

COVID-19: Why Helping Your Customers Is More Important Than Ever

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In late March, we awoke to the sobering news that jobless claims in the US for the last week of March were over 3 million. It is expected the next few weeks of unemployment filings will have numbers near this level or perhaps higher.

By the end of April, we could have over 15 million individuals that two months ago were gainfully employed now out of work and no longer able to fully participate in our economy as either workers or consumers. At the same time, government agencies and bank economists have issued predictions our economy will contract between 5-10% over the next two quarters. In light of the jobless claims, this prediction may end up being on the low side of what we actually experience.

While this is all bad news, it pales in comparison to the human tragedy now unfolding in communities and healthcare facilities in the US and around the world. This situation has no doubt been exacerbated by the fact that most countries were underprepared for an event of this scale and magnitude. We have all heard about the US strategic oil reserve at various times, but very few people have discussed in detail our national medical equipment reserve until now. As a result, everyone from virtual community groups to Apple have been pressed into service to manufacture and provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to our front-line medical workers.

How can your business respond in a similar way and serve its customers during this extraordinary moment? Here are some approaches to consider as we navigate these uncertain times:

- Do you have a communications plan to convey empathy and support to customers and prospects?
- Do you have resources that can be quickly deployed to help your customers, improve your organization's standing and limit the damage to your people, your brand and the communities you serve?
- Do you have the goodwill of customers, suppliers and business partners you can call upon to help you get through tough times
- Do you have alternate modes of operating to ensure business continuity?

Many organizations understand that the economic impact from this pandemic is an opportunity to serve customers and create goodwill for the future. For example, Airbnb is working with housing providers to offer free accommodations to 100,000 front-line medical workers who need to stay close to their healthcare facility – and perhaps stay isolated from their own families. Spectrum Internet is giving households with Pre-K to 12 or college students two free months of internet service for new customers. Spotify and Pandora are examples of other companies offering extended free trials of their services.

Let's look at an organization I'm sure many people reading this article (and working from home) have become familiar with over the last couple of weeks. Microsoft is now offering its Teams collaboration tool for free on a six-month trial basis. Unlike other trial versions offered by Microsoft, this version includes full meetings, collaboration and workflow capabilities.

In announcing the free trial, Microsoft released this statement:

"For many individuals and organizations, Microsoft Teams videoconferencing, chat and collaboration are playing an important role in helping people continue to work and collaborate. By making Teams available to all for free for six months, we hope that we can support public health and safety by making remote work even easier."

Obviously, Microsoft is looking ahead to the hopefully not-too-distant future where face-to-face interaction and business travel become possible again. But in the meantime, they plan on showing people and companies how productive they can be at home, when they can't get together in person. This stance also strongly positions Microsoft for a "new normal" in business that will likely include a paradigm shift to a larger remote workforce.

Does Microsoft see a future commercial opportunity in this offer?
No question.

But are they being helpful right now in a time of need?
Absolutely.

It's time for businesses everywhere to take a look their products and services, and the markets they serve, and see how they, too, can do well by doing good.

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