

Marketing in a Time of Social Distancing: Actually, Not Much Has Changed

By **Bill Smith**

DELIVERING THE RIGHT MESSAGE at the right time is the definition of effective communication. At its essence, marketing is simply that: communication done with the intention to inform and persuade.



But when it comes to making the creative and business choices needed for executing and sustaining an effective marketing program, it can be daunting in the best of times. Combine that with a global health crisis and the changes it has brought to our industry, and the challenge becomes that much more formidable. But don't be intimidated by the current state of the industry (and the world)—the basic elements of successful marketing haven't changed.

What are those elements?

Relevance

Relevance begins with knowing your customer. Customers, new and returning, change. Their needs and

wants, just like yours, are constantly evolving. So how do you hit multiple moving targets? With multiple projectiles. Those projectiles need to be on target and that means understating where your customers are headed, so that you and your message intersect with them at the right time and place

Making a commitment to remaining relevant means making a commitment to knowing your customers, their behaviors and tendencies, and what they genuinely want. Then, you need to provide products or services that are valuable and designed to remain so.

To achieve this, it is helpful to develop internal systems that keep you engaged with your customers and incorporate that into your products or services.

Many online tools can help with this. For example, data measures from social media sites and from visitors to your own web domain can provide insights into what your customers are looking for and how to message to them. Industry publications, [blogs](#), and online [forums](#) are also good resources for evaluating trends and tendencies that impact your customers and potential customers.

Messaging

Knowing what to say and how to say it are cornerstones of marketing. The digital age provides an opportunity to try, test, and tailor marketing messages in a novel and invaluable way. But there also needs to be a common thread of consistency that identifies you in the marketplace and helps build your brand over time.

Think of your marketing messaging as being like a piano. On a piano, there are 88 keys; no more, no less. Those keys can be played alone, in sequence, or in combination to create a seemingly endless variety of music. When done well, the music that's created can stir powerful emotions. And all of that comes from the piano's 88 keys—its defining parameter.

Your messaging should also have parameters—notes, if you will—that may be struck in order to convey your brand, your market position, your proposal, your opportunity, your ability, your offering; all the varied and valuable things that you bring to the marketplace. But the way you play those notes may be varied. And in a world where the consumer is more in command than ever before, they should be made available in a variety of ways that even if seen separately, convey the heart of your message so your customers always know who you are and what you are about.

Outlets

Knowing where your customers are and why they are there is essential to successful marketing. Trade publications; business and general media; social media sites

like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram; and blogs and industry chat rooms can all be valuable platforms for broadcasting your marketing message. But it is important to carefully consider which places your customers are most likely to be, and then tailor messages to fit those particular platforms.

Not all outlets are useful for all brands or offerings, even though the same people may be on all of them at one time or another. Aligning your brand and your messages to each platform is key to success and a key to being relevant as well.

Timeliness

Timeliness and relevance are a matched set. It's essential to stay on top of what is happening in your portion of the industry and how you can add value, and to adjust your communication strategies accordingly.

This is always true, but particularly so during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the state of affairs, at even the slightest level, is essential to ensure that your messaging is seen as timely. It has been easy to recognize how the biggest brands in the world—Amazon, FedEx, Walmart, Apple—have generated new marketing efforts incorporating things germane to the pandemic. Their advertisements and earned media campaigns are addressing social distancing and face masks and the ways that they have altered their business practices, but their main branding and the core of their messages are still the same. This communicates that they are up-to-date and in synch with the current challenges everyone is facing, but also that they can still be counted on to deliver on what they have built their brands around. ♦



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