4 Simple Techniques for Successfully Branding Your Business During a Crisis

Engage in new ways – and with humor – to make customers loyal long beyond these stressful few months.

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When you watch a movie or read a book that's centered on a hero's journey, you'll frequently find a pivotal moment, the point in the story when the hero must commit to the journey or abandon it. Think about Frodo in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: He literally crosses the threshold when he leaves his home in the Shire for new lands, dangers and challenges. In *The Matrix*, Neo crosses the threshold when he takes the red pill that replaces blissful ignorance with uncomfortable, unsettling truth.

What does crossing the threshold have to do with marketing and branding your company in a crisis? Everything.

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First, I want you to think of crossing the threshold as your commitment to developing and promoting your brand during a period of crisis. But also (why use one metaphor when you can use two?) think of branding as the way you cross the threshold of your ideal customer's consciousness, home and life. Because branding isn't necessarily intuitive, even during "normal" times, let's examine some strategies and examples of

companies that have gotten it right.

1. Be honest

One of my favorite examples of stellar brand building during the crisis is from Airbnb. Most folks on the planet have been anxious, worried about their health and their financial outlook. Millions worldwide lost jobs, and those layoffs forced many families to struggle, a prospect that's bleak from an employer's perspective as well. Part of brand building is cultivating trust, and you can't do that if you're being dishonest. When Airbnb's co-founder and CEO Brian Chesky announced significant layoffs, he did so in a public letter. In the letter, Chesky laid out how and why the company was reducing its workforce, covering details like severance pay and job support for helping workers find other employment. Chesky didn't deceive. He didn't sugarcoat. He was clear, thorough and honest, and that's how brands survive difficult times.

2. Address real, relevant issues

One thing you don't want to do is carry on with your marketing as if everything were business as usual. As consumers panicked as a global health crisis started spreading, they bought up every scrap of toilet paper they could find. One of my favorite brand messages came from Cottonelle. Not only did Cottonelle encourage consumers not to hoard toilet paper, but it also encouraged people to "stock up on generosity" instead. It introduced a campaign, #ShareASquare, that partnered with United Way to get paper products to those most in need.

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3. Engage your customers in a new way

IKEA, known for inexpensive furniture you assemble at home, opted for a clever, timely move. It released, via tweet, the recipe for its world-famous Swedish meatballs, complete with a graphic representation that looks just like furniture assembly instructions. Its message not only encouraged customers to focus on the comforts of home, but it also let people interact with the brand in a completely new way, by reproducing something that could previously only be purchased in a store. Twitter users could also reply, which yielded this gem from @garyswilkinson: “I got to the end of the recipe and there were still three screws left over.” Encouraging customers to interact with your company even when they can’t shop in person is great brand building.

4. Find out what your customers need

I saw countless examples of small, local companies doing just this. Some restaurants, unable to open for dining in, made hard-to-get-supplies available to-go. They sold fresh, high-quality meat and local produce, in addition to carryout prepared food. Craft distillers switched production to hand sanitizer when none was to be had for any price. And some beer and wine shops that were permitted to stay open broadened their product offerings to include other necessities. Some even offered a free roll of toilet paper or paper towels with purchase.

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Customers remember companies and brands that give them what they need and want in a crisis. Whether it’s entertainment,

education or everyday necessities, reaching out in memorable ways helps cement your brand in your customers' minds. Compassion, humor and optimism are all important during stressful, difficult times. Finding a way to connect s a vitally important step in the hero's journey that is entrepreneurship.

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