

Every Company Will Face a Crisis – Here's How You Can Adapt Quickly

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When I think about great founders and entrepreneurs, they tend to be obsessed with problems, not just solutions. Why? It's simple: When you become obsessed with the solution, you end up prioritizing the wrong things; but if you focus on the problem, you continuously assess where you can make the most impact – for both your customers and your business. Great entrepreneurs constantly ask themselves, “Knowing what I know today, what's the most important problem to solve and how do I solve it?”

This particularly rang true in January when the wildfires devastated Los Angeles, where my company, Realm, is headquartered. Realm has always been focused on building a single destination for homeowners to navigate their biggest home decisions. Historically, this was tackling complex renovations and home builds like major kitchen remodels or adding an ADU. But when the wildfires broke out, entire neighborhoods were destroyed and homeowners were suddenly left facing incredible challenges – and we had to act fast to support their needs.

We saw similar tech companies like Zoom shift gears during the Covid-19 pandemic when the world searched for new ways – almost overnight – to communicate with each other. The pandemic allowed people to see Zoom in a new light: What was once just a tool for businesses was now in most people's homes, on their phones and being used for schools, helping

them to stay in touch without requiring anyone to be tech-savvy. This shift in Zoom's offerings allowed it to be a solution in a crisis while reinforcing brand visibility and long-term relevance.

Much like Zoom adapted to meet an urgent need while staying true to its core strengths, we had to reassess how Realm could best support homeowners in the wake of the wildfires. Our experience taught us valuable lessons about identifying new customer needs, engaging our team in a transition and adapting quickly while ensuring long-term sustainability.

No matter the problem you're solving, the lessons learned below can hopefully help your business strategy the next time you need to redirect your brand's focus quickly.

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Identifying emerging needs and aligning with your brand's core strengths

When the fires started on Jan. 7, it forced me, as a founder, to take a step back and ask myself three questions:

1. What are we uniquely good at? For us, this answer remained the same – helping homeowners navigate expensive, emotional and long-term home projects.
2. Where are we uniquely good at doing it? In addition to being our headquarters, Los Angeles has always been our largest market.
3. Who are we uniquely good at helping? This is the answer that changed overnight. Instead of focusing on homeowners planning renovations, the most urgent need was now from homeowners who had just lost their homes and had their entire lives turned upside down.

In challenging times, it's crucial to stay problem – not solution – focused. Coming back to these key questions helped us to stay on track, but it's also essential to be aware of what you're not good at. Knowing your limitations will help you avoid taking on challenges you aren't well-positioned to solve.

We aligned our brand strengths with urgent homeowner needs, like navigating the insurance process, understanding rebuilding permits and finding vetted contractors when scams can be rampant after natural disasters. By shifting our priorities to support impacted homeowners, we not only addressed the most pressing challenges, but we also demonstrated our ability to mobilize resources quickly and reinforced our community-driven mission. Similarly, Airbnb also jumped into action after the wildfires, which displaced thousands of people, by expanding their Open Homes program to offer free temporary housing for wildfire evacuees and first responders.

How to engage your team and customers during the transition

Once we understood the shifting needs and our strengths, we had to ensure our team and customers were aligned. With our team, this required three key steps:

1. **Setting the tone:** Make it clear that action is required, not optional. Your team needs to understand that the company isn't considering doing something, but that it's happening, and you will figure it out together. Speed and agility are critical, so be upfront about the pace of change that's required from all team members.
2. **Explaining the why:** Detail your specific reasons why and make sure they always focus on customer impact first and business value creation second. These are often closely connected – helping customers in a meaningful way

usually results in value for the business.

3. **Being clear on what you're not doing:** With an extreme example like the wildfires, it was apparent that our already-busy team could easily become overwhelmed. It was important to be clear on what we were doing but even more important to be clear on what we were *not* doing. That might look like saying no to what were once priorities and shifting focus to what is directly in front of you.

By aligning urgency with clear reasoning, you foster team commitment and smooth execution. With customers, clarity is just as crucial. Customers need to be confident that you are well-suited for this new focus. Even if you haven't tackled the exact challenge before, you can highlight the relevant expertise and experience that make your company prepared to step in. For example, when I was speaking to fire-impacted homeowners, I emphasized how our experience guiding thousands of homeowners through other major home projects positioned us well to help them rebuild their homes.

In a crisis, the people who are impacted may be skeptical and worried about being taken advantage of. That's why it's critical to be transparent about your intentions. Communicating openly and honestly about why you care and how your success is tied to theirs will build trust and reinforce your commitment to genuinely helping.

Related: **I'm Living Through the California Wildfires – Here's How Every Business Can Prepare For a Natural Disaster**

How to adapt quickly but sustainably

When navigating change, speed is essential. One thing we say frequently in our company is that you must think of change and driving growth in days and hours, not weeks and months, so

it's critical to timebox your learnings and results. Adapting to a crisis will require you to take risks and experiment in areas where you haven't before. If you do this without a clear understanding of what success is and how long it's going to take to get there, you can end up with open-ended initiatives that slow everything down. Instead, set clear timeframes – how can you test an idea in 24 hours rather than two weeks? Accept that some precision will be sacrificed for speed.

When change is happening rapidly, it can create confusion and chaos, so it's essential to establish clear ownership. Make sure that team members know exactly what they are responsible for and that they feel empowered to overcome obstacles.

Adaptability isn't just about reacting to change – it's about proactively identifying the right problems to solve and rallying around a clear, urgent and focused vision. By staying true to your company's strengths, engaging your team and customers with transparency and balancing speed with sustainability, you can turn challenges into opportunities while keeping your business resilient and deeply connected to those you serve.

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