

Redefining customer experience: Connecting in the time of COVID-19

As the novel coronavirus forces people into a digital-only way of life, it's important for businesses to infuse virtual experiences with a human touch.

All relationships have an emotional component — and that holds true for the connection between people and brands. Your business's relationship with customers is built over time, nourished by experiences along many online and physical touchpoints in their journey, grounded in expectations, and confirmed through repeated interactions.

A crisis puts both the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship under a spotlight. And the coronavirus pandemic is not just any crisis. The “locked down” nature of the response to this crisis — which is forcing most people to be physically separated from their friends, extended family, workplace, and favorite places — is requiring organizations to adapt to a digital or remote way of doing business and is dramatically altering people's daily experiences.

So, as a business leader, how do you help people thrive when they are stressed, fearful, and longing for authentic human connections? And how do you mitigate the impact of the novel coronavirus as it upends every aspect of your business like a slow-motion tsunami?



Don't let panic shake your customer focus

If you are a B2C company, your most important stakeholder right now is a human being who is craving comfort and connection, and suddenly needs a new customer experience (CX). Your first question, therefore, shouldn't be, “How can I grab market share?” or even, “How do I boost my top line to counteract the economic carnage I'm facing?” Your most pressing question should be, “How do I support my customers right now in a meaningful, human, and relevant way?”

Even before this crisis, PwC research showed that 59 percent of global consumers surveyed felt companies had lost touch with the human element of customer experience, and 75 percent of the customers surveyed preferred to interact with a human versus an automated machine. And now, people might be struggling to navigate the many friction points of the “new normal” and need a human touch even more. For instance, making purchasing choices for essential items without being able to try out or see products in person could be difficult for some. The same is true for getting advice online or solving problems, an example being telehealth, without direct human contact.

As a result, what customers care about most right now might be changing. Brands with the best price, coolest product, or most memorable marketing campaign might not have an advantage compared with those that exhibit emotional intelligence and communicate with care, honesty, and empathy, and build trust as a result. In times of crisis, people want to be seen and understood, and they are extremely sensitive to tone and motive. Are you reaching out to help them — or to sell them something? Does your outreach feel authentic and caring — or does it appear self-serving?

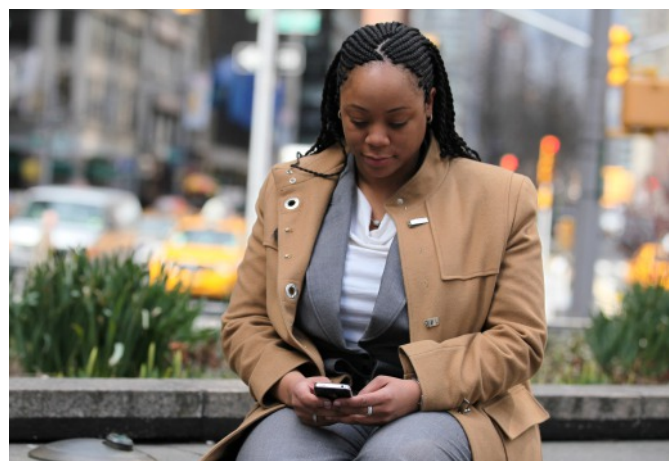
For example, as all retail businesses in China had been shut down due to coronavirus, people were craving their usual comforts, including hot pot dining — traditionally a communal experience in restaurants. So a restaurant chain began delivering the ingredients for the cherished meal to individual apartments, with no physical contact, enabling people to have their comfort food and deepening its bond with customers.

Keep in mind that the impact of the actions you take today will probably outlast the pandemic and define the loyalty people have to your brand and your products. So the messages you put out in the marketplace must be grounded in the actual experience and needs of your customers. And those messages must be matched by your credible ability to deliver on them. If you can earn customers' trust in this way, you'll build a connection today and in the future.

Find ways to make digital more human

B2C companies typically encounter customers on multiple channels: physical (face-to-face), remote (via mail or phone), and digital (via online sales and support). Up until now, you've probably prioritized efficiency — transitioning human interactions where possible to digital or automated ones. The irony in that shift is that now, in the time of COVID-19, it's no longer good enough to just make those experiences simple and efficient. You must be more human across those virtual channels, too, because people can't get that touch in other ways. So think about how you can embed human interactions, be honest with your customers about what's changed, and surprise them with unexpected, caring gestures.

For example, a customer who contacts a call center might be delighted to have the option of a video call with a real person who's also working from home and is willing to take as much time as needed to address her question. The video creates a human connection, and the entire CX shows that the company cares — it's willing to prioritize the quality of the interaction over call-volume efficiency. This experience also shows that the company is taking care of its employees by enabling them to keep working — and to keep getting paid — from home.



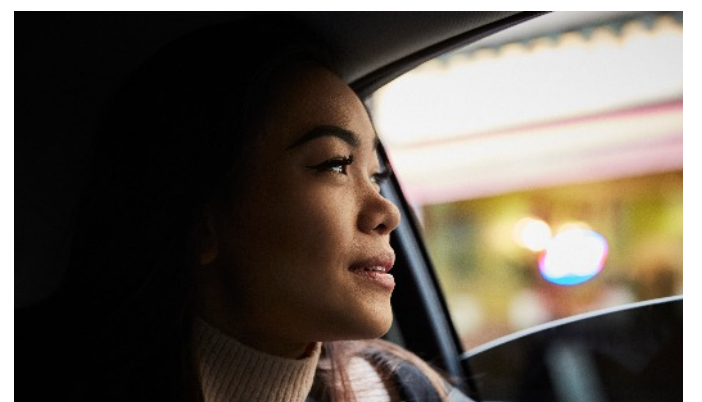
Don't be afraid of imperfection, either. Companies often talk about the importance of agility and the need to “fail fast” in order to succeed. This is the perfect time to put this concept into action. If you are being authentic and really are trying to help customers, they'll understand. And in fact, showing that you're human, just like them, will help you forge a bond with them.

There's a hidden opportunity, too: When all bets are off, you can go ahead and test innovative new approaches to customer care that you might have been too risk-averse to try before. Consider offering your most loyal customers the opportunity to pilot such programs as a way of deepening your engagement with them. And consider what you can do for your loyalists, in general. Some online grocers, for instance, have been trying to prioritize delivery to longtime customers.

If you demonstrate to your customers that you're doing everything in your power to put protecting and serving them ahead of seeking profits — that you understand that this is not the time for business as usual — they will be far more forgiving of imperfect execution, operational glitches, and poor video connections.

Forging the future together

We all become more human when we've gone through pain, and we all become more deeply connected when we've suffered together. Those emotional realities are also valid when it comes to relationships between businesses and consumers. If we suffer together and yet support each other, those bonds will only strengthen over the long term. They can even form a new basis for how brands and consumers can connect in the future.







Ultimately, COVID-19 will teach us a great deal about the true nature of interaction and collaboration: that they will lead to a deeper appreciation of putting people first, that brands will have had the opportunity to show their true colors (positively or negatively), and that companies, brands, workers, and consumers are capable of adapting in a positive way to a change that is imposed upon all of us, and emerging, together, in a better place.

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