



The

# **Broadcasters' Desktop Resource**

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

## **BROADCAST OPERATIONS**

### **Keep the Flu out - Keep Your Staff In**

*By Barry Mishkind*

*[October 2009] According to news reports the H1N1 flu has affected a significant number of people. Some have fallen ill, but one result is that everyone has become more aware of personal hygiene and ways to prevent transmission of flu viruses. Of course, we are getting conflicting messages from various bureaucrats and health professionals.*

*Nevertheless, it is well worthwhile to review the policies and plans at your facility so as to make sure everything and everyone keeps functioning as well as possible.*

It is the dreaded sound of each flu season: “*AHHHHCHOOOO!*” It is especially unwelcome if you are sitting next to someone in a conference room or on a crowded airplane, where you cannot get away from them, and they suddenly send a misty cloud of virus germs into the air. The situation in a radio studio, with its confined space, could be just as bad.

Would you want to work in a studio following a sick person who has been coughing and talking into a microphone for several hours? Even a strong Lysol spraying might not give you much of a sense of safety. Of course, with the reduced staffing levels now at many stations, losing even one person to the flu (whether or not it is the H1N1) can cripple daily operations, especially if they are a one-person department.

So, what can you do to protect yourself, your staff, and the station from succumbing to the bug?

#### **PLAN, PREVENT, PREVAIL**

First of all, as a famous book says: “Don’t Panic!” Yes, there is cause for concern when a viral outbreak is reported. But, really, by following a well thought-out plan, problems can be minimized, and life will go on normally.

Of course, the enemy is not just the H1N1 virus, but a whole range of flu bugs that circle the world every year. While there new flu vaccines are released each year, they are based on scientists’ best guesses about exactly which flu bugs will appear. Even if they guess right, it can take as long as two months for someone who was injected to develop immunity. Then, too, sometimes they guess wrong.

But even the most educated guesses can be rendered worthless in a matter of hours. Remember, with air travel, a flu strain that has not yet appeared in your town still can move around the world in less than a day. I know from experience: I got the flu shot one year and yet, just two months later at NAB, I got a very bad case from a different flu strain, anyway – putting me in bed for a whole week.

That is why now is the right time to put together a plan to deal with any threat, whether major or minor. Giving serious thought to the various ways to reduce infection – and how to “cover” for ill workmates – will result in fewer infected staff members and less lost work time for all.

## **PROTECTION IS PREVENTION**

Perhaps the most basic plan is the one that centers on prevention. Since few can just move to a cave in the mountains, we have to deal with the working environment in which we find ourselves.

Stephan White reminds us that “airborne germs are inhaled by unwitting recipients and they incubate in our mouths, throats, and nasal passages. All warm, damp environments [are] highly conducive to germ growth and retransmission.” Irritated or inflamed nasal passages (from allergies or the wrong spray) can create an especially vulnerable gateway for germs to invade.

Unfortunately, it is probably not a viable plan to have the staff wear masks – especially the air staff. However, there is a lot that can be done to reduce the potential for transmitting the flu to everyone in the building.

The first line of defense is cleanliness. Make sure everyone washes their hands often – and with vigor. Alcohol wipes and/or hand sanitizers in appropriate places would be a good move. White suggests nasal sprays which, if used properly, can kill off most of the germs that try to enter that way.

Also, it is important to carefully clean all the work surfaces. Disinfect the microphones and windscreens regularly (some stations use several in rotation). And, did I mention that the whole staff should wash their hands frequently?

If available, flu shots may provide a level of protection. Some feel that flu season is the right time to take extra Vitamin C, or other vitamins. Make sure you get sufficient rest each day. White recommends drinking a lot of hot coffee or tea because it “will wash those germs and viruses into the stomach where they cannot grow because there is no oxygen present to feed them. This and frequent gargling with an antiseptic mouthwash will go a long way to keep a person healthy.”

One thing is certain: it absolutely could not hurt!

## **WHEN FLU STRIKES**

If you are a manager or supervisor, you should make sure that your people deal with public health issues intelligently – and you should set the example. While washing hands is important so that germs are not spread to surfaces where others could come in contact with them, reduction of airborne germs is also vital – especially in those “close” places like a studio/control room. A rough cough or a single sneeze can put millions of little droplets in the air.

To reduce the danger of infection to others, some remember the old advice: Put your hand over your mouth when you cough. However, while you could immediately run to wash your hands or use a hand sanitizer, health professionals may suggest that it might be better to cough into your elbow or sleeve.

Still better, encourage your staff to carry and use a handkerchief. Yet, knowing that some will not do so, perhaps it would be a smart thing to supply tissue paper in the control room, and around the facility. Combined with routine cleaning and disinfection of surfaces, and either an aerosol disinfectant or hepafilter, the chance of transmitting the flu bug (or others) is reduced significantly.

But what happens when someone does fall ill? Businesses with more than one employee probably know it is *not if, but when*, flu will strike. Someone *will* get sick.

Now what?

## **CHECKLIST**

This is where planning ahead brings everything together: First of all, plan to have anyone who becomes ill visit their doctor and then home. Public Health authorities point out that prompt treatment with the right drugs often can help the person recover more quickly.

Health officials also say infected persons should stay home until they get over the flu, and in some jurisdictions have even promised to close schools, public offices, and even some workplaces in the event of a local outbreak. Meanwhile, each department head should have a plan as to who can “cover” for each and every employee should they fall ill. This means announcers, sales, news and traffic, the receptionist ... and engineering.

Here are some points that your plan should consider and plan for:

- Do you have an accurate, up-to-date contact list for the staff?
- Does each staffer know who to contact if their boss is out?
- Is there a way they can contact the station – 24/7 – in case they fall ill? (How about a web page where *they* can make contact with the station? )
- Do you have an accurate up-to-date contact list for vendors and contractors, in case you need help with something (plumbing, air conditioning, etc) usually handled by someone who is ill?
- Is someone assigned to monitor the CDC, State and local health hotlines so you have current information on the status of local health issues, as well as tips for helping folks cope better.
- How capable is the office VPN server? Can it handle incoming requests from multiple stay-at-homers?
- Can you reduce meetings and conferences for the duration of the health alert?
- Can the “front desk” duties be handled remotely, reducing interaction with the public during the health alert?

## **GIVE THEM TIME TO RECOVER**

As much as you need or want to get folks back to work, do not try to force people back into the building too soon – they might still be infectious and just make things worse. Think about those in the studio and how close they must work in relation where to someone may have been coughing not long before.

The Internet has offered some options that did not exist previously. For example, if someone is at home and is on the mend, they might be able to do some – or all – of their job remotely, via VPN, without the danger of infecting others.

The better your plan, the more seamless it will be in terms of making sure all important tasks are covered without exposing anyone to infection.

## **HANDLING DIFFICULT COVERAGE**

Nevertheless, what about the specialized staffers in your facility? Engineering may be a one-man-band department, for example. And it might be that no one else in the building can do even part of the job.

One solution is to look outside: Perhaps it might be possible to make advance arrangements with another station for mutual coverage in case the engineer is indisposed. Often, the engineers know one another anyway. And cooperation helps everyone.

Our hope is that you continue unaffected by the H1N1 or any other virus. So then: Plan, prevent, prevail. Your whole facility will benefit.

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