

## Will The Customers Come Back?

By  
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When we narrow down the current COVID-19 economic situation, we're all in the same boat. No matter who we are or what we do, getting back to doing business hinges on having customers. Whether we like it or not, there's no guarantee they will be there. Although it may be disconcerting, here's why:

- *Some customers will decide they don't need us.* Their situation will have changed and they've moved on.
- *Others will have found new solutions.* Competition will be fierce with appealing options popping up everywhere.
- *More customers than we dare imagine will have simply disappeared,* whether individuals or companies. For one reason or another, they aren't around anymore.
- *Many will be far less accepting and far more demanding than they were in the past.* They've had time to rethink what's important to them and established new priorities.
- *Others are so stressed and preoccupied with their situation, they're unable to make decisions, let alone move forward.* They can't shake it off.

This may not be where we would like customers to be, but it's where they are. As frightening as it may appear, we can't expect them to dust themselves off and pick up where they left off. Just saying these words sounds, dare I say it, pessimistic. This isn't the way we see ourselves. We're optimists down to our DNA. We face danger squarely and we welcome challenges. To even suggest that a virus, of all things, could possibly disrupt our lives goes against the grain. It's more than a mere a slap in the face; it's the ultimate humiliation.

So, what are we to do? How will we deal with the cards we're left holding? Hope for the best? Keep our fingers crossed? Turn on the optimism and bring back a pop tune from the 1940's:

You've got to accentuate the positive  
Eliminate the negative  
Latch on to the affirmative  
Don't mess with Mister In Between

That's us—or is it? The words seem weak and out of place today. Here's the point: rather than trying to pick up where we left off or hoping for the best, we will be better served by recognizing that we've all been through a lot and a lot has changed.

Here's a checklist for reaffirming relationships with existing customers and building new ones with prospects. This is anything but easy. But it can happen!

1. *Customers perceive us as being authentic.* Pointing to Growth from Knowledge's Coronavirus Consumer Pulse findings, *Marketing Insider's* Stacy Bereck says that "85% of U.S. consumers feel that the way brands behave during the COVID-19 crisis will affect their desire to do business with those companies in the future."
2. *We let them know we want to understand their situation.* Call it empathy or whatever you like. Consumers want to feel they are doing business with those who are interested in them and not just making a sale.
3. *We introduce ways for customers to stretch their money.* It's more important than ever. Here's how the Betty Crocker folks are responding to this obvious challenge. "Impossibly easy dinners for \$2.50/serving. Dinner doesn't have to be spendy to be delicious. These fuss-free recipes are big on flavor and easy on your wallet." Right upfront they make it clear why their recipes are a good fit. They use the right key words: easy, inexpensive, and delicious. A winning combination.
4. *We help them avoid making purchasing mistakes.* I can hear someone say, "That's not a salesperson's job. I'm there to make a sale." That was then. Now, it's the smart salesperson who takes time so customers can arrive at an informed buying decision who will get the business—and be remembered.
5. *We focus on helping customers.* Explore options with them. Not good, better and best; not low, medium and high prices, but options you and your customer develop together such as poor fit, good fit, and best fit. In other words, options that make sense to them.
6. *We try to pull customers rather than pushing them.* This will take a lot more listening than talking, a lot more patience than persuasion, and a lot more understanding than ever before.
7. *We don't think we can pick up where we left off.* Let's face it, there's not much worse than being unwillingly slowed down, sidelined, and told to stay home. We may be charged up and chomping at the bit to get going. Even so, it's not like coming back from vacation. All of which is to say we need to give both ourselves and our customers time to adjust to a new and different situation.

8. *And, finally, our customers will stay with us if we let them know we're depending on them.* Some will see this as a sign of weakness and take advantage of us. But if we believe in building relationships, it's a chance worth taking.

In the past months, we have learned there is much that's out of our control. Even so, that's not the last word. What we do next when it comes to our customers and prospects is up to us.

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