



How to Manage CX During a Global Crisis

Introduction

With the entire globe going through a crisis, the market certainly looks different, what with consumers being unable to 'consume' as they would under 'normal' circumstances. In a world where people feel as though they are not in control, they seek to gain more information in an attempt to reassert control and curb their anxiety. That being said, organisations are also taking steps or planning the steps that they intend to take in response to the impact that this global crisis has already begun to have on the economy, as well as the impending and potentially devastating repercussions which are still to come. With economic statuses facing a downward spiral, organisations now, more than ever, need to dig their heels in and consider the factors which they can still control. That is, their CX strategy and how they continue to engage their customers as well as their employees.

So, the primary question is raised, how do you manage your CX during a global crisis? Furthermore, what does CX look like in the world where Covid-19 is the main focus? In this paper, we will further be looking at the following questions as well; are you communicating with customers during this time at all, even if you are not operating? How do you keep employees engaged during this unprecedented, challenging period? We will also take a look at the idea of 'Resilient leadership and how they respond to Covid-19'.

Decision Making in Critical Times

With Covid-19 being the most widely discussed topic in 2020 at the moment, and with many countries in a state of lockdown with no certain end in sight, making decisions about the weeks and even months to come has become a rather difficult feat. Studies (Markam, 2020) suggest that there are a number of reasons which impact one's decision-making ability during a crisis. Now, because the Covid-19 disease is real, there is an ever-present threat looming, globally. As humans, we are wired to pay attention to threats as a means of survival, while the uncertainty surrounding the spread of the virus and the potential of its destruction, this further attracts our attention (Markam, 2020).

Furthermore, as people have little to no control over the spread of the virus, short of engaging in actions like washing our hands, avoiding touching our faces, and practicing social distancing, there are many aspects of the situation that are still out of our control. People do not like to be in situations in which they have no agency; it creates additional anxiety as well as a desire to do something to reassert control which fundamentally speaks to prevention (Markam, 2020).



Studies suggest that threat, uncertainty, and anxiety lead us to making short-sighted decisions. As such, the best way to make big decisions in the face of these psychological factors, particularly when it impacts the lives of others, is to *slow down* (Markam, 2020). Panic tends to make people want to act right now in an attempt to avoid the threat, however, it is likely that one's actions may not be prudent in the midst of a potential pandemic. As such, by taking a moment to slow down, you can use deliberative reasoning, and this is best done in conjunction with data in order to better and more logically influence the decisions you make (Markam, 2020).

Managing Your CX During a Crisis

Even though we are undergoing a nation-wide lockdown in South Africa, it is essential that we bear in mind the fact that customers are still interacting with products and services. Even as the global crisis continues to disrupt the economy, the typical purchasing habits that consumers display, and the general everyday lives of all individuals, there is no doubt that Covid-19 has wreaked havoc and has left a trail of confusion on every topic, from business operations all the way down to toilet paper (MaritzCX, 2020; Linville & Ratekin, 2020).

With many companies scrambling to respond to quickly-changing circumstances, planned investments that were intended to drive growth — like the hiring of new staff, media spend, and software purchases — are being re-evaluated as business leaders are forced to triage what they need to do to weather the storm. We are all in 'survival mode', and survival is about prioritising what is most important...*and its not toilet paper* (Abbott, 2020).

Rather, right now, the focus needs to shift to existing customers. Studies (Abbott, 2020) suggest that businesses which choose to focus on retaining customers and building loyalty will be ones that will survive and have a chance at thriving through this uncertain climate that we now find ourselves in. There needs to be a shift (though temporary) from a growth mindset to a 'retention' mindset. Yes, this may not be true for all companies, but many, if not most companies, are facing contraction due to the simple fact that consumers are unable to go out and make purchases (other than essential purchases), as well as the fact that many citizens are going through a challenge themselves, whereby they have had to endure unexpected salary cuts or the complete loss of their jobs- their primary source of income.

One may therefore ask, "should I suspend some or all of my CX program?" (Abbott, 2020; MaritzCX, 2020). The answer would be, "No". Now is the time where listening to your customers really counts. Avoid becoming isolated from your existing customers, and further avoid making rash decisions.

However, not only is listening to your customers more intently key during this time of crisis, but so is responding. Now is the time to change the conversation from trying to get existing customers to buy more, but rather further showing them how they can get more value from what they have already invested in (Abbott, 2020).



While you may be focusing on existing customers, it is essential that you bear in mind the fact that even your customers are changing- as we all have due to the change in our basic needs in the face of a global downturn (Abbott, 2020).

Abbott (2020), suggests that companies that are on 'on the pulse' of the changes that are occurring today, those who are proactively listening to their customers, are better equipped to adapt, innovate, survive, and serve as intended.

While the outside world seems to have come to a standstill, it is advised that you keep surveying and allow customers to decide whether they want to participate. It is further suggested that reminders are kept to a minimum if not just one (for each survey) (MaritzCX, 2020). Customers have always had the choice to participate or not, and certainly, the degree of the crisis will determine whether customers choose to participate, but, the mere fact that you are listening- especially through these trying times- could make all the difference.

Since listening to your customers is of great importance, it is advised (Abbott, 2020), that organisations keep programs running, particular in areas that are minimally or not affected, while discerning whether to bring programs which are highly affected to a halt. It is further advised that organisations keep a close eye on response rates and comments that come back in their respective surveys to determine at which point they might want to suspend or adjust surveying (Abbott, 2020).

Furthermore, research and experts in the field (MaritzCX, 2020) advise that this is the perfect time to take the opportunity to look to the future. Since we have all been catapulted into a new dimension and way of working, it is time to think about the potential of the future. It is during this time where we may think 'if the world were different and we could start on a clean slate', what are the possibilities? If there were any strategy that we could implement while there are little to no parameters to work within, what would we choose to do and implement as an organisation?

If we think of this time as a means of great opportunity and potential to change and implement strategies that we only hoped for in 'normal' circumstances, what would that strategy look like? But remember, listening to what your customers have to say, and considering their needs will be the best way to guide how you adapt your CX strategy.

Communicating with your Customers

During such an uncertain period and in a world where social interactions seem to be a foreign concept as a result of the lockdown protocols which have been applied, communication with customers needs to be fairly well thought out if it is to be well executed. "While Customer Experience is always important, it is times like these where providing a great customer experience is of paramount importance" says Linville and Ratekin (2020). It is in times like these where companies are differentiated- one from another- the actions and steps you choose to take, and a stellar customer experience can set you above the rest.



Your customers too, are in a 'state of emergency', they too are going through a crisis, as such, how you handle this tough time and the decisions you make will certainly be remembered by these customers.

Organisations need to ask themselves, 'Are we communicating with our customers at all?'. If so, "are we doing so effectively and with meaning?", and further ask the question, "are we, as an organisation, taking this situation seriously without feeding into the panic?" (Linville & Ratekin, 2020).

When a crisis strikes, addressing the issue at hand is part of the first and most critical task, but it is closely followed by or perhaps coupled with communicating effectively with your customers and stakeholders (ZenDesk, 2018). Poor communication, on the other hand, can destroy the trust that you have worked so hard to establish with your customers (ZenDesk, 2018).

Studies (Dore, Ehrlich, Malrafa, & Ungerman, 2020) suggest that leading organizations are taking steps in an effort to reorient their customer-experience endeavours to meet their customers' primary needs, such as safety, security, and everyday convenience. These actions will inevitably speak louder than words in a world where companies are increasingly advertising a message of "we are here for you." By consciously providing empathy and care during this crisis, companies can build a foundation of goodwill and long-lasting emotional connections with the communities they serve which will in-turn build the customer's loyalty (Dore et al, 2020).

In a time where everyone- that is, the entire globe- is in or has gone through a state of panic, reassurance can be given in a number of ways. While verbal reassurance is good, its visual counterpart has proven to be better. An example of 'actions speaking louder than words' can be seen in the instance where a supermarket has employed 'cart washers'- these are people at the store who clean and disinfect trolley-carts for the customers as they come to the store. This has proven to be a great gesture to reassure and reinforce the idea that the store is doing all that they can to ensure that the customers are safe during their shopping experience (MaritzCX, 2020).

Now, we are not all able to make such a great gesture due to the varying nature of businesses, however, since customer communication is key, the channels we choose to make use of for communication is also crucial. During times of crisis, it is easy for people to get 'bogged down' with an information-overload (Morgan, 2017). The most effective communication from an organisation to their clients should simply involve the basics of what customers need to know (Morgan, 2017). This may include sending short text messages, sharing informative emails that have been well-planned and well-designed, and further directing customers to your organisation's website and social media pages (Morgan, 2017).

With the great variety of applications that we have at our disposal to stay connected, be sure to make time to meet with your customers using one of the technological platforms. Be sure to maintain a professional standard when attending virtual meetings- giving your client, to the best of your ability, the typical experience



that you would have when in a face-to-face interaction and be sure to be mindful of your customer's time. Furthermore, try as much as possible to respond to queries or concerns that the client might have fairly quickly- your crisis communications should be consistent with your brand's voice as well as across teams - this is a time for departments to unite and provide a clear message that you are there to help (ZenDesk, 2018). Providing a timely and consistent customer experience during crisis situations also reinforces confidence that the next time there's a crisis, customers know what to expect and trust your organisation to execute (ZenDesk, 2018).

Even though your organisation may not be operating during the lockdown (South Africa, 2020), or due to a crisis in general, it is crucial that you still maintain and cultivate the relationships that you have built. Furthermore, maintaining the relationships with your employees- your greatest asset- is as important.

Maintaining Employee Engagement During a Crisis

With the majority of organisations in South Africa being forced to close their doors and take up remote offices in their homes- having to invoke emergency 'work-from-home' policies, staying connected with your entire organisation and managing teams remotely is a new challenge within itself. For many companies, having the entire workforce working remotely is unprecedented, while there are a number of organisations wherein remote work is fairly common in this day and age.

As with customers, when it comes to our stakeholders, having the right tech-tools in place is essential, however, you do also need to have a plan in place to keep all employees engaged and focused on their work (Fallon, 2020).

With most families now isolated in their homes together, employees are faced with more distractions than there might normally be (Fallon, 2020). Furthermore, your team may be feeling anxious about their health and safety, as well as the security of their jobs going forward due to the uncertainty of the times we are currently facing. So, it's important for employers to be mindful of how those fears may impact productivity in the coming weeks and months (Fallon, 2020). To help you keep operations running smoothly as you and your team navigate this "new normal," you may employ the following insights regarding how to maintain engagement while you are all working from home (Fallon, 2020):

Keep people updated

The key to success as a fully remote team is consistent, transparent communication. This is especially important as the Covid-19 pandemic situation continues to unfold and change (Fallon, 2020). You may want to ensure that you have multiple ways to reach employees, including chat software and email, a platform on which teams can play games together, a platform whereby employees can share parts of their



day-to-day experiences and even concerns, while being cautious of overcommunication.

Get everyone on video

With video conferencing tools like Zoom and Google Hangouts, it is easy to keep your regular meeting schedule. The trick, however, is encouraging everyone to turn on their cameras so you can get that face-to-face focus and much-needed social interaction.

Lead by example with a good remote work setup

If your team is not particularly accustomed to working from home, they may still be adjusting to their new "home office," whatever that might look like. As a leader, you can model what a good remote work setup looks like, especially during your video conferences.

Avoid micromanaging

For companies that are used to a 'traditional office' environment, it can be tempting for leaders to check in constantly to make sure employees are on task and productive throughout the day while working from home. However, micromanaging your team will only make them feel like you do not trust them. Building and displaying a culture of trust is essential during these unorthodox times and will further improve the work ethic and even working relationships that employees and employers have going forward.

Maintain friendly social interactions in your new virtual office

Without the in-person social cues in an office, it is easy for the hours to pass by at home without taking a break from work. Studies suggest that managers are encouraged to schedule virtual "coffee chats" with team members in between meetings for some friendly, non-work conversation (Fallon, 2020).

Onboarding

The absence of an office environment makes it more complicated for new remote employees to join the team and get the training done more effectively. Not even



well-detailed documentation can compare to in-person supervision during the first days in the new position (Alcajan, 2020).

Appreciation

Appreciation is one of the simplest and most effective ways to motivate your remote employees. Studies suggest that workers are less motivated by money and more by such things as an acknowledgement of their ideas and suggestions, growth potential and having authority (Alcajan, 2020).

With all the complexities surrounding remote working, having a resilient leadership team is part of the backbone of your work-from-home strategy.

Resilient Leadership

Part of the responsibility of good leadership teams is to observe and identify the opportunities for improvement and further offer a helping hand to the employees who may be struggling with factors such as being included in the team or the idea of working from homes and need support to perform at their best (Alcajan, 2020). The simple key to it is leading by example. Engaging leaders produce engaged employees. By simply showing your team that you care, open for discussion and communication, and are there for them and treat them with respect and trust, you will encourage the same kind of behaviour within your team (Alcajan, 2020). Furthermore, your leadership will encourage other members of the team to reach others that may be struggling with the adjustment, however temporary.

Studies (Renjen, 2020) suggests that there are a few fundamental qualities of *resilient leadership* that distinguish successful leaders as they guide their respective enterprises through the COVID-19 crisis:

Design from the heart ... and the head- In crisis, the hardest things can be the softest things. Resilient leaders are genuinely, sincerely empathetic, walking compassionately in the shoes of employees, customers, and their broader ecosystems. Yet, resilient leaders must simultaneously take a hard, rational line to protect financial performance from the invariable softness that accompanies such disruptions.

Put the mission first- Resilient leaders are skilled at triage, as aforementioned, able to stabilise their organisations to meet the crisis at hand while still having the ability to find opportunities amidst difficult constraints.



Own the narrative- Resilient leaders seize the narrative at the outset, being transparent about current realities, this includes sharing what they may not necessarily know—while also painting a compelling picture of the future that inspires others to persevere.

Embrace the long view- Resilient leaders stay focused on the horizon, anticipating the new business models that are likely to emerge and sparking the innovations that will define tomorrow.

Studies suggest that a typical crisis tends to play out in three (3) 'time frames': *respond*, wherein an organisation confronts and deals with the present situation and further takes steps to manage continuity; *recover*, during this period, an organisation learns and emerges stronger; and *thrive*, where a company prepares for and shapes their 'new normal' (Renjen, 2020).

Conclusions

In times of crises and uncertainty like a pandemic, it is best to take your time when making decisions rather than acting on gut feelings. Those quick actions may reduce some of your anxiety in the short period, but they are likely to create more problems than they solve in the long run (Markam, 2020).

With the many complexities that affect the decision-making process with regard to client communications and listening to the voice of the customer even during such trying times where customers cannot go out and make their regular purchases, and not one recommended solution comes close to fitting every clients' situation. The ultimate recommendation would be to consider the pros and cons for each client, put yourselves in your customers' shoes, consider other non-survey channels for continuous customer feedback, and trust your gut. That is – when considering all of this food for thought – plus the every-changing new information that emerges daily – do what you think seems right for your company at this unique time in our world's history. (Linville & Ratekin, 2020)

Crises are unexpected and can wreak havoc on companies but having a plan in place to communicate with customers seamlessly can make all the difference and turn a potentially chaotic situation into something that is calm and organised (Morgan, 2017). Staying on topic and being concise can help strengthen your customer experience, even during difficult times (Morgan, 2017).

No one knows when a crisis is going to strike, but we should know that in times of crisis and hardship, we have to work together and show each other a little empathy. You strive to provide the best customer experience during the good times, and even more so, you should take pride in stewarding your customers through challenging



times too. It is your vigilant, empathetic service that will keep them coming back in good times and bad (ZenDesk, 2018).

Whether you already have a crisis plan or are developing one on the fly, establishing a plan will help keep everyone in your organisation (including your support team) calm. This will also keep your customers calm — hearing from confident, prepared, and knowledgeable employees is exactly what they want from you in an emergency situation (Morgan, 2017). Customers want to know that you can manage the problem (and hopefully prevent it from happening again), and to know that you care about them (Morgan, 2017).

The companies that understand that their employees are the most valuable asset to their business and make sure they support developing new skills, recognize achievements, give and ask for regular feedback and empower their employees' growth (Alcanja, 2020). Furthermore, building a relationship with new employees and allowing them to feel included will also allow the team as a whole to be stronger and work together toward a common goal.

Although we have been pushed into a really challenging time, globally, looking toward and thinking about the future could be the difference between success and failure going forward, when your clients see that your organisation does not simply crumble when faced with such a tough challenge, but that you rather push through and emerge stronger, they will find all the more reason to keep coming back. Where possible, invest in new opportunities now for the future to improve the lives of both your employees, as well as your valued customers.



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