

How customer centricity can help you stay in business



IAB SA / Kantar Insights in Action: How customer centricity can help you stay in business

Customer centricity is becoming increasingly important as everything seems to be changing around us daily, which in turn changes our behaviour as consumers. Here are six ways brands can better adapt to customers' needs in these trying times, both externally and internally.

The latest COVID-19 Barometer results among connected consumers show that most South African consumers still see the coronavirus as a huge concern, largely due to the uncertainty around when we will finally return to normality. This mood makes it difficult for brands to respond, but it's also a huge opportunity to connect with consumers at a deeper level, which will have lasting impact.

The pandemic is not only impacting our personal and work lives but also the global economy, with \$8tn in output loss expected globally. Consumers are now looking to be more proactive in their financial tracking, with 72% saying their income has been impacted as businesses struggle to get back up and running. This in turn is impacting the relationship between customers and brands. But instead of the do-or-die scenario of cutting costs wherever we can, businesses need to realise the pandemic may well serve as a catalyst to move us forward and rethink what they can do to become more customer-centric brands.

Our emotions are especially heightened in times of crisis, so we will likely remember what brands do right now for a lot longer than we would in normal times. Linking to Daniel Kahneman's concept of the experiencing self and the remembering self, the stuff that sticks is what has emotional impact, as those are the experiences, we will continue to tell ourselves stories about.

Brands need to decide how to make those memories positive in a time where everything is heightened, with heightened emotions a by-product of the stress that coronavirus has on people.

Customers will remember brands that that showed humanity; that took care of their employees; that made efforts to help society. Customers won't remember businesses that did nothing, and they will have negative memories of those that were exploitative, put profit before people and who acted only in their self-interest. To create long-lasting goodwill, businesses must act on a strategy to help people. Maya Angelou's famous quote has never been more relevant: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

6 customer experience recommendations for COVID-19 and beyond

While some things will, with time, go back to the way they were, many things will not. So, companies that adapt and innovate now will have a competitive advantage in the future. Being agile and responsive to customer needs now, creates capability to adapt and compete effectively in the post-coronavirus environment.

But what is important now for brands? How do you act, rather than react? How do you make sure you are acting and not only reacting? Customer centricity acts as a systemic stabiliser, ringfencing brands from major economic and societal disruptions.

It's time to reinforce the customer-centricity of your brand and thus help you protect your company in those uncertain times...

1. Re-imagine customer journeys: Purchase journeys are changing to online

Brands need to understand how customer journeys have changed, beyond the functional mission of purchasing food for the week to include the more emotional one of staying safe. Kantar's COVID-19 Barometer shows that lots of that change has seen customers move online for shopping and banking, with brands adapting their ordering and delivery process fast.

80% of connected consumers currently shopping online and many expecting to continue to do so once the crisis passes, though just 20% of retail customers globally state that their grocery brand is providing an excellent experience in their online shops, so we need to focus in new customer missions, new emotional needs and different journey steps, and realise the danger of abandoning journey is great.

More than ever, brands need to solve problems for customers still looking to keep safe as we slowly move back towards normal. It's a great opportunity to embark on partnerships to solve customer journeys creatively, it's not about doing the same things in different ways but reimagining the customer journey overall.



2. Don't stop listening now! It's the best way to manage expectations

It's time to adapt your VOC programme. People feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information that's out there, so keep it short and be proactive – anticipate problems and address them before your customers experience them. Address the feelings before the practicalities and remember that it's time to communicate from the top, as it shows that your leadership recognises the importance of your customers and suppliers.

People use social media to express how they are feeling and are quick to vent, so listen. Add data flags to survey invites to understand the impact of pandemic and use text analytics to get a deep-dive on the key themes that help customers. Also make sure customers can get through to your contact centre instantly to get the help they need, as this often ties in with an emotional need to be heard – this may mean increasing capacity and enhancing your digital offering, to ensure your brand is as responsive to those changing customer needs in this disrupted time as possible.

3. Also care for the customers who have not been in touch recently

Many customer feedback programmes only reach out to those customers that have been recently in touch, but we need to focus on our 'silent customer' mass – those who only interact with the brand when they encounter a problem. This is often the case when it comes to utilities, insurance and telecoms. Unfortunately, disrupted everyday routines can put customer relationships at risk, especially where there's a gap between customer preference and company performance. Now that they have more time on their hands under lockdown, spending more time online and grappling

with financial insecurities, this is the time customers are likely to do a bit of research and switch suppliers if they're not completely satisfied.

That's why you need to show your whole customer base that you care in how you respond to the COVID-19 situation. Clearly communicate what your brand is doing and how you can assist consumers, and provide additional channels like chatbots and WhatsApp for customers to pose questions and give feedback. Monitor social media for topics related to category or brand to identify pain points and concerns.

4. Actions speak louder than words

How are you responding to the crisis? Our COVID-19 Barometer results show that customer expectations have shifted from wanting brands to be practical and help consumers, to now wanting to know what brands are doing to fight off and attack the crisis. Consumers want brands to protect us, so ensure your physical store has social distancing measures in place, as well as screens to protect employees and contactless payments options.

As economic uncertainty and the direct impact on household income grows, so people become more price conscious. Now's the time to provide value and show consumers you support them in helping them save money through payment holidays and other ways to ease the financial burden.

5. Monitor the actions you've put in place

Companies need to understand what is working for customers and how they respond to the changed environment during the crisis to adjust their processes and way of communicating with customers.

In South Africa, overall response to the crisis from business has been seen as positive, with 51% of the Kantar COVID-19 Barometer's local respondents saying they've had a more positive experience with local brands during lockdown than before the crisis hit.

6. Celebrate your staff – they are true heroes right now

It's time to monitor customer responses, so as to provide feedback and empower staff. Key drivers of customer satisfaction are staff-related: overall service quality, as well as availability and friendliness of employees. This friendliness and helpfulness in turn leads to improvement in business performance. Care for your employees in this time by showing your appreciation, keeping up communication and connecting on an emotional level, while empowering them to make decisions and solve customers' problems – do they have the tools and authority to do so on the spot?

It's not only important to redesign customer journeys, but to reimagine them with a focus on what customers need now as we move towards the future. In some ways we will undoubtedly revert to normal, but other behaviours might be here to stay. While acting to the crisis is crucial, brands also now need to prepare for after the pandemic and how it will impact what they do to remain customer-centric.

Employee experience management for CX in time of COVID-19

It's a difficult time for everyone, but don't keep that focus outward. Employees are the real heroes that will help you deliver your brand purpose, so see this as a once-in-a-lifetime moment to be inward-looking. Focus on your processes and business models and invest in your employees, as they will help you deliver your brand promise when you need them.

There's a legal obligation to do the right thing by employees in these difficult times, with positive ramifications as doing right by your employees is effectively doing good business. Mental and emotional health risks are high right now with reports of salaries being cut and jobs lost, as well as distractions and competing interests with children staying at home while we work remotely, which can hamper productivity. But rather than dwell on the negative, brands should do what they can to minimise friction and see it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to drive lasting positive employee experiences.

Employee experience refers to the journey the employee travels with you before, during and after they work for you. The experience starts long before they're added to your payroll and lasts long after they've left as they're more than just employees, they're brand ambassadors. Empathy is the glue that binds employee experiences. If anything, that's what COVID-19 has amplified. Employers need to show they care by communicating a clear and consistent crisis plan. This helps employees create routine where they feel out of control and the transparency builds trust and positive relationships.



Companies must pay attention to the emotions of their employees and the brand experience projected externally to customers in order to drive sentimental connections that will build goodwill

Prioritise people over profits by putting contingency plans in place to deal with the fact that 'business as usual' will be difficult for a while. Working from home and flexible working models will likely be sustained, so drive meaningful work that gets employees to buy into the brand's vision and purpose, as that's what will sustain profits post-pandemic. This has a direct impact on customer experience, because engaged staff will go the extra mile to provide thoughtful service and solutions to customers.

Remember that COVID-19 is but a moment in history. It will not last, but the impact and feeling you leave your employees with will. Kantar's Jack Hlongwane notes that there's a difference between empathy and pity: Empathy sees the other as an equal; pity sees the other as beneath. It's time for businesses to show empathy, not pity.

So, make sure you connect the dots of customer experience with employee experience, as everything you do now needs to relate to customer needs and how they tie in with your brand purpose. It's a tough time for everyone but don't panic. Check in on how employees are coping and hold regular virtual or socially distanced huddles with your frontline employees on the coalface of getting feedback from customers, so you can raise and solve their issues more efficiently. There's still so much talk about moving out of siloes, now's the time to act and truly become more collaborative and cohesive as we work towards a post-pandemic future. We're all in this together – let's choose to see it as an opportunity for brands to get back to their humanity.

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