

# COVID-19: Essential steps to communicate about your situation



## Preamble

The economic activity of the country, and of Brussels in particular, has been severely tested during 2020.

Retailing has taken a direct hit from the crisis. However, it has been able to find the strength and daring needed to adapt to the different regulatory measures imposed on it.

Before bringing down the curtain for the second time in a few months, many of you reinvented yourselves to be able to continue to run your business: sales via social networks, delivery of clothing to try at home, creation of an e-shop, implementation of a click & collect system, etc.

All of these solutions are paving the way for a new way to consume, to which your customers are getting used to little by little. There are, however, some questions remaining: are these merely stop-gap solutions to deal with the closure requirements? Will the new models outlive the crisis? And, in either case, what type of communication is effective for the different solutions?

These are some of the questions (and answers) we cover in this guide. The goal? To help you facilitate your communication during the crisis and promote your various sales channels, particularly when they co-exist (retail outlet open and online sales site active).

# Essential steps to communicate about your situation

## List your communication tools

First of all, we recommend that you list all of the communication tools available to you today. This will enable you to target the tools to be adapted or identify media that it will be useful to develop.

Communication tools are usually categorised as follows:

### Digital

- Website and/or e-commerce, click and collect
- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Google My Business, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest, etc.)
- Newsletters & e-mailings
- Potentially an online loyalty system

### Print

- Business cards
- Flyers
- Posters, opening hours, various media
- Large format visuals (pavement sign, beach flag, etc.)
- Vehicle decals and display window signs

### There are also communication actions

That is, all of the methods used to increase your visibility every day:

- Paid listing campaigns (SEA)
- Social media advertising campaigns
- Web banners and inserts in the print media
- Print media marketing campaigns
- Events (organised in-house or external events like creators markets, specific trade shows, etc.)

## Optimise your tools

What needs to be adapted in your opinion? Which tools and/or actions must be developed to meet your current reality and events? This first inventory will make it easier for you to understand your priorities. Some print tools could benefit from an adjustment to be up-to-date, you can revise the frequency of your newsletter and your loyalty system - if your shop has one - should also record online purchases, etc.

You may also have the opportunity to find out if you are missing a specific new tool or if you want to invest in a new social network. This is the time to plan and implement. You haven't implemented an online sales or click and collect system? While an online sales website provides an excellent way to continue selling your products when your shop is closed, it will also provide you with additional visibility on the web. Have you surveyed your customers to find out their current consumption preferences? If they are inclined to purchase online, like most Belgians, it may be time to start thinking about creating a webshop now (to avoid creating it under emergency conditions if a new lockdown is ordered!).

You should also check the budget you have available for any adaptations. Take your current situation into account and carefully decide what can be done in-house based on your resources and the time available.

The following advice is intended to be implemented autonomously in most cases. However, you may be confronted with situations that will require the help of outside service providers. Communication is a profession. The time you dedicate to putting things in place without being sure about their effectiveness is a cost which is sometimes better invested in hiring professionals from the field. Think this out carefully!

## **Prepare the communication for your (future) reopening**

During the two periods of forced lockdown, you may have implemented an online and/or click and collect sales system. Your business will have survived, but only thanks to appointments agreed directly with customers. When the mandatory lockdown for retail outlets is ended, it will be essential to broadcast a clear message about the days and times you are open. You should address the message to all of your customers and your target audience.

Given this new context, you may decide to adapt your opening days and/or hours to, for example, reserve specific times for visits by appointment, either for online purchase pick up or to limit the number of customers in the shop and provide better quality service. Regardless of the reasons for the changes, it is important to communicate them to inform your customers.

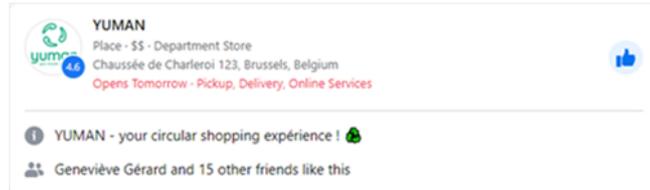
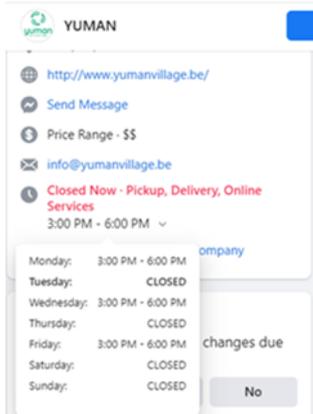
There are a number of potential situations:

### **Your normal opening hours remain the same**

In this case, inform your customers that you will reopen according to the hours available on your website/display window. If you posted a “temporarily closed” sign on Facebook and Google My Business, don’t forget to update it. This is generally one of the first sources of information used by your customers to check your opening hours.

### **Your normal opening hours have to be changed**

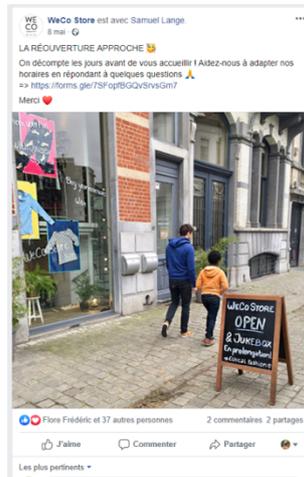
Remind your customers of this several times on your social networks, update your opening hours on your Facebook page and on your Google My Business page, include it in your Instagram bio, announce it to your contact database with an emailing (strongly emphasising the new hours), update your website, post the hours on your shop’s door/display window.



How will you know if your opening hours must be adapted to your customers' expectations? If there are no internal organisational reasons preventing it, you can ask your customers' opinion.

**Example:** during the March-April-May 2020 lockdown, **WeCo Store** conducted a survey to understand its customers' preferences. The opening hours of the retail outlet were modified following the survey. You have doubts about your new and future opening hours? This action can enable you to communicate with your customers and strengthen the connection with them.

- Broadcast the announcement about the survey:



- Broadcast the results:
  - On social networks:



- Via email:



- Update your new hours on your Facebook cover photo:



## Provide information about the hygiene measures implemented

Opening your shop means that you will have to implement hygiene measures. [Documentation](#) for retailers has been published by FPS Economy for this purpose.

After you have clearly communicated your reopening date to your target audience, we recommend that you also provide for the dissemination of the health conditions applicable to your business.

Define them upstream to be able to provide a clear and consistent message to your customers. When everything is clear in-house, remember to create a fun and very understandable message. Even though people are used to seeing these new health measure postings, additional communication on the social networks can quickly become redundant. You can plan a special (health measures) publication for this purpose and, for example, pin it to the top of your Facebook page.

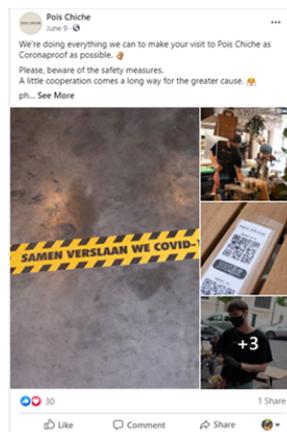
Use as many pictograms and infographics as you can, for example using the free Canva.com software, to communicate in a light and fun way while ensuring that your message gets through.

For example:

- Via graphics sent by email and broadcast on social networks:



- Via publication on Facebook and Instagram:



## (continue to) communicate: online/click and collect sales service

The lockdown has pushed a lot of retail businesses to implement a remote and/or click and collect sales service. While the communication in place during the lockdown enabled you to focus on this initiative, the opening of your business raises a key question: is it worth continuing to offer the service? **Given the current uncertainty, continuing the delivery/click and collect service will be useful.**

In any event, you should plan for a special communication - and if you haven't done so yet - plan for a sales channel in addition to your shop which suits your needs.

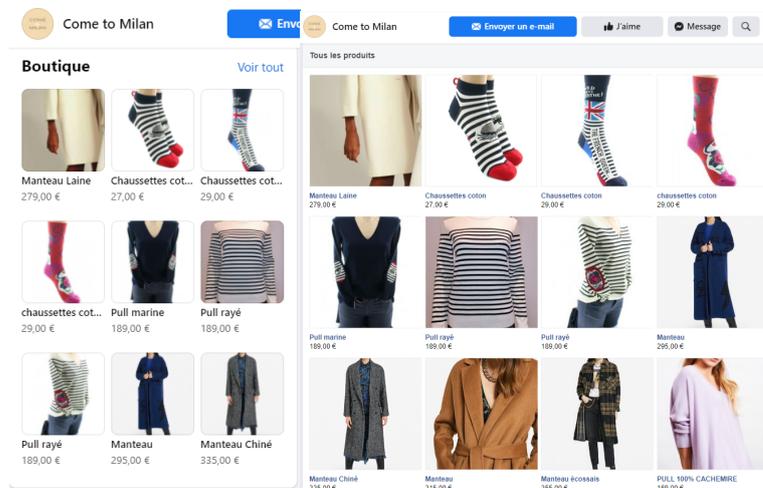
## Remote selling: methods

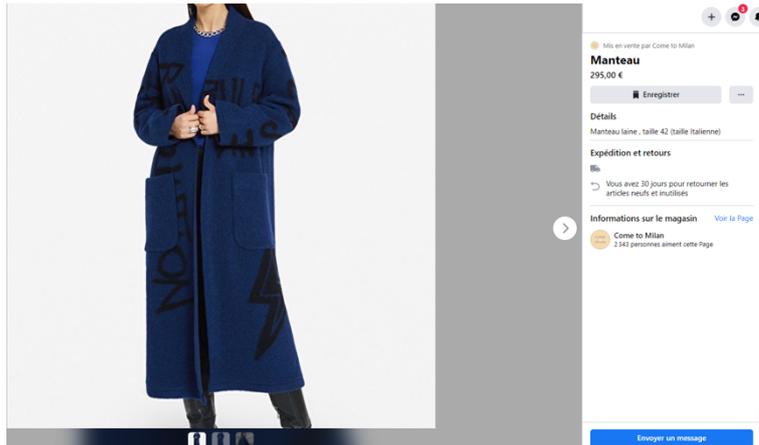
### The direct method

You haven't (yet) implemented an online sales or click and collect system via a website? Do you want to test the market before starting? The easiest method is probably to inform your contacts, via your social networks, an emailing and the website that you are setting up that type of service.

You can then highlight a selection of products available in your point-of-sale, the new products and the special deals (a special year-end holiday package, for example) and offer them for sale requesting that you customers reserve by email, via a private message or by telephone.

Another option is to activate the "store" option on Facebook. This functionality allows you to list your items in a catalogue and to add the practical aspects for their sale (generally a return email via your company's Facebook messaging system):



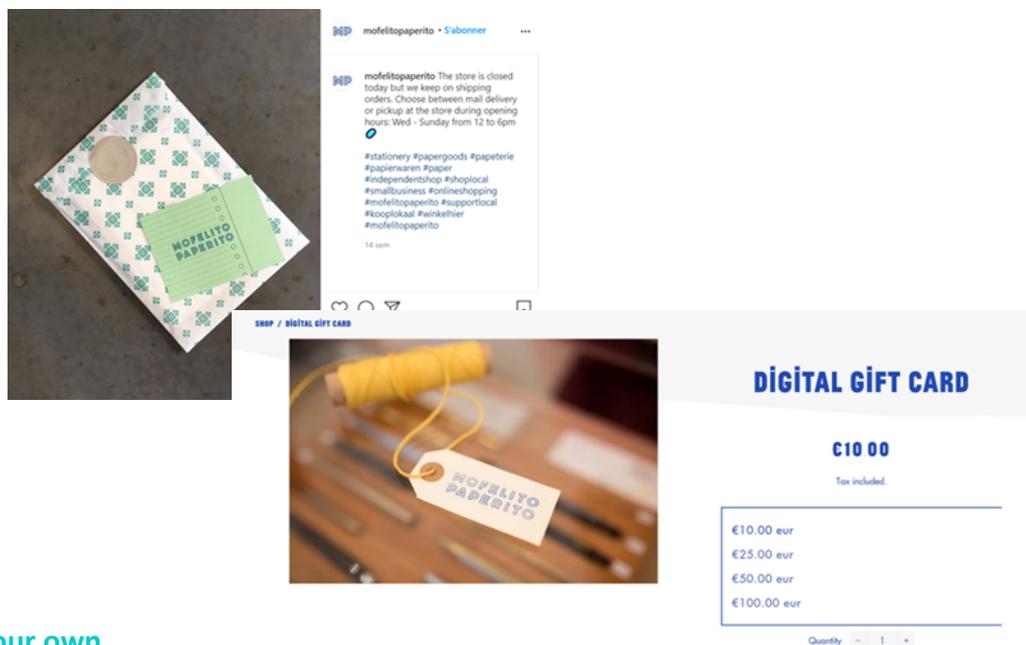


## Sales of purchase vouchers and gift cards

Your shop is closed and you haven't been able to set up online sales? You can offer your community the opportunity to buy a purchase voucher (for a fixed amount or an amount selected by the customer) which they can spend once your shop is open again.

The goal is to provide information about the purchase voucher system via your different communication tools and to detail the practical steps to purchase them.

For example, Yuman has recently set up an operation of this type, which is in addition to its online sales system:

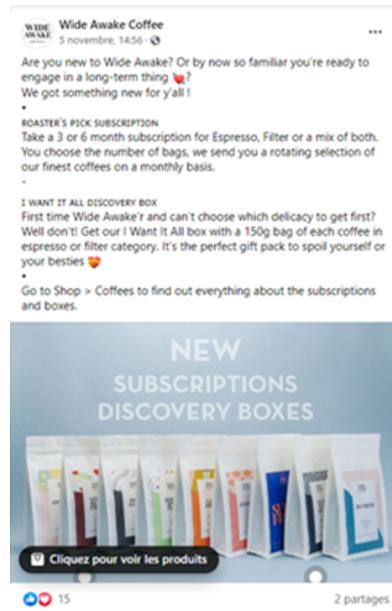


## Using your own website

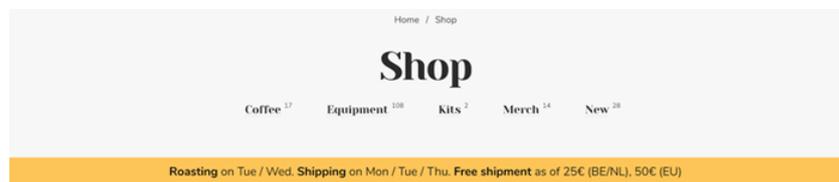
Order and payment management via your website's e-shop requires a financial investment but provides a real guarantee. In addition, sales via your own platform will increase your name recognition and boost your brand image.

Overall communication management is the same as for the previous methods.

- Communicate the practical steps of ordering via email.
- Broadcast practical information on the social networks.



- Highlight special deals on your webshop, such as your free delivery service:



## Click and collect

The click and collect system is generally based on a pre-existing website, but it can also be created using an online form...as long as customers have access to the products you are offering via remote sales.

Regardless if the sale is completed in your e-shop or via another channel, the advantage of click and collect is that it enables you to bring customers into the shop by offering them the opportunity to order an item remotely and to save on delivery costs by coming to the point-of-sale to pick it up. "On-site" collection provides an opportunity to give personalised advice and to offer additional products when appropriate.

Click and collect increases traffic in shops and many customers who come to pick up their items make additional purchases. We recommend that you identify the products that you can highlight in your point-of-sale to provide customers with the opportunity to complete their initial order.

## In brief

Regardless of the system selected, we recommend that you provide specific communication - on a regular basis - to promote your online service. Don't forget that an online sales website can be considered a complementary tool to your physical business.

When your shop re-opens its doors, you will have the opportunity to communicate on two subjects: highlighting your physical sales channel and your digital sales channel. These two elements can cohabit perfectly, but need to be highlighted on a regular basis.



# Adjust your communication daily

## Adjust your digital communication: social networks

In order to communicate transparently with your community, we recommend that you set up an editorial calendar if you haven't done so already. It will help you precisely define the information you want to provide on your social networks. It will also enable you to plan the content, messages, visuals, etc. you will post ahead of time.

### Building steps

#### 1 Prepare your editorial calendar

As mentioned, preparing your editorial calendar will ensure that you don't miss any "major events". It will also enable you to structure the content in advance and facilitate transition to a new type of communication. Although the discourse and usual tone of your posts don't necessarily have to change, you should, however, adapt the content to match the realities of your audience as closely as possible.

You should, ideally, define one topic per posting day. Here are the major posting categories:

- **"Tricks and tips"** posts let you display your added value/expertise. Most importantly, you must communicate "useful" information which is often produced and shared by other broadcast channels than yours, but which are relevant to you. You can share them on your page to, why not, increase your audience's awareness.
- **"Friendly"** posts create a unique connection/complicity with your fans. Don't hesitate to post "behind the scenes" content on a more regular basis to strengthen the feeling of proximity with your customers, while including shared information about the suppliers/producers/artisans you work with.
- **"He who gives receives"** posts strengthen relationships with your partners. For example, you can share information when a retailer in your neighbourhood carries out a special action.
- **"Promotional"** posts: you have to let people know that you want to sell! Clearly state why you are the best at what you do and highlight some of your assets in a post.
- To make your life easier, use a simple Excel calendar to create your editorial calendar.

#### 2 Search/compile images

If you have a database of your products, prepare it and select the photos and the times you will post them.

Don't panic if you don't have any good quality images. You can use images available on the Internet. A number of image databases are available free: pixabay.com, unsplash.com, pexels.com, foter.com, etc. Do some research to select your photos and illustrate your upcoming posts in just a few clicks!

### 3 Prepare your texts

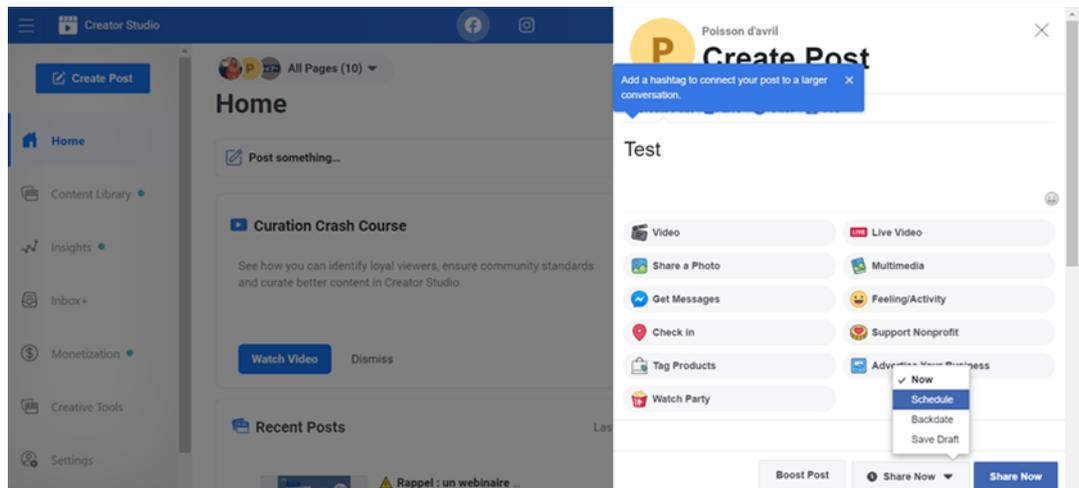
Prepare the texts for your posts in advance to save precious time. Since your publication plan already lists the topics, you will just need to write the text and combine it with specific content.

In order to optimise your text, we recommend limiting captions to 250 characters maximum, using two to three emoticons and, potentially highlighting some words with capital letters, hashtags or text formatting. This will create greater interaction with your community and also create visual appeal for your posts.

### 4 Plan your posts

Once you have created your editorial calendar, and defined all of the items mentioned above, you will just need to schedule your posts. You can spend an hour or two scheduling all of the content you will post during the week. This is an excellent way to ensure that you will have a regular and coordinated presence on social networks: don't miss out!

Make your life as easy as possible by planning your posts in advance. This functionality is easily accessible on Facebook via the publishing tools:



You can also schedule your posts on Facebook and on Instagram via Facebook Creator Studio.

### 5 Interact with your community.

Preparing and scheduling your posts does not necessarily mean that interaction with your community must be limited...on the contrary! By preparing your content in advance you will save time every day which you can use to answer comments, messages, emails, etc.

Maintain a dialogue. Don't hesitate to survey your subscribers, to ask their opinion, to ask them to express themselves and, especially, to discuss things with them. This is obviously an excellent way to increase the scope of your posts and to generate the greatest number of interactions possible.

#### Advice

Given the current situation, it's important for your business to communicate in a serious and structured way to build trust. In addition, the concept of "virtual

proximity” has become the norm as a result of the lockdowns. You can use it for your own daily communication...by inquiring about your customers on a regular basis, but also by providing news about yourself and the members of your team by sharing photos from behind the scenes, etc.

This type of content was already valuable before the COVID-19 crisis, but has become even more so now: it will enable you to maintain a direct link with your customers, even at a distance. Don't hesitate to use this method (or even overuse it!).

We went over the different elements you should communicate on your social networks above. They should be included in your overall editorial calendar.

## Adapting your website

There are several steps involved in adapting your website. First, if the hours and access conditions of your shop have changed, you should highlight this fact on your homepage.

- For example, you can use a pop-up window which opens automatically when visitors arrive on your website;
- Mention it in your blog or news tabs;
- Update your landing page's visuals and text.

You can also (and this is recommended) **mention the new measures implemented for the current health situation (openings, closures, access conditions, etc.)** on your website. Customers will generally view your website to access your product catalogue and practical information such as your opening hours and access conditions.

In these uncertain times, it's very important to be transparent about them: talk about the access conditions in a very clear and straightforward way. Be reassuring and positive to convince your customers that they are in good hands in your establishment.

**Tip:** if you have created computer graphics for your social networks, put them on your website.

**Tip:** if you have a website footer with your opening days and times, make sure that they are always up to date. Likewise, pay close attention to the information in the “Contact” tab, which normally provides your location and the access conditions and opening hours of your business.

## Ongoing remote sales

If you've created an online sales website during one of the two lockdowns, you should now include this sales channel as part of your business development. It's important to promote it via your different communication tools. There are several options available to integrate this option in an existing website:

- Do you take orders by email, telephone, Facebook or another method? Highlight this on your homepage by updating the text
- Did you set up a delivery system via an order form (or via email)? Post the practical steps for ordering on your homepage
- Do you have an e-shop? Highlight it on your homepage and invite website users to visit it with a number of different calls to action.

Also remember to [update your natural listing/SEO](#) and to highlight the take away service.

## Update your communication in the field

The re-opening after the lockdown will require that you adjust your communication in the field. Consider the items that have to be updated:

- Your display window: remind your customers of the hygiene measures and access conditions of your establishment. If your opening hours have changed, display them in the window too.
- Pavement signs: use them to advertise your re-opening, and your click and collect/online sales options.
- Etc.

In order to maintain your visual identity, we recommend that you use a professional service to adapt or develop material specific to your business. If the current conditions don't allow for this, there are free tools available, including [canva.com](https://www.canva.com), which will ensure an excellent result.

Next, assess the value of implementing promotional activities like a paid advertising campaign on social networks to announce your re-opening. You can also launch a communication campaign in the print media to communicate about your new products and innovations implemented for the reopening.

## Your updated checklist

That's it! You're ready to reopen! Be sure that you've done the following:

- Defined the new communication tools/actions to be implemented
- Defined the budget available to implement the above point
- Given priority to communication about the following via the social networks, email, the website and print media:
  - The reopening date and the new hours, if they've changed
  - The hygiene measures
  - The online sales or click and collect service
- Updated your website
- Sent out a reopening email + practical details
- Adapted your print and large format media and/or developed new ones

## In summary

Providing information daily during the health crisis requires adapting to meet the “new” concerns of consumers the best way possible. Your usual product and/or services offering has probably changed, as have your access conditions. These are all reasons to update your communication and provide a clear and transparent message. Don't be afraid to speak out and, be sure to be yourself in your communication...it's your greatest quality!

## Contact information

The hub.brussels Retail Team is here to help.

You can contact our department if you want to take the opportunity to discuss your business. We will help you reposition your business, redefine your - current and potential - customer base, develop your communication channels, revise your organisation and/or your internal management. We can also analyse your communication strategy and give you tips & tricks to adapt your communication to your goals. And if, on the other hand, the crisis provides you with growth opportunities, we can assess them with you.

**Contact us via email:** [retail@hub.brussels](mailto:retail@hub.brussels)

**Join our community:** <https://www.facebook.com/groups/hub.brussels.retail/>