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The Only Message Customers Want From You

By
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Messages that miss the mark

It only took the pandemic a couple of weeks to turn it all upside down—including marketing and sales. And along with it has come an endless tsunami of email messages flooding consumer email mailboxes. It was war with 50% to 80% off sales, “Lowest prices ever,” “Free shipping—Free returns,” “Final Markdown,” “Sale ends in 4 hours and 17 minutes,” and BOGO offers.

Emails to customers from well-meaning businesses streaming to smartphones and computer desktops. It seems like a domino effect. One company starts it, and everyone else follows—with their version of the same message. Most open with a comment on the COVID-19 scourge and then quickly offer assurance that “We are here for you.” Words that companies would like to think customers want to hear.

Then, in a nanosecond, attitudes changed. Customers rejected the century-long proposition that the near-sacred role of marketing and sales was getting customers to buy more stuff and doing anything and everything to get the job done. And driving it all was the arrogant (and mistaken) belief that, no matter how you dress it up, customers exist for only one reason: *what they can do for us*. And it worked—then it didn’t.

How has the marketing and sales world changed? Some companies are listening. They get it: *It’s no longer about what customers can do for us by buying our stuff. Now, it’s all about what we can do for them.*

Arrogance is out; candor is in. Opinion is out; facts matter. Lying is out; empathy is in. Telling customers what they want to hear so they will take the bait is out; understanding and transparency are in. Being conned and ignored are out, truth matters and play it straight are in.

Sending customers BS-filled messages isn’t just unacceptable and stupid, it’s far more than that—it’s a missed opportunity. As demanding as it is to craft meaningful messages in troubling times, customers respond to those that make a difference in their lives.

What customers want to hear

What customers are looking for is understanding and help. Not the run around, not endless delays, not a pat on the head, calling another number, not incomplete information, not being dropped like a hot potato the moment the order is placed.

Isolated, alone, stressed, and frightened by an unseen enemy, they look for those who are prepared to come to their aid, who are on their side. It's also a message that better be clear, compelling, and positive, if we want their attention *and* their business.

The good news is that the growing cadre of companies that get it is growing. But it may take sales reports dripping with gloom to spur the creative juices flowing in many more businesses.

Nevertheless, it's happening and that's good news. Here's a sampling of companies that are looking inward to find ways to help customers cope with a relentless enemy that would harm their health and safety.

Anton's Cleaners, New England's largest dry-cleaning company, took the what-can-we-do-to-help question seriously and came up with an on-target message for the COVID-19 crisis:

**We care about your health.
Sterilization is a standard part
of our cleaning process**

No coupons, no discounts, no "Offer expires in 2 days." Just a simple, direct, and factual message, that answers the question why someone should take their clothes to Anton's: Anton's sterilizes your clothes. The message neither knocks competitors, nor is it price driven. It highlights an *existing benefit*. It's a guess that few Anton's customer knew their clothes were being sterilized and all of a sudden, it's a huge deal.

Even so, there's another side to the story. Supermarkets everywhere jumped in with early morning hours for the most vulnerable coronavirus age group, those age 60 and older. Some didn't stop there. They limited the number of customers in a store the same time, provided wipes, and installed see-through barriers at check-out.

Come to think of it, "Early Senior Hours" may deserve becoming permanent at least a day or two a week. Seniors tend to rise early and seem to like a slower pace when shopping, which might also please those who are in more of a hurry later in the day.

What's it take to get your message right?

Now, here's the point. Why does it take something like a whack on the head with a two-by-four to come up with worthwhile idea like early morning hours for seniors? We talk "customer commitment" to death, without having a clue as to what it means. Happily, a growing number of businesses are now getting it and are coming up with helping

innovative ideas that benefit customers. Here's a snapshot of a few that are doing it right:

- Cox Communications has increased internet download speeds from 30 MPS to 50 MPS to help improve productivity for at home workers.
- Allstate's "Shelter-in-place payback" is returning \$600 million of auto insurance premiums customers because fewer motorists are driving due to COVID-19, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.
- Best Buy offers contactless curbside service for purchases and returns.
- Constant Contact has a *free* Website Builder Business Plus plan to help small businesses get an ecommerce site up and running.
- The Institute of WorkComp Professionals is offering its members a free five-part webinar series on prospecting and LinkedIn positioning.
- Meero offers free large-file transfers to help remote workers, according to *Forbes*.
- Planet Fitness offers free online home workouts.

Sure, the cynics may scoff. Sure, these companies want more business. But, so what? Yet, these, along with others, are digging deep to find new and innovative ways to be of help to their customers at a painfully difficult time. All we need now is more like them and we'll come through this energized and on our feet.

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