



Customer Experience in a
COVID-19 World
A Survival Guide for Business

COVID-19 – A Highly Emotional Event

One of the most critical points to take into consideration about COVID-19 is the emotional intensity that has been generated as a result of the impact on people and communities. What makes it also unique is the impact it has had on a global nature. Unlike other crisis events such as 9/11 in 2001 or the global financial crisis in 2008, this event has impacted a much larger number of people in a more profound and arguably a lasting manner. The emotional intensity of this crisis provides the underlying reason why any business needs to reengineer its customer experience to enable them to trade in a COVID-19 world successfully.

Customer experience professionals are trained to eliminate customer pain points throughout the customer journey because as people, our DNA is programmed to remember the negative experiences over positive ones. Most customer journeys are now impacted due to the crisis, and this survival guide is designed to provide business leaders with insights and practical actions they can take to address new customer expectations successfully.

COVID 19- The Reversal of People's Priorities

One of the helpful ways in understanding what's happening on a psychological level is to revisit Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. Maslow's theory—a five-stage model, based on basic human deficiencies—attempts to explain how people are motivated. The deficiencies are needs that, when they are unmet, motivate us into action. The original model was divided into five categories covering need (1. physiological, 2. safety, 3. love, 4. esteem 5. self-actualisation). The model was later expanded to include cognitive, aesthetic, and transcendence needs. Maslow states that the motivation necessary to fulfil such needs increases the longer they are denied. For example, the longer a person goes without food, the hungrier he or she will become. People, throughout their lives, move up the levels in the pyramid as each need is met.

The theory highlights that a person will not be motivated into action to achieve a top-level need if their basic essential needs are not met first. In the case of COVID-19, we find that it has threatened some of the many needs we have taken for granted as being met, such as:

- Health
- Personal security
- Food supply

- Employment
- Shelter
- Sleep

Based on the theory, it can be argued that before the crisis, many people were motivated to meet top-level needs such as esteem, self-actualisation and the aesthetic. Today, however, these top-level needs have taken a lower priority over more important ones such as health, employment, and personal security. These more basic unmet needs shape behaviour more profoundly because they are linked to survival. The more people feel that their lives are being threatened, the more they panic, become fearful and develop anxiety. These emotions drive such behaviours as hoarding of food and aggressive antisocial behaviours towards perceived threats such as Asian tourists.

The point made, with a substantial degree of certainty, is that people's priorities have changed and so have their expectations when they buy goods and services from any business.

What are the new customer expectations?

Customer expectations in a COVID-19 era will evolve based on people's emotional response to the crisis. There are three generally accepted stages: **fear, acceptance and growth**. At each stage, people will have different expectations based on the dominant state of mind that is influencing their emotions and behaviour. The most important new customer expectation revolves around **guaranteeing personal safety** from catching COVID-19.

Customers transacting with any business that has any form of direct contact with people will need to provide a level of comfort for their customers. As the crisis evolves, there is an expectation that there will be an easing off in the social distancing laws and the number of people able to congregate in the same place. Customer expectations will not only vary based on the stage of the crisis but also by each country and demographic. For example, in Italy where COVID-19 has been severe in impact, there is a zero-contact expectation, and people are required to wear both masks and gloves to enter a supermarket. In Australia, where the impact has not been as severe, the zero-contact expectation is still not widely adopted across customer-facing businesses. Organisations should consider the demographic of their target customers as well. A company with mostly middle-aged or elderly customers should adopt stricter strategies to make their customers feel comfortable doing business.

Outlined below is a guide on the various emotional stages for the COVID-19 crisis and the anticipated elements influencing new customer expectations:

Influencing Element	Stage		
	Fear	Acceptance	Growth
Customer mindset	Shock, fearful, very anxious, mood swings, angry, “I may die”, “I may lose everything.”	Shift in the mindset to accept the situation, aware of negative and heightened emotions, more accepting of any loss such as financial or job, control consumption of negative news, comfort that you are not alone.	Accept there is a future, actively adapting to the new home and work life, thinking of ways to help others, spreading messages of hope, clearer and more constructive thinking.
Customer behaviour	Survival based, panic-buying, argumentative, snaps easily at smallest things, cocooning to ward off the threat, reactive, obsessed with consuming news on COVID-19.	Find new things to receive joy, seek relief mechanisms such as exercise, less angry, less panicked, develop new routines, rediscover online, use humour to diffuse the situation.	Calmer, appreciative of others around you, proactive solutions, seek out new projects to feel productive, actively looks for ways to offer help.
Transactional expectations	Zero contact is preferred, home delivery, online purchasing.	Zero contact preferred or light touch, visible hygiene best practices at customer physical touchpoints, safe place, functioning hygiene processes.	Hygienic controlled touch, minimised touch, technology-based solutions to protect the transaction.
Relational expectations	Show me you care, help me, reassure me, inform me of the changes, seeking trust in the brand.	The brand is pivoting to serve me better, trust is demonstrated through visible actions; the brand is part of the solution.	The brand is evolving and adapting, smart brand, the brand is helping others in the community.
Preferred communication	Calm, empathetic, constructive, clear, no-selling, confidence that all measures taken to protect customers and staff.	Proactive examples of actions taken to protect, and amend any products or services to meet the new environment, empathetic towards the level of anxiety and stress.	We are helping others, caring, new relevant offers to entice spending, empathetic with financial limitations.

10 Practical Actions to Meet the New Customer Expectations

In this section, we outline ten practical steps organisations can take to meet the new customer expectations in a COVID-19 world. Each suggested action is general advice and should be customised for each business or government organisation.

1. Change your market communications to be more empathetic with the pain and challenges experienced by customers and employees.

2. Provide proactive communication to customers to alleviate any anxiety and fear. Don't sell to them until the impact has subsided. Ensure you communicate your new trading hours.

3. Redesign your direct customer contact processes to become as contactless as possible, ensuring crowd management practices are incorporated. Implement a working-from-home model for employees if possible.

4. Align your new work practices to your brand identity and your cultural values.

5. Design and document the hygiene practices for your business and any partners with physical customer contact.

6. Procure the resources and equipment required to implement your new hygiene and crowd management practices.

7. Develop and implement staff training on new hygiene practices and showing more empathy towards customers.

8. Implement any environmental changes in the workplace.

9. Provide clear communications to customers about your hygiene and crowd management practices at the place of business and through external communication.

10. Adjust and adapt your practices as the crisis evolves, and customers become more receptive to new offers.

All business owners should take direction from their relevant government authorities and ensure their practices meet legal requirements.

KINETIC
CONSULTING

Contact us at:

E: help@kineticcs.com

AUS: www.kineticconsulting.com.au

UAE: www.kineticcs.com

Phone AUS: 1300 780 556

Phone UAE: +971 44558410

Kinetic Consulting Services is a boutique business growth consultancy providing private and public sector clients with the full suite of consulting services to accelerate growth, build brand value, and achieve market differentiation. Kinetic has offices in Dubai and Sydney Australia.