

Marketing Sensitivity in the Age of COVID-19



As the COVID-19 virus continues to bring unprecedented changes to our world, your business has probably experienced some big changes as well, from telecommuting employees to shifts in how you operate. While attempting to navigate these changes, and the best way to respond to them, one thing is sure: for most companies, it's no time for business as usual.

One of the biggest challenges businesses face is determining how to market to customers during this difficult time. Some companies have already hammered out a plan for approaching them. Others are still trying to figure it out. To help you assess your own situation and forge an appropriate path, we've gathered some lessons from companies who

have already come up with a strategy, along with data-based best practices for showing sensitivity to the current situation in your marketing.

Don't lie low

While you may be tempted to keep quiet until the business climate becomes a little more certain and less confusing, that's not what your customers want. It turns out that they actually would like to hear from you. In fact, in a recent Advertising Age study, 43% of respondents said they found it reassuring to hear from brands during this time. A GlobalWeb Index survey supported this conclusion, with 38% of respondents agreeing that brands should continue to advertise amidst COVID-19. (Of the other respondents, 28% disagreed and 35% neither agreed nor disagreed.) Bottom line: let your customers know that you're still out there and ready to help.

Be nimble

Are you ready to launch a traditional marketing campaign, developed before the coronavirus turned the world upside down? Well, it may be time to shelve it instead, at least temporarily, until life for your consumers gets back to normal or closer to normal once virus numbers finally begin to decline. Instead, use the time to learn how the virus is affecting your consumers and adjust your strategy accordingly. Reassess your goals and priorities. Almost half of marketers surveyed by GlobalWebIndex have decided to change their priorities during the pandemic. Only 6% are going ahead with business as usual.

Avoid making assumptions

You know what they say about assumptions. (If you don't, you can Google it.) In any case, because everything about marketing during the pandemic is new, it's no time to be assuming things. In this changing business climate, it's more important than ever to rely on new data and insights regarding your customers, prospects, and others connected to your business.

How are your customers feeling these days? (Depressed? Stressed? Happy? Relaxed?) What are their financial challenges? Are they buying goods and services now or holding off on them until later? What are their expectations for the companies they patronize? It's well worth your time and money to do the research and adjust your marketing to reflect what you find.

Be sensitive to financial pressures

In April of this year, the unemployment rate soared to 14.7%, the highest since the Great Depression. While many of these job losses may be temporary, a significant number of those now without jobs are having money problems. Even those who aren't, appear to be conserving their dollars in the wake of economic uncertainty. For example, according to a

Scorpion survey, many consumers are holding off on large purchases and are planning to save during the upcoming months.

It's important to take this uncertainty and these financial issues into consideration when determining your marketing strategy. Perhaps it's time to think about offering special promotions or flexible pricing to help customers weather the financial climate. For instance, for a small startup fee, some enterprise software companies have created promotional offers that give prospects almost unlimited use of their products for three months. The strategy has helped the companies gain market share while remaining sensitive to customers cash-flow problems and building customer loyalty.

Use your power for good

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. That's an appropriate mantra for all the tech companies that have seen the problems brought about by COVID-19 and worked to find solutions. Here are some examples:

- Rideshare services Lyft and Uber are delivering food and medical supplies for frontline workers, seniors, and others in need throughout the world.
- Apple has donated 10 million masks to the medical community and \$15 million towards the global COVID-19 response. It's also continuing to pay all its hourly workers, even though they can't go to work.
- Honeywell has partnered with the U.S. government and is expanding its operations to produce N95 masks. According to the Smithfield, Rhode Island company, the expansion will create 500 more jobs in the area.
- Verizon Media has offered new tools to help developers and data teams better organize, understand, and present publicly available COVID-19 data.
- Cisco has created programs to help healthcare operations quickly procure free networking equipment.
- Google is working with the U.S. government to create a website for COVID-19 education and resources. The company is also removing misinformation from its sources.

These are just a few of the companies that have looked at the pandemic problems impacting their communities and the world and risen to the occasion to help out. Their actions will not only create goodwill with the community and loyalty from their customers, but they are also likely to make partners, vendors, and others feel good about working with these businesses.

What can you do to help your customers and communities during this time? If you can't think of anything, ask colleagues and employees to weigh in with their ideas. Even some of the smallest actions are likely to be remembered and appreciated. Just keep in mind that, in the worst of times, it pays to be at your best.

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