FMI

Guidance for the Food Industry: Coronavirus Outbreak

IV. Considerations for Food Sector Continuity in a Reopening Economy
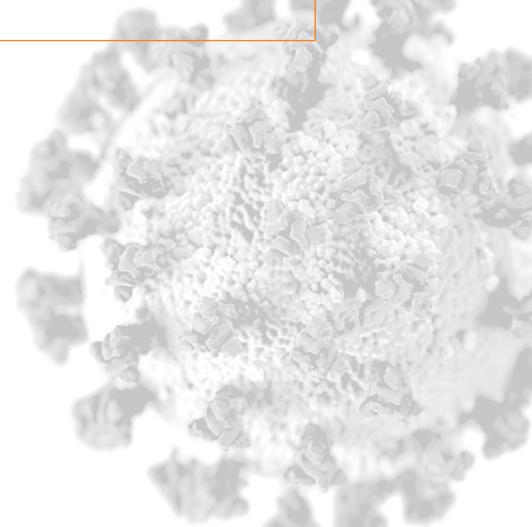
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Overview

The United States declared a national emergency on March 13, and federal and state leaders continue to work with health officials to take effective actions to fight the growing coronavirus pandemic. Certain areas of the country are beginning to see signs of a peak in confirmed COVID-19 cases, while other regions continue to see rising numbers and millions of Americans remain in shelter-in-place areas.

On April 16, the White House released [Guidelines for Opening Up America Again](#), a three-phased approach to help states and localities take steps to begin reopening their economies. Several states have announced their plans to reopen their economies beyond the critical infrastructure, while others express caution over lifting restrictions too early. As more states begin to move forward with plans to allow businesses to reopen in the coming weeks and months, the food sector must be prepared to effectively transition from crisis operations to some semblance of normalcy.

As part of the country's critical infrastructure, the food industry is unique because most grocery stores and food producers remained open in the effort to ensure food was available as thousands of businesses were forced to close. Using the [White House's phased approach](#) as a guide, this document provides considerations for the food industry to ensure it continues to operate smoothly as millions of Americans return to the workforce in phases and new considerations are presented to the industry's operations. Unfortunately, the ongoing health crisis is not expected to end once businesses begin to open. Companies and individuals will need to follow health guidance and continue to take the necessary precautions as they return to work, shop for groceries and resume at least some social interactions. Businesses should also consider medium- and long-term planning to address areas in which a secondary surge occurs or the country experiences future resurgences of outbreaks later in the year.

The U.S. economic outlook remains uncertain even as businesses begin to reopen. The length and severity of the downturn remains to be seen as does its long-term impact on shoppers' behavior. To assess the impact of COVID-19 on the perceptions and behaviors of grocery shoppers, FMI is actively surveying shoppers about their changing shopping habits and is publishing an ongoing series of reports, blogs and infographics. FMI's *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends COVID-19 Tracker* is available on [FMI's website](#).

This is the fourth in a series of business practice documents that FMI is producing for the food industry. Previous documents included [I. Best Practices and Planning for the Immediate Situation](#), [II. Short-Term Best Practices](#) and [III. Suggested Business Practices](#). We encourage reference to these other documents for additional recommendations, including supporting associates' and customers' health and supply chain issues.

Three-Phased Approach to Reopening the U.S. Economy

<u>Criteria and Preparedness</u>
The White House set a number of recommended conditions that states and localities meet before they begin reopening their economies, including a prolonged downward trend in confirmed cases of COVID-19 and a strong infrastructure for testing and contact tracing.

- A phased reopening may be implemented statewide or on a county-by-county basis at the discretion of the governor.
- States or regions should have downward trajectories of both symptomatic cases and documented cases within a 14-day period.
- Hospitals should have sufficient capacity and testing capabilities in place.
- States should have the ability to set up screening and testing sites for symptomatic individuals and trace contacts of positive results.
- States should be able to independently supply PPE and critical medical supplies.

<u>Ongoing Considerations and Guidelines for All Phases</u>
Employers should continue to implement industry best practices and appropriate policies regarding social distancing, PPE, temperature checks, sanitation and disinfection, and business travel in accordance with government guidelines. Employees who are symptomatic for COVID-19 should not return to work until they are cleared by a medical provider. Employers should maintain an effective workforce contact tracing program if an employee tests positive. Employers should consider evaluating emergency policies implemented during the health crisis and be transparent when considering rescinding such policies.

At the onset of the pandemic, FMI and other industry stakeholders advocated for [several waivers and other policy flexibilities](#) to ensure that the food industry could meet the increased demand associated with the many shelter-at-home orders and other challenges associated with the health crisis. As waivers and other emergency regulatory policies potentially begin to be rescinded in the weeks ahead, companies should identify the policies relevant to their operations to ensure readiness to comply with these regulations and that all necessary licenses are valid.

Individuals should continue to practice good hygiene and stay at home if they feel sick, and they should follow CDC, state and local guidance, especially as it relates to face coverings.

Each region's approach may vary, and companies should consider the underlying conditions in their region when making decisions for their associates, customers and supply chain.

Phase One

(For states and localities that satisfy the [White House Guidelines for Opening Up America Again](#))

- Individuals who are high-risk or vulnerable should remain at home and shelter-in-place. Households with vulnerable individuals should take precautions if returning to work.
- Social gatherings of more than 10 people should be avoided if appropriate social distancing cannot be practiced.
- Large venues, such as restaurants, may reopen with strict social distancing protocols.

Considerations for Associates

As states and localities begin to "reopen" by lifting some of the restrictions, companies should begin preparing for employees to return to work in order to facilitate a seamless recovery from emergency operations to more "normal" operations when it is appropriate. In this context, normal is used as a relative term compared to the crisis operations at the height of the pandemic. Companies and individuals will be adapting to a new normal in the months ahead as they continue to make adjustments in response to the pandemic. To do this, companies should take into consideration the following:

Workplace
- Identify a workplace coordinator who will be responsible for COVID-19 issues and their impact at the workplace.
- Openly communicate with employees prior to resuming more normal operations.
  - Prepare to notify employees of any policies or rules that were temporarily lifted, added or changed to accommodate COVID-19.
  - Develop office procedures for employees returning to work (i.e., staggered work schedules, use of shared equipment and spaces, etc.).
  - Remind employees of the normal operating policies and let them know when these rules will resume.
- When possible, allow for flexible worksite accommodations (e.g., telecommute). Provide office space for job functions that cannot work remotely (e.g., due to security reasons or the nature of the job).
- Schools that are currently closed likely will remain closed, so consider certain flexibilities or accommodations for employees with children home from school. A comprehensive contact list for state childcare agencies and a state-by-state list of restrictions is [linked](#) as a reference.

- Establish alternative options for holding large gatherings, meetings and events. For example, provide virtual options.
- Common office work areas should be kept closed unless appropriate social distancing practices can be employed.
- Reduce non-essential travel. Evaluate employee travel policies and determine the travel that is and is not permitted. Follow CDC guidelines regarding appropriate isolation if travel does take place.
- Implement flexible sick leave and supportive policies and practices to allow employees to report symptoms and stay home when sick.
- Consider implementing special accommodations for employees that are part of the vulnerable or high-risk population.
- Continue to monitor associates' health and if appropriate, screen associates for symptoms. Any associate exhibiting symptoms should be excluded from work and sent home.
  - The Food and Beverage Issues Alliance (FBIA) has developed protocols for screening food industry employees for COVID-19 symptoms or exposure.

PPE
- Promote the use of cloth face coverings, especially in areas where social distancing may not be possible. See CDC Guidance on How to Wear a Cloth Face Covering.
  - FBIA has developed guidelines for the proper usage of face masks to protect against COVID-19.
- Continue to promote hand hygiene for employees, customers, and worksite visitors.
- Ensure associates are trained on the proper use of PPE, proper hand washing, and good personal hygiene. Using PPE does not replace proper hygiene such as handwashing and not touching surfaces.

Social Distancing
- Encourage social distancing in store and support office settings. Consider establishing policies and practices for social distancing. Social distancing should be implemented if recommended by state and local health authorities and where possible in stores when contact time between people is extended beyond a few minutes.
  - FBIA has developed protocols on the emergency prevention measures to achieve physical (social) distancing in food manufacturing facilities as related to COVID-19.
  - Utilize in-store signage to encourage customers to maintain a distance from one another (FMI Social Distancing Signage).

Sanitizing and Cleaning

- Clean and disinfect the work environments that were closed (i.e., support office) before employees return to work and continue to perform routine environmental cleaning and disinfection. See [CDC's Guidance for Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes](#).
- Develop a plan for routine cleaning and disinfection, train employees and implement.
- Develop a plan for enhanced cleaning and disinfection after an individual suspected/confirmed to have COVID-19 has visited the support office location.
  - FBIA has developed [protocols](#) for (1) when an employee of a firm is a confirmed or presumptive case of COVID-19 and (2) when a facility employee/facility visitor/customer has been in close contact with an individual with COVID-19. This protocol is specific to food manufacturing facilities, distribution centers, and wholesale and retail outlets.

Ongoing Procedures

- Continue to identify opportunities to maintain a healthy work environment and reduce transmission among employees.
  - Actively encourage sick associates to stay home.
  - Identify where and how workers might be exposed to COVID-19 at work and minimize if possible.
  - Separate sick employees and send sick employees home.
  - Educate employees about ways they can reduce the spread of COVID-19.
  - Encourage employees to practice social distancing outside of work and avoid community gatherings that might increase the risk of exposure.

In-Store Considerations

As the economy reopens, continue to perform suggested business practices from [FMI's previous documents](#), such as with regard to PPE, hygiene and sanitizing. For all in-store departments, transparency wins. Continue to post signs throughout the store and on public address system or video monitors that describe the precautions and actions the company is taking to keep a clean and sanitized shopping environment. Some of the following recommendations may be more appropriate during the later phases of reopening based on local conditions and state and local health guidance.

Meat

- Enhance signage on in-stock conditions and explain that although certain items may not be available due to processing plants trying to be efficient and reducing the variety of products produced, the supply is still coming in.

- Reinforce confidence that supply is not running out, but there may be periodic shortages on specific SKUs on specific days.

Produce
- Packaged produce continues to sell more quickly than loose produce. Protected fruits like bananas and oranges are also selling well.
- Ensure that all employees are wearing masks and gloves. Customers prefer not to see other people's hands touching their products.
- Consider enhancing signage that explains that consumers should continue to rinse all fruit and vegetables before preparation. This was true before COVID-19 and is still true.

Deli and Foodservice
- Hot foods: Consider flexible options to offer hot foods to customers. For example, provide customers the opportunity to pre-order hot foods via an app or online ordering mechanism for pick-up in packaging to keep food warm.
- Consider providing flexible family meal options that are prepackaged to meet customer demands.
- Phase in salad bars and customer self-service operations as permitted, or potentially during the second or third phases of reopening. As operations are phased in, frequently clean and sanitize all surfaces and utensils. Food workers must continue to wash hands often and practice good personal hygiene. Continue to encourage spacing between customers and employees.

Bakery
- Continue to pre-package all products, including bagels and doughnuts. Consider single-serve packaging (single bagels and single doughnuts) in addition to the half dozen and full dozen packaging.

Seafood
- Seafood departments will likely see increased sales volume due to fish's role as a healthy protein. Associates should continue wearing full PPE while engaging with consumers. We also recommend continuing to pre-package seafood in the self-service cases for those customers that do not want full service. Consider social distancing measures that may be necessary at the seafood or other department counters.

<u>Supply Chain Considerations</u>

Key Distribution Center and Transportation Recommendations
These considerations are for companies operating their own distribution centers or for independent grocers to discuss with their wholesalers.

- Evaluate the emergency check-in and receiving procedures implemented to minimize contact between drivers and warehouse personnel and adjust only as needed.
  - For example, have any check-in procedures been automated? Can they remain automated?
- Evaluate emergency store delivery procedures to minimize contact between receivers and drivers and adjust in alignment with state and local guidance.
  - For example, if drivers have been asked to remain in a different area than warehouse personnel, assess ability to maintain social distancing and consider gradually relaxing barriers between phases one and two.
- Evaluate emergency guidelines for any lumpers or temporary labor you may use and adjust as needed in alignment with state and local guidance.
- Continually educate warehouse and logistics (and all) staff about the importance of protective measures and social distancing during off-work hours, especially as upcoming holidays may lure people into a false sense of security.
- High-risk individuals should maintain social distancing through all phases.

Procurement / Product Supply
- Evaluate cooperative arrangements with other distributors to keep the food supply chain functioning.
  - FMI and other organizations have established exchanges and collaborative communication portals to facilitate connections with potential sources of food supply. See [FMI.org for details](#).
- Evaluate product substitution rules as product supply shifts such that products continue to flow to the shelves. These will need to be well communicated and well understood.
- Continue to communicate with upstream suppliers about their business continuity and risk mitigation plans for potential unforeseen interruptions.
- Conduct discussions with trading partners to improve supply chain response plans.
- Evaluate core and other items that will be critical to the food supply during the transition through potential relaxed restrictions on social distancing.
- Continue to identify alternatives for core items to the extent possible and develop a plan to shift demand to these suppliers should it become necessary.

- Recognize that international and national distribution may continue to be disrupted and update a geographic analysis to examine ways to shift to more local or regional supply sources through the phased reopening.
- Continue to consider consumer purchase patterns by market.
- Consider assistance that might be available for key vendors struggling to continue normal business functions.
- Evaluate and develop a plan to coordinate backhaul strategies to help address shortages. Evaluate and assess the need to utilize any alternative pickup locations that may have been used in certain severely impacted locations.
- Use the learnings from the product procurement and supply coordination to reimagine networks and collaborative planning going forward.

Phase Two

(For states and localities that continue to satisfy the [guidelines](#))

Many of the phase one considerations continue to apply when states and localities shift to their second phase of reopening. <u>Employers should continue to promote proper social distancing and hygiene for their associates, customers, and worksite visitors.</u> Each state or locality may have varied approaches to the reopening to accommodate characteristics of their region. Companies should continue to consider the underlying environment in which their stores operate when making decisions for their associates, customers and supply chain.

- Individuals who are high-risk or vulnerable should continue to remain at home and shelter-in-place. Households with vulnerable individuals should take precautions if returning to work.
- Social gatherings of more than 50 people should be avoided if appropriate social distancing cannot be practiced.
- Continue to encourage telework options.
- Close common areas or other office areas where social distancing cannot be maintained.
- Non-essential travel can resume. Continue to evaluate employee travel policies. Follow CDC guidelines regarding appropriate isolation if travel to designated higher-risk areas takes place.
- Continue to consider implementing special accommodations for employees who are part of the vulnerable or high-risk population.
- Schools and other youth activities may reopen.

Phase Three

(For states and localities that have no evidence of a rebound in documented cases and satisfy the [guidelines](#) a third time)

As with phase two, many of the considerations from the previous phases may still apply during phase three. <u>Employers should continue to follow CDC and state and local health guidance, especially as it relates to proper social distancing and hygiene.</u> A well-executed internal and external communications strategy is critical during any crisis and is especially important now during the current health emergency. While phase three is the final phase of the reopening approach, it remains to be seen what the new normal will look like when regions make it through phase three. Potential surges in COVID-19 cases could result in reestablishing some of the restrictions from earlier phases or some of the stricter policies implemented during the earlier period of shelter-in-place.

- Individuals who are considered high-risk can resume public interactions but should maintain appropriate social distancing.
- Employers can resume unrestricted staffing of worksites.

Additional Resources

Supplemental to these considerations, FMI has many additional resources to help companies stay informed and operate effectively during the ongoing health crisis.

- **FMI Coronavirus Resources:** www.fmi.org/coronavirus
- Previous FMI guides in this series:
  - I. Best Practices and Planning for the Immediate Situation
  - II. Short-Term Best Practices
  - III. Suggested Business Practices
- **Daily Calls:** FMI's government affairs team hosts daily calls at 4:30 p.m. EDT to provide the latest updates on the government response to the outbreak and to provide a forum for members to ask questions.
- **FMI Crisis Management Email:** For general questions on the ongoing outbreak, contact crisismanagement@fmi.org to get in touch with an interdisciplinary group of experts at FMI.
- **FMI State Issues Crisis Tracker**: Tracking state-by-state responses and waivers for industry topics, including state reopening plans, face covering requirements, WIC waivers, state emergency declarations, truck weight limits and hours of service waivers.
- **Food Industry Documents:** Through the FBIA, FMI and the food industry have issued joint resources for the food industry at www.feedingus.org, including:
  - Food Industry Recommended Protocols When Employee/Customer Tests Positive for COVID-19
  - Considerations for Identifying Exposed Employees as Related to COVID-19
  - COVID-19 Employee Symptoms/Testing Status-Based Decision Tool for Food Facilities
  - Recording of COVID-19 Work-Related Illness Under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) Recordkeeping Requirements
  - Proper Usage of Face Masks
  - Emergency Prevention Measures to Achieve Physical (Social) Distancing in Food Manufacturing Facilities as Related to COVID-19
  - Screening Food Industry Employees for COVID-19 Symptoms or Exposure
- **FMI COVID-19 Business Solutions**
  - FMI has compiled important business solutions during this ongoing crisis to support the food industry.
- **Worker and Customer COVID-19 Safety Resources**
  - This toolkit includes resources for grocery store and warehouse employers to communicate coronavirus (COVID-19) safety practices to both their employees and their customers.

- **FMI's U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends COVID-19 Tracker:** To assess the impact of COVID-19 on the perceptions and behaviors of grocery shoppers, FMI is actively surveying shoppers about their changing shopping habits and publishing an ongoing series of reports, blogs and infographics. The latest report contains comparison findings from the first four waves of research but also includes insights about cooking and eating during this period of home sheltering. Additionally, these are broken down by generation for those interested in comparing how millennials are approaching things differently from Gen Xers and Boomers. Future weeks of research will continue to provide deeper insights and will track evolving areas of concern and changing patterns in the where/what/who/how of grocery shopping as influenced by the pandemic.
- The FMI Jam COVID-19 Online Community, powered by SAP, is a knowledge sharing forum tailored for all subsets of food retail. It has four sub-communities focused on workforce, operations, supply chain, and worker safety, and it includes a repository of nearly 100 PPE resources to explore.
- **FMI Customizable Signs**
    - **Essential Worker Car Decal**
    - **Aisle Signage**
    - **Social Distancing Signage**
- **CDC's Coronavirus Site**
- **FDA's Food Safety and Coronavirus Resources**