How Can Small Businesses Prepare for the Coronavirus

As the number of confirmed COVID-19 (coronavirus) cases and deaths continue to increase it is time to consider how small businesses can/should prepare. The CDC urges businesses to prepare for worst-case scenarios regarding coronavirus.

Here are some of their suggestions as reported by Bridget Weston, Acting CEO of the SCORE Association.

**Stay on top of the news.** With rumors spreading faster than the virus itself, look to reputable sources for facts.

- The CDC recently launched Coronavirus.gov with extensive information for all U.S. residents, not just including business owners.
- The CDC has issued coronavirus guidelines for businesses and is updating them as new developments occur.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) has a coronavirus fact sheet for businesses as well as coronavirus FAQs and resources.

**Identify key functions and risks.** If you already have a disaster plan, use it to identify your most important business functions. Then think about how a pandemic might affect them.

- How will you stay open if half the staff is out sick or caring for sick family members?
- Who are your employees with critical skills who can’t be easily replaced on short notice? Can you train someone quickly, perhaps even outsource their work?
- What might happen if products you import from China were restricted?

**Keep your workplace safe.** At work, remind employees to practice basic hygiene, as they would during cold and flu season.

- Provide plenty of tissues and hand sanitizer throughout the office.
• Keep bathroom soap and towel dispensers full and encourage regular handwashing for at least 20 seconds each time.
• Clean surfaces regularly and provide disposable disinfectant wipes so employees can wipe down shared surfaces, such as keyboards, cash registers or desks, before using them.
• Provide disposable gloves for employees who use shared tools or touch the same surfaces, such as warehouse workers or shipping clerks.
• Because close contact allows viruses to spread, consider rearranging workspaces to keep workers at least 6 feet apart.

**Watch for symptoms.** Know the symptoms of coronavirus—fever, cough and shortness of breath.

• If workers have even mild cold or flu symptoms, send them home.
• Keeping employees from coming in sick may require providing sick pay and removing limits on sick days.
• If an employee gets sick at work, sanitize their work area after they go home.

**Work remotely.** If possible, have employees work remotely.

• If using their own computers, ensure employees use your company’s virtual private network (VPN) to access data, encrypt emails, install antivirus software and activate firewalls.
• Choose communication tools for instant messaging, project management and virtual meetings; **Zoom**, **GoToMeeting** and **Zoho Meeting** are three video conferencing apps to consider.

**Restrict travel.** Eliminate non-essential employee travel, especially to events with international audiences or areas with coronavirus outbreaks. Employees who have recently traveled to an affected area should self-quarantine at home for 14 days after their return.

**Plan for absenteeism.** In addition to employees who are out sick, many healthy employees will be stuck at home caring for sick family members, caring for children if schools close down, or unable to get to work if mass transit shuts down.

• Cross-train employees, supervisors and managers to cover others’ jobs, including working in other departments and geographic locations if necessary.
• Develop a relationship with a staffing service so you can quickly bring on temporary workers.
• Identify positions that could be outsourced.

**Check your coverage.** Business interruption coverage covers income lost when you shutter your business due to disaster. However, it typically doesn’t pay out unless there is physical damage to the business. Talk to your insurance agent to see what, if any coverage you would have if coronavirus forces temporary closure.

**Communicate continually.** Communication is key to preventing panic.

• Make sure employees clearly understand the reasons for any policies you implement.
• Direct them to reputable sources of information to stay abreast of the situation.
• Use the Crisis Communications Planning Checklist to develop a communications plan.

**For food service businesses:** The National Restaurant Association advises contacting your local health department for guidance and updates about coronavirus in your area.

• The NRA website has information and resources to help restaurants prepare for a coronavirus outbreak, including a coronavirus fact sheet in both English and Spanish.
• Dine-in business may drop off significantly, but this can be an opportunity to ramp up delivery or takeout sales.
• Bringing takeout customers’ orders to their cars can minimize potentially risky contact.

**For retailers:**

Prepare for supply chain issues and product shortages by seeking alternative suppliers.

• Keep in touch with suppliers to get alerted to problems immediately.
• Use this opportunity to expand your e-commerce sales; be prepared for online orders to increase.
• If you don’t sell online, offer customers the option to place orders by phone for delivery or curbside pickup.
Dean L. Swanson
Southeast Minnesota SCORE
c/o Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce
220 South Broadway, Suite 100
Rochester, MN 55904
www.seminnesota.score.org/
*Dean is a volunteer Certified SCORE Mentor and former SCORE Chapter Chair, District Director, and Regional Vice President for the North West Region