CMO LONG READ

Increasing customer and employee happiness in the coronavirus era

And why that's essential to boosting sales and marketing productivity

The following article is based on a CMO Roundtable organised by the B2B Marketing Forum, SPOTONVISION and Salesforce. Topics of discussion included:

- **The skills** marketing and sales managers can use to reduce the effect of loneliness on customers and employees, while driving increased sales and productivity
- **The need** for personalised, empathetic marketing to improve the customer experience
- **The use** of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance cross-channel marketing

The "new normal"

The first use of the phrase "a new normal" occurred in a science fiction novel in 1966.[1] It's been used many times since to describe events that dramatically shifted the world at large, including the current coronavirus crisis. But, at its deepest level, is there anything truly new about what people are experiencing today? Rather has this "new normal" simply intensified a factor that explains why human beings act as they do – perhaps even more so in the digital age?

The reason for this may be quite primeval. Could the tools designed to protect the survival of the species, such as social distancing and the wearing of masks, also be hindering the very thing that makes us human?

How powerful is loneliness?

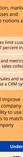
Taken to extreme, it may result in psychological disorders. For example, proxies for solitary confinement – the most severe form of prison punishment – have shown half of such incidents in prisons are committed by those in solitary. Yet these individuals make up just a sliver, barely 5 percent of the total prison population.[2]

However, people the world over today are facing functions on a magnitude never before experienced. This has and will continue to affect their happiness and how we get along with others, both professionally and personally.

According to Maxie Carl, a neuroscientist and business professor at the Kellogg School of Management and the Institute for Neuroscience, Cognition, and Technology, "Because our brains demand human connection, the sudden absence of this interaction that creates loneliness.

Engagement is the antidote to loneliness

To overcome loneliness and increase happiness during this time, marketing and sales managers can utilise programmes that promote human interaction for their employees and customers. And as B4 percent of business leaders say that the experience a company provides is as important as its products and services, now is the time to increase such activities.[3]



Personalised, empathetic marketing requires delivering messages and offers that match an individual's unique needs and expectations. To achieve this, at least moderate amounts of data and the technology to collect, process and analyse that information in real time are required. This has led Gartner to predict a survey conducted by Salesforce during the first two months of this year, to a 186 percent increase in artificial intelligence (AI) implementations by 2021.[4]

This same study also reveals the top priorities and challenges among marketers.

	Priorities	Challenges
Top 1	**Engaging** with customers in real time	**Engaging** with customers in real time
2	**Innovation**	**Innovation**
3	**Complying** with privacy regulations	**Creating** seamless customer journeys across channels and devices

Moreover, the needs of both customers and marketers appear to be more aligned than ever. In fact, 69 percent of business buyers surveyed expect marketers to understand their needs.[5] And, amazingly, 92 percent of B2B marketers surveyed have an account-based marketing (ABM) programme, which can help companies become more proactive.[6]

The need to transform marketing

Sixty-nine percent of customers expect connected experiences.[7] To better understand their customers' needs, marketers are operating at every stage of the customer journey, making it more seamless. Branding, acquisition, retention and advocacy are all being tied together and connecting with customers.

Marketers that rely solely on traditional marketing sides, which focus on a single product/service stage, or on tactics like email or social media, can be prone to misinterpreting customer cues or missing them altogether.

Brand and product managers need new types of information, marketers can adopt new types of channels and develop new processes and relationships with colleagues in other departments. These notions are supported by the following statistics.[8]

69% of marketers say traditional roles limit customer engagement – up from 57 percent in 2018

81% of marketers share goals and metrics with sales colleagues

63% of marketers use the same CRM system as customer and service departments (among marketers that use a CRM system)

Among the skills needed to enable cross-functionality and improve customer engagement, two may be more likely to predict company success or lack thereof. These critical skills involve the ability to use data science and emotional intelligence. This connection seems to match with how marketers rate their team's skills along with their company performance.[9]

Performance	High	Moderate	Under
Data science	67%	50%	23%
Emotional intelligence	65%	49%	28%

Using AI to make emotionally intelligent decisions from data

To make sense of data from an emotional intelligence perspective and to use it to inform marketing programmes that can engage customers in real time through personalisation requires AI. And more marketers are using AI to do just that, as 84% report using it in their companies – up from 29% in 2018.[10]

The top three use cases marketers are applying AI to include personalisation, segmentation and deep data insights.[11] And there appears to be link between using AI and success. Of the marketers that claim a fully-defined AI strategy, 70 percent rank their success as high or very successful. Furthermore, this use of AI seems to line up with customer expectations.

Shifts in cross channel marketing

Customers now expect companies to dynamically engage with them across channels. If brand and product content on one channel doesn't synch up with a customer's actions on another, it often leads to a poor customer experience.

For example, more than half of customers report that they are annoyed if they are targeted with an ad for something they've previously purchased. And 71% report using multiple channels between the beginning and conclusion of a single transaction.[12] Therefore, cross channel marketing assisted with AI is more likely to result in positive outcomes than programmes that do not use the technology.

The graph below reveals the growth of dynamic cross-channel campaigns, in which marketers tailor content to different channels based on a customer's actions on another channel, while those that practice siloed programs don't coordinate at all.

Making customers feel less lonely

As marketers become more adept at using AI and other technology to improve personalisation and engagement with customers during the pandemic, the less lonely and happier their customer are likely to become.

With customers reporting that experiences are as important as products and services, businesses that improve in this area can gain a competitive advantage.

But what about employees?

By not addressing employee happiness until now, this article demonstrates that it's easy to focus on customers and forget about the people we work with. Managers who are cognisant of how loneliness affects those unaccustomed to working from home can take steps to reduce its effect.

An organisation that studied the consequences of loneliness and how to overcome it is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. As well as peace exploration agencies in Europe and Asia, have used this research to enable astronauts to cope with isolation and lack of interaction over prolonged periods of time. These lessons can also be used to help employees learn to productively work from home and reduce feelings of loneliness.

Useful tips

1. Re-assign teams

NASA discovered that pairs often emerge, which can cause conflict with whoever's left out. They learned that if they re-assign teams to break up these pairs, it increases harmony among the entire group as people learn to see how others think.

2. Focus on the big picture, not the details

Different kinds of opinions are the details – it's easier to solve a challenge can prevent the group from moving forward. NASA realised this creates isolation among the group, leading to loneliness. To overcome this, NASA directed the group to acknowledge and focus on where they agree. This reduces conflict, while solving challenges and avoiding loneliness.

3. Help each other

Each astronaut has specific duties. They learned that if one completes their tasks and then assists another who had not, it reinforces bonding and reduces loneliness. Instilling this in your corporate culture can also increase happiness.

4. Recognise the 3rd quarter phenomenon

In lacuna, teams tend to perform poorly in the 3rd quarter. They are often tired and make mistakes and fouls. Coaches and teams that understand this take action to ensure it doesn't create conflict among their players.

Similarly, companies have specific periods that produce more pressure than the rest of the year. By taking that into account, management can add further precautions to avoid conflict and improve performance.

5. Embrace structures and systems

NASA and other space exploration agencies demand that their astronauts follow a set of procedures. This creates regularity, reducing loneliness.

By following routines and rituals, people can get out of their own heads and experience others. Companies can do this by setting up regular teleconferences or virtual happy hours for those who will speak when.

For either quick morning huddles or a longer weekly check in, the benefits can last beyond the length of the call. The reason is that the human brain looks forward to positive experiences that it knows are in the near future.

6. Tell jokes

Self-directed humour, that is making mild fun of oneself, or telling shared jokes reduces tension and helps people relate to each other. However, jokes at another's expense will likely make that person feel isolated and lonely. Humour may have been inappropriate for your company in the past, but it might be what your employees now need.

Lastly, it's not about the "new normal"

When managers place less attention to the idea of "a new normal" and focus more on what makes their customers and employees happy, they can increase happiness, reduce loneliness and improve performance even during the pandemic.

And while data and technology will play a role in how and when to engage with customers, the overarching skill that companies need to work on is cultivating emotional intelligence.

In time, the coronavirus will no longer pose the health threat it does today. And so wonderful as that will be, the lessons about happiness and loneliness we've learned during this time will likely prove to be enduring.

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Sources:

1 The new normal
2 Solitary Confinement and Risk of Self-Harm Among Jail Inmates
3 State of the Connected Customer – Salesforce research, 2019
4 State of Marketing – Salesforce research, 2020

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