

Customer experience in the age of #Covid-19

By [Dr Sibongile Vilakazi](#), issued by [Kantar](#)

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The basis of memorable customer experience is human connection driven by empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in another's situation and feel what they are going through. So, companies that get customer experience right are those that spend time understanding their different customer types (or contexts), the mission or tasks customers want to accomplish, and the journeys they take to accomplish these. They study the tasks and emotions associated with all of this, in order to be empathetic and touch customers emotionally where and when it matters the most. This is the essence of creating memorable customer experiences. Simplifying journeys and making it easy for customers to do business are the supporting pillars of customer experience, but they are not at the heart of it. The heart of customer experience is an emotional connection, especially in the moments where it matters most to the customer.

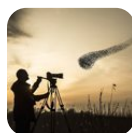


Dr Sibongile Vilakazi, Kantar SA

There's no better time than now for brands to show the utmost empathy. The Covid-19 pandemic is dubbed the greatest global crisis since World War II. It has threatened our existence when we least expected it. Progressive business leaders were still thinking and talking about the need to transform their businesses to start putting the human/customer at the centre of what they do because it made business sense to do so. But the virus has forced us back to our core survival instincts as humans. Saving lives and staying alive is the most important task right now, which connects us all globally and has necessitated a shift in mindset. We've seen before in times of crisis (and war) that the basics of human survival are collaboration, a sacrifice of individual needs for the collective and care for others. The coronavirus has, therefore, forced us to realise that at the core of our existence is our connectedness; the acknowledgement that 'I am because you are'.

This is the fundamental lesson that businesses must walk away with from this epidemic – the stark reminder that good customer experience is not a reflection of how 'woke' a business is or simply a competitive advantage but in fact the blood that regulates the business. Businesses have been called to reflect on their purpose, as heads of state called for non-essential businesses to shut down during lockdown periods while essential services remained open. The question for businesses not providing an essential service is, 'what core human needs are you satisfying and how are you satisfying these needs?' Covid-19 has forced all of us, at an individual and business level, to answer these existential questions of why we exist. If authenticity and empathy are not at the core of your brand's offering and how you deliver it, your business is

under threat. So, what should businesses do to purposefully use this time to create a memorable customer experience?



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During uncertain times, it's natural to react and start taking desperate decisions to stay afloat. These decisions may not always be congruent with the reason the business was started and can threaten core issues of identity in the longer term. Most businesses are established to meet a human need and are sustained by good business models over time. So, surviving these difficult moments may require a re-look at some business models and assumptions in order to adapt them, but adapting these can be successful only if they are aligned with the business purpose. Example of brands that are doing this well are Burberry and Tesla.

Burberry is an iconic British luxury brand, established in 1856 by Thomas Burberry. Its most iconic clothing item is the trench coat. The Burberry trench coat was born during World War I, when an outdoor coat was adapted to become waterproof, to meet the needs of military personnel. It was worn by the British army in the trenches and today it is one of the most recognisable fashion statements. Now, the pressures created by Covid-19 on hospitals and hospital personnel has prompted Burberry to announce that the company is diverting its clothing production to produce coats for doctors and medical personnel who are currently in the 'trenches'.

Tesla is an American company founded in 2003 by engineers and South African-born investor Elon Musk. Musk has a personal life purpose to save humanity from itself, which has influenced his business choices. For Tesla, Musk drove the business purpose of designing and producing electric cars at affordable prices to the ordinary consumer, in order to help 'save the earth' from carbon emissions. As a result of Covid-19, Tesla has since announced that they will be producing hospital ventilators for free and distributing them wherever they are needed globally, in order to help fight the virus and thus 'save humanity'.

These companies are just two examples showing what it means to be purpose-guided and adapting in a time of crisis to contribute to humanity.



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Clearly connect your 'why' to your 'how'

The 'how' of service delivery speaks to the mode of getting the service or product to customers and is often thought to be what customer experience or customer service is all about. Customer experience is the sum of the brand purpose, brand promise and how the promise is delivered, not simply the service delivery process. During the lockdown period, brands have been challenged to review their service delivery channels to enable digital servicing models and respond to social distancing. Some brands will be able to seamlessly make the shift to digital, but the virus has highlighted what we've always known: that human connections and empathy are core to humanity. Just as we need oxygen to survive, we also need to meaningfully connect to others. Brands would be short-sighted not to effectively leverage this human truth.

As most businesses are born because of empathy through the desire to solve another's need, it follows that the solution or service must also be delivered with empathy. Empathy can be delivered digitally, by ensuring that all systems and processes are frictionless and benefit the customer. Empathy can also be delivered face to face, ensuring that compassion

is at the centre of every interaction. Compassion can be expressed in many ways that are aligned to the brand purpose, just as Tesla has chosen to express compassion by making ventilators available to hospitals without charging for them. This kind of compassion breeds loyalty because it is what people ultimately remember when the dust settles, and they will reciprocate because reciprocity is instinctive to humans. This is another human truth to be effectively engaged.



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Be resilient

Resilience is the ability to bounce back or recover from difficult situations. In his book, *From Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes that the companies that reach their next level of growth are those with the ability to bounce back from difficulties because they anticipate and plan for the worst. They are neither overly pessimistic nor overly optimistic, but they do have a touch of pessimism mixed with realism. They read situations and act timeously to prevent a catastrophe while leveraging opportunities. This is what companies must do during this time. No one knows what the future will look like, as this crisis is a first for all of us and has changed life as we all know it, but companies must hold on to human truths. Companies must connect with staff, suppliers and customers at a human level. They need to imagine life after the impact of the virus and build meaningful connections that will attract goodwill and support.

In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, author Viktor Frankl, an Austria-born neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust, writes about finding meaning in one's situation to develop resilience. He writes that he realised that in order to survive life in the concentration camp, he had to find some purpose. He did this by imagining himself giving a lecture after the war on the psychology of concentration camps, to help people understand what he had gone through. Despite not knowing whether he would survive, he started drawing up goals for himself, based on the things he needed to do. This helped him rise above the immediate conditions, as resilience is a mental disposition that determines if one will survive or perish.

Companies must see this time as a gift to reimagine their business with renewed energy. They must envision the value they will add to their customers if they deliver authentic solutions and services that improve the lives of their customers, society and the planet. They must see customer experience as the lifeblood of the company and transform to integrate customer experience into all aspects of the business.

Reference: Coutu, D. (May 2002). *How Resilience Works*. Harvard

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