COVID-19 outbreak.

KEY MESSAGES

- We stand together in the determination to maintain our safety and freedom to travel. Passenger protection is our first priority. Be informed, be safe and ready to fly.
- The hallmark of civil aviation are means, processes and procedures together with regulation and oversight for constant improvement of aviation safety and security.
- The aviation and health authorities, operators and service providers have jointly and uniformly implemented safety rules and measures against potential contamination aimed at ensuring the health of passengers and staff.
- Every person is responsible for protecting themselves and other people, according to health and safety rules. Be kind to each other – it is the only way we will get through this.

STAKEHOLDERS

- European and international organisations
- Civil aviation authorities
- Airlines
- Airport operators
- Service operators and providers (e.g. ground handling, cleaning and catering companies)
- Public health authorities
- Other companies from different business sectors that frequently use the air transport (management consultants, tourism agencies, entertainment, etc.)
- Politicians and policy-makers
- …

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Effective communication practices include the use of existing online platforms (websites and social media accounts) already in place to urgently communicate information to passengers.

- Websites
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc.)
- Local, national and international media (radio, TV, newspapers and magazines)
- Newsletters
- Video-conferences
- Webinars
- Press release, press statements
- Digital platforms (media partnerships)
- Google Ads – targeted campaigns with different key-messages
- Outdoor and indoor display systems (airports, aircraft, lounges, shopping malls, parks, main crossroads etc.)
- Posters and guidance materials (brochures, flyers etc., preferably electronic)

When appropriate, offline communication and marketing campaigns should focus on POSMs (point of sales materials), in order to trigger the action, especially for undecided persons (this approach could be useful in travel agencies offices, waiting rooms etc.), whereas online communication campaigns could focus on creative digital content (targeted newsletters and Google Ads campaigns, pop-ups, banners, video, vivid and colourful images presenting picturesque places that make you think about the next trip etc.).

TARGET AUDIENCES

- General public
- Air passengers
- "High risk" categories of passengers
- Aviation community, including transport workers
- Public health experts
- Tourism agencies
- Media
- NGOs
- Politicians and policy-makers
- etc

AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION CRITERIA

- **Geographic**
  - Country of residence
  - COVID-19 pandemic stage

- **Demographic**
  - Profession
  - Income
  - Gender
  - Age

- **Psychographic**
  - Interests (lifestyle, needs)
  - Personality (values, beliefs)

- **Behavioural**
  - Purchase history (including date and amount of latest orders)
  - Devices used for browsing the Internet (laptop/PC, mobile, tablet etc.)
  - Number of visits and time spent on the travel websites, blogs, ticketing platforms, airlines' websites etc.

ROLE OF SPOKESPERSONS

Cooperation and coordination in sharing knowledge and mutual assistance in times of crisis is key. Gathering of data, means of communication methods and development of a robust system of reporting in a harmonised way is essential to faster and better results in the task of strengthening passenger confidence. Clear and timely communication with target groups as well as among stakeholders reduces the risk of uncertainty, speculation or misleading messages.

Established spokespersons represent an important source of information and journalists are likely to include their comments in news stories to lend credibility to their reporting. Identified spokespersons, experienced speaking to a variety of audiences, has to be granted and have easy access to all available and continuously updated information. The aim is to ensure unified and effective dissemination of correct information and to respond to incorrect news transmission. See Appendix.

To preserve consistency, other employees who collect and/or provide information, support spokespersons or perform other tasks that affect communication issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic also need to know their roles and means of disseminating information.

THE WIDER COMMUNICATIONS CONTEXT

The aviation community has to be aware of the wider communications context when communicating with the media and on their own websites and social media channels, during conversations or briefings with government officials, state authorities etc.

The communicators need to take into account these considerations when planning their communications:

a) **Who** from the organisation will be communicating with each of the different groups of stakeholders (government officials and other state authorities, media)?
b) **The method of the communication** aimed at the needs of different audiences.
c) **The timing of the communications.** Sometimes, it might be necessary to communicate to each of the target audiences in quick succession, to avoid leaks to the press.
d) **Consistency of information.** Even if expressed in various ways, the content of the official messages for the different target audiences should be the same. Where additional, classified information is being provided to government officials, this should be clearly marked with the appropriate security classification.

COMMUNICATION ABOUT HEALTH-RELATED MEASURES AND OTHER MITIGATION MEASURES PUT IN PLACE

The measures taken to limit contact between transport workers and passengers, as well as between passengers, have to be communicated as clear as possible, to different target audiences

Convincing arguments to strengthen public confidence in civil aviation are based on information on comprehensive and coordinated actions and operational guidelines recommended by European authorities and implemented by the aviation community. A communication and safety promotion campaign should have the purpose to confirm the developed safety protocol for the health and safety of passengers and the staff by maintaining safe and secure operations whilst minimizing the risk of virus transmission. In the process, every step of the flight has been reviewed, from the purchase of airline tickets to the completion of the trip at destination. All parties' responsibilities have been defined, staff training has been carried out and instructions provided to passengers. In regards to the passengers, coordination is key: knowledge of what to expect regardless of airport or airlines and receiving clear messages about what it takes to take care of its own safety and others.

Harmonised information and guidance from the European authorities should be at the forefront. Simultaneously, frequently asked questions from the passengers themselves or the media give a good indication on possible improvement the communication might need.

Along with organised improvement and update of the given information, proactive communication and safety campaigns are recommended through all available media.

Information aimed at strengthening the confidence of passengers shall be available as long as needed. Methods should take notice of the media used and attention paid to the format. For visual approach, pictograms are encouraged.

Distributed materials should be available in the national language(s), English and, where needed, other languages based on the most common language profiles of the passengers.

CONTINUOUS REASSESSMENT

The communication objectives have to be reviewed continuously and modified as needed. One of the risks that can arise during this period is a potential second wave or severe backlit in the COVID-19 crisis, undermining again passenger confidence on the safety and security of the civil aviation. Examples of other potential issues that shall be monitored and to which immediate response may be needed are misleading messages, disinformation and propaganda.

The course of the evolution of COVID-19 is still unforeseen and uncertain when passengers, population, commercial industries and communities can resume to previous behaviour or establish new norms. Cooperation, regular evaluation and a coherent consistency of messaging will serve in the mission of protecting the health safety of passengers and transport workers as well as of the strengthening their confidence.

APPENDIX: GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR SPOKESPERSONS

As the spokesperson has a special responsibility for maintaining a continuous and coherent dialogue with the media, he/she needs to have theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of communication, to have or to develop appropriate skills of a good communicator.

The spokesperson should:

- have thorough knowledge of the organisation and functioning of the organisation, as well as the specific activities of each department within the organisation;

- have the ability to present in an accessible way the information about the activity of the organisation during the COVID-19 crisis, and to "translate" the technical language and/or the professional jargon and the medical terminology in "everybody's language";

- be able to understand and, sometimes, to anticipate what the expectations of the media representatives are and what the consequences of his/her statements might be, so as to effectively structure their responses;

- **answer correctly, completely, safely and firmly to the questions of the media**, which implies a thorough documentation and mastery of the organisation's field of activity and mitigation measures taken during this crisis.

Incorrect or incomplete information is likely to give a sense of frustration and hostility among journalists that may have the effect of creating a negative public opinion; a hesitant tone or evasive responses can allow speculative and even biased exploitation of the messages.

- **refrain from "no comment" reactions.** If the spokesperson does not have all the information to formulate an answer to a question, it is more appropriate to honestly acknowledge this, with the immediate indication that the desired answer will be documented and provided in the shortest time. At the same time, if he/she can't answer a question, existing an imperative legal prohibition in force, such as the prohibition to disclose sensitive/confidential information or the prohibition to provide personal information and data, is recommended that the spokesperson explain that he/she has no right to answer that question and to refer to the applicable laws or regulations prohibiting the formulation of a public response in this regard;

- **avoid entering into controversy with the journalists,** to maintain their calmness, attention, patience and availability and not to appear "disturbed" by some questions, however difficult, erroneous, tendentious or uncomfortable these might be;

- coordinate the activity of making the press kits, press releases, press statements, as well as all the other materials for the press;

- **have a presence that inspires confidence**, and to pay attention to his/her own image, taking into account the fact that, from a psychological point of view, the receiver is tempted to equate the spokesperson's own image with the image of the institution he/she represents, to **have a pleasant voice** (to not "scratch with the voice"), balanced intonation and clear diction, to control their mimicry and gesture – put in the service of emphasizing the ideas from the transmitted messages – to

have a presence of spirit, and to know how to create a good relationship with the journalists;

▪ **show readiness to provide the media with the required information, even outside the working hours.** A news story based on rumours or assumptions, which might arise due to the impossibility of contacting the spokesperson or because he/she refuses to express his opinion on the grounds that "he/she is out of the working hours" will have a negative echo in the perception of public opinion. However, the spokesperson shall have the ability to manage the relationship with the journalists with a personal respect that limits the tendency to be requested outside of business hours to provide non-urgent information or data that can be obtained by simply consulting the official website of the organisation, as well as to provide statistical data or information that requires laborious documentation, which cannot be achieved without the support of the specialized departments of the organisation.

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