

Work in a COVID-19 world

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Leading in uncertain times



Managers at all levels can step up to help their companies cope with coronavirus

As we prepared our Spring issue to go to press, the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 transitioned from a widely ignored respiratory illness that initially affected people in China to a rapidly spreading pandemic that crippled economies worldwide. This occurred in a matter of weeks and upended businesses across all industries.

Print and broadcast media have churned out coronavirus coverage 24/7, turning heretofore terms such as “social isolation” and “self-quarantine” into household terms. Whether this outbreak lasts a couple months or well into the year, there will be other disruptive occurrences that require smart leadership of teams in the workplace. You may have consumed more than you ever want to know about viruses, pandemics and how to cope with them. However, a great deal of content about leading in the business world during crises has been published since the outbreak that is worth repeating. We are committing our Next section to some highlights.

Great leaders prevent crises

“If extraordinary leaders had carried the day, this pandemic wouldn’t produce any heroes. It simply never would have happened,” states Sam Walker, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and author of “The Captain Class: A New Theory of Leadership.”

[Walker shares a parable](#) he heard while writing his book that he says is well-known in public health circles. Two friends who are sitting by a river spot a child drowning in water and immediately jump in and save the child. Almost instantly, another child drifts into view. Then another. Then another. After completing several rescues, one of them climbs out of the water, leaving the other one asking, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going upstream to tackle the guy who’s throwing all these kids into the water.”

Walker says he first encountered this parable while reading

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EDITED BY PAUL NOLAN

Dan Heath's recently published book, "Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen." Too often, Heath states, managers attack the symptoms of problems rather than the problem itself. For example, if a company is being inundated with customer service calls, its leadership might mobilize a backup team to handle the overflow. Once these emergency response teams exist, they tend to self-perpetuate. If calming irate customers is your job, your primary motive is calming them successfully. You have no incentive to figure out how to stop them from calling.

The best strategy, Walker says, is to figure out how to incorporate crisis-control strategies into the regular daily workflow so, if the time comes to incorporate it, people will have experience using the systems that must be put into play.

"There are two occasions when most organizations assess their bosses: times of success and times of crisis. But these are exactly the wrong moments to do so. What's really important is what the leader does during the quiet moments in between," Walker writes. "Leaders reveal themselves through a series of small, precautionary moves. If nothing else, I hope this pandemic will help organizations appreciate the difference between leaders and managers and start learning how to identify them."

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– Sam Walker

Put your own people first

"The big message I think we're learning is that whatever happens, the right response is people first, business second," writes [HR analyst Josh Bersin](#) for Forbes.com. The 2020 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) makes it clear that trust is based on three things: competence (doing things well), ethics (living by an ethical value system), and voice (giving people a chance to speak).

"The people in your company are the ones who will pull you out of a financial slowdown. The coronavirus represents

an opportunity. If you focus on your people in a competent and ethical way, and you listen to their needs, you can drive up trust, teamwork and resilience," Bersin says.

The economic downturn places pressure on businesses to cut costs. Bersin implores managers to do whatever they can to avoid layoffs. "Research shows that when these periods occur, companies that go through deep layoffs always underperform in the future. Many go out of business."

In an [article for Harvard Business Review](#) on making decisions during a crisis, psychology professor Art Markman says managers would be wise to slow their decision-making down. "There are many actions people should take over the next several weeks and months, but the decision to act should be based on deliberation, sober reflection on data and discussion with experts – not in reaction to a headline or a tweet. In times of relatively slow-developing existential crises 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-run, but they are likely to create more problems than they solve."

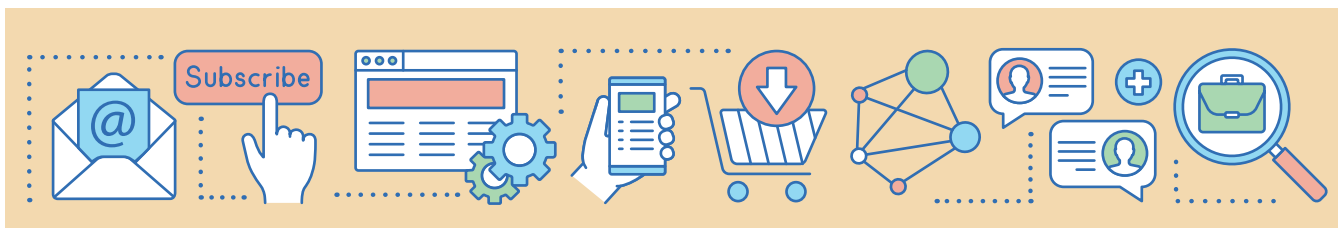
Go on offense

While many play defense during a crisis, there is an opportunity to be aspirational as well, says [Eric J. McNulty](#), co-author of "You're It: Crisis, Change and How to Lead When It Matters Most." "Imagine that the adversity of the situation coalesces your team to rise to its absolute best. Think about how you may all emerge from this incident stronger, more engaged and more capable than you were before. Creating such conditions calls leaders to reassure and encourage everyone throughout the enterprise that 'we can do it' and then supporting them both at work and at home."

During crises with a long duration like a pandemic, leaders must show they can execute a series of pivots as the facts on the ground and their operational context shift. Like Bersin, McNulty emphasizes establishing trust – through dialog and actions rather than proclamations and intentions.

"Decisions made and actions taken in trying times resonate far beyond the present. Forecasts about climate change, global urbanization and aging populations indicate that pandemics and other disruptive events will increase in frequency. Eventually, there may be one with a high, 1918-level morbidity rate that pushes our social and economic systems to their limit," Bersin says. "The lessons we can learn and the practices that can be put in place now make our organizations healthier today and better prepared for future turbulence." **SMN**

A subscription model can help combat economic downturns



“While you may be focusing on your direct competitors, they probably won’t put you out of business. Disruption is coming from across the globe, or from a company with a totally different business model.”

Robbie Kellman Baxter’s statement in his new book, “The Forever Transaction,” was written long before COVID-19 became the most potent global business disrupter one could never imagine. The recurring revenue that comes with a successful subscription model is the ideal shield against an economic downturn of any kind.

The subscription model has been a natural fit for B2B companies that sell software as a service (SaaS), but what about other B2B companies? While it’s true that more B2C companies than B2B companies have made the subscription model

more of a staple, the concept seems tailor-made for B2B businesses, says Bob Moore, co-founder and CEO of the data mining companies Crossbeam and Stitch, Inc., two businesses that serve B2B customers through a subscription model.

“From accounts to authorizations, B2B buying is generally more complex than that of B2C. Once a customer has identified a merchant that knows their needs and makes a product that works, the prospect of vetting and switching is all the more overwhelming,” Moore states. “Subscriptions alleviate that anxiety by simplifying the customer experience. In a way, B2B purchases already resemble subscription models — customers usually buy products from branded manufacturers and distributors on a regular schedule and in

bulk. B2B vendors have the opportunity to automate those repeat transactions, solidifying customer relationships to make them ‘sticky’ over the long term.”

Assessing how close you are to a membership model is the best place to start, says Kellman Baxter. But it’s important to keep in mind that pricing a subscription or having an offering called a membership doesn’t mean you are thoughtfully nurturing long-term relationships with the people you serve or maximizing customer lifetime value. Subscription pricing by itself is not a business model.

You may have thought about the benefits of a subscription model for your company, but have you thought about what’s in it for your customers? Your goals and your customers’ goals must align. Kellman Baxter offers these benefits

that attract and retain members:

- Cost savings
- Time savings
- Risk mitigation
- Readily available expert advice
- Premium (front-of-the-line) service
- Exclusive offers
- Broader range of choices

Leaders can’t just pay lip service to the strategy. They have to allocate resources and track the right metrics, Kellman Baxter says. “Many membership models fail because the organization lacks a strategic lead who builds a big picture vision that incorporates the entire organization instead of focusing on operational tasks. A team lead with credibility, seniority and a strategic orientation is a game changer.”

Making the most of digital communication

Efficiently communicating with customers and partners has never been more important. Rachel Perone, a multimedia designer at Magentrix, offers [these tips](#) for how to effectively and efficiently communicate digitally with partners and customers, especially during times of uncertainty.

- **Provide updates via a partner or customer portal.** No one can predict the future, but showing that your organization is prepared to address any scenario that comes their way, will bring confidence to your partners and customers.

- **Listen to feedback and respond to concerns.** Be prepared to communicate the latest updates with your partners and customers via the portal. Gather feedback in a centralized system to ensure the team is able to stay on top of their concerns.
- **Host events online and keep everyone informed as plans change.** Customer and partner portals — where organizers can quickly make changes and notify guests with a click of a button — are an easy and effective way to ensure everyone is up-to-date with the latest changes.

Late adapters are finally turning to digital

The disappearance of trade shows and other live marketing events, combined with increasing barriers to face-to-face sales meetings, places added pressure on businesses to market themselves through alternative means. If there is a silver lining, it's that marketing dollars that were allocated to the live events may now be available for other efforts. Digital is expected to be the clear winner, says Bernard Marr, a strategic business and technology advisor.

The temptation, in these uncertain times, may be to claw back your unspent trade show and conference dollars and not spend them elsewhere. That could be a fatal mistake. Without sounding too alarmist, Marr says, the investment in digital marketing could be the deciding factor whether small or medium-sized businesses make it through the time ahead.

For B2B companies that are in industries that have been slow to adapt to digital marketing — and there are more than you might imagine — it means a rapid transition is necessary. “In the coming months, your prospective clients are going to be less open to the idea of letting you walk through the door and shake their hand. If it's standard in your industry to go out and meet new customers face-to-face before you do business, adapting may mean opening new channels over web or social media platforms where introductions can be made and relationships fostered,” Marr states in a [post on Forbes.com](#).

“If your organization previously put token efforts into digital channels — because like a lot of other businesses, you had built your networks offline and that had always seemed to

work — now is the time to revisit them. That could be as simple as giving your website and social pages a refresh, or a more innovative approach.”

Ratnesh Singh, head of global business at events technology agency Buzznation, told Marr that businesses are experimenting with immersive 3D virtual events and live social platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn Live as substitutes for their lost trade show and conference networking opportunities.

“As long as businesses approach the shift to digital marketing strategically, there's no reason why it should just serve as an emergency fill-in, but could carry on providing long-term value when the world eventually gets back to normal,” Marr says.

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Should we even be selling in this environment?

Your customers want to have conversations about the challenges they're facing. Isn't that where sales begin?

Among the challenges that sales managers may face in the coming weeks and months is uneasiness on the part of sales reps to make presentations in the current unsettled environment. In times of crisis, there is an inclination to put commerce on hold. The problem is that disruption caused by COVID-19 could last months, and most businesses cannot afford to pause that long.

Should we be selling in this environment? There is a lot of talk about how the emphasis with human exchanges currently should be on our humanness. However, the implication that selling is not about “humanizing” is at the root of what has caused so much to go off course about selling over the past decades, says sales coach and author David Brock.

“Our job has always been about helping our customers, organizationally and individually. It's about helping them identify and address opportunities to grow, to improve, to be better,” Brock states in a [blog post](#). “Our job is to help them achieve their dreams and goals, whether it



is to improve revenue, reduce costs, improve profitability, grow, address new markets, find new customers or improve their operations. This includes their personal goals, which may be as simple as bringing sanity and clarity to their lives.”

This is a time when reassurances, as well as ongoing normal business sales efforts, are an opportunity to validate the value of the personal relationships and reliability that your reps have hopefully established as a key supplier, adds John Gunderson, vice president of analytics and e-business for Modern Distribution Management. MDM provides industry research and trends analysis for wholesale distributors.

[Gunderson cautions sales managers](#) to make sure their reps are sensitive to whether clients are receptive to discussing business while not completely placing sales on

the sideline. “A tone-deaf, disruptive sales call this week can do a lot of potential damage. “I believe that distributors can mitigate the impact of this crisis by supporting their customers and sales teams and not get gridlocked. While we are far from business-as-normal, we all have to work hard to look and move forward. This is a time when leadership makes a difference.”

Your clients are struggling with business decisions just as you are, says Al Davidson, founder of Strategic Sales & Marketing, Inc. (SSM), which delivers B2B lead generation services and appointment-setting services to clients. In a [recent post](#) for Small Business Trends, Davis says your customers may welcome your thoughts on how they can weather this economic downturn.

“Depending on what types of B2B solutions you sell, your prospects might already be

having significant pain points and concerns about the coronavirus. Spend some time rethinking and changing the angle on what are the key benefits of your products and services in a way that is relevant to coronavirus concerns. Is there a relevant sales pitch that you can make about how your B2B solutions can help your clients adapt to coronavirus and key benefits to help them get through the crisis?”

Indeed, many of your clients are likely eager to talk about how the pandemic has affected their business — possibly for good. In times of great disruption, just as in more stable times, sales conversations should be just that — conversations. Reps should take this opportunity to have high-level, thought-provoking conversations with the business leaders they engage with, prospects and customers, says Jack Wilson of information technology and services provider Cinch I.T.

Instead of asking customers and prospects stale questions about how this is impacting them, reps should be thought leaders and try to anticipate how the circumstances might be changing their customers' businesses, not only immediately, but long term. That's a conversation starter, and from there, your reps can position themselves as a leader who can help them prepare for the road ahead.

Quick-take tips for coping with COVID-19

The three-sentence work-from-home policy –

For any leader faced with the new normal – and especially for people whose leadership style skews toward command and control – suddenly needing to manage a distributed workforce can feel extremely uncomfortable. Don't be tempted to create a comprehensive list of expectations, guidelines, procedures, policies... and worst of all, potential repercussions. [Inc. magazine](#) contributing editor Jeff Haden says your work-from-home policy can be three short sentences:

1. Get your work done.
2. Be available.
3. Over-communicate.

"What matters is what gets done," says Haden. "Trust your employees to step up, whatever they're working on. Good employees don't need policies. They just want to know what really needs to get done."

Dedicated coronavirus web page –

For businesses that are significantly impacted by the crisis, it may be necessary to explain how you're adapting on a dedicated page or right on your homepage, says George Nguyen on [Marketing Land](#). Larger brands can also use the media/PR sections of their site for this purpose. In your statement, outline the situation for your customers and keep this information up-to-date.

Work on long-term investments – This may be the ideal time to re-evaluate your operations, platforms and processes and do some long-term strategic planning, says Gregg Schwartz, vice president of sales and marketing at Strategic Sales & Marketing, a lead generation company. If you have a few big prospects in the pipeline, now is a good occasion to put more energy into lead management and nurturing of those longer-term opportunities.

Pool the information you have at your disposal –

"The source of panic is usually from the unknown," Abby Mangold, founder and MD of crisis management agency, The Mangold Consultancy, told London-based [B2B Marketing](#). Start by mapping what you can know about this situation. Spend time calmly examining the business impact the Coronavirus may have on you, your teams and your customers. Emphasize the facts you've established, but don't ignore the gaps in what you know. "You often know very little at the beginning. Conversely, later on in a crisis, you end up having way too much information, which you've got to sift through," Mangold says. Understanding wherever it is you're starting from means you'll be able to assign the right people to gather the information you need.



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The rules of engagement

Follow these tips for better virtual meeting results

In traditional presentations, a speaker is typically afforded eye contact and at least feigned interest from those in the audience. With the coronavirus outbreak essentially ending live presentations and meetings of even small groups, one risk for those turning to video conferences is whether anyone will be paying attention.

Of course, if a presenter is uncertain whether their content will hold the attention of a virtual audience, they should ask themselves whether the presentation is necessary in the first place. But even important and worthwhile presentations and virtual meetings must compete with the unlimited distractions that our virtual attendees encounter.

In an article posted recently on HBR.org, Justin Hale and Joseph Grenny, two veteran presenters, identify four broad reasons to hold a meeting: to influence others, to make decisions, to solve problems, or to strengthen relationships. "Since all of these are active processes, passive passengers in a meeting rarely do quality work. The precondition for effective meetings—virtual or otherwise—is voluntary engagement," they state.

Avoid observers

Hale and Grenny start from the assumption that virtual gatherings "bore groups into a coma." Through studies they conducted, including one test comparing the same presentation experience to a face-to-face audience with a virtual audience, they developed five rules that lead to predictably better meeting outcomes.

These include:

- **The 60-second rule** – You can't engage a group in solving a problem they haven't felt. Do something in the first 60 seconds to help them experience it. This could be eye-opening statistics or anecdotes that dramatize the problem.
- **The responsibility rule** – People identify with a role in almost any social setting. The biggest engagement threat in virtual meetings is to allow attendees to unconsciously adopt the role of observer. Don't let that happen. This can be accomplished by using the next rule.
- **The nowhere to hide rule** – Break larger groups into smaller ones and give them problems or other tasks during the course of your presentation. Virtual attendees should have a means to communicate with one another (video conference, Slack, a messaging platform, etc.).



The smaller groups can type their solutions into the chat function and a presenter can call on a few to expound on their answer. Hale and Grenny recommend that presenters provide a new problem to solve at least every five minutes. "If you don't sustain a continual expectation of meaningful involvement, they will retreat into that alluring observer role, and you'll have to work hard to bring them back," they state.

Little things matter

Attention to detail reaps dividends in any presentation. That's even truer with virtual events, says Richard Goring, director at BrightCarbon, a specialist presentation agency. In a recent webinar for SMM Connect on creating better virtual presentations, Goring advised virtual presenters to pay attention to details, including setting, lighting and audio.

Don't rely on the microphone that is built into a laptop or use your cellphone, he says. Purchase a dedicated microphone. [Wirecutter](#) tested more than 25 USB microphones over six years and selected the best performers. They range in price from \$45 to \$130.

Pay attention to lighting. Sit in a bright room or set a light behind the camera to illuminate your face. You can angle and redirect LED desk lamps. Michael Hession, head of photo and video at Wirecutter, suggests bouncing the lamp light off a nearby wall rather than pointing it straight at your face.

Pay attention to position. Sit in a good chair and take a few minutes before the presentation begins to make sure you will be positioned so your face is in the middle of the screen. You don't want to be too close or too far away. That said, an engaging virtual presentation will be designed so the slides, animation and other visuals do the heavy lifting.

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View the full webinar presentation "Urgent: Moving Presentations Online" by Richard Goring at SMMConnect.com/recordings. (Free registration is required.)



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Marketing agility is critical during a crisis

By Mirko Holzer

Business agility and change management are not “nice to haves,” they are business critical. Global marketing organizations that previously were able to create their 2020 plans over Q3 and Q4 last year have discovered they need to reassess their campaigns, plans and budgets to adjust to a dramatically changing go-to-market landscape and to recalibrate their pipeline creation strategies. To make things even more challenging, they are trying to accomplish this in days rather than months.

To be agile requires alignment, and many organizations are simply not structured for alignment. Different teams and departments manage different brands with separate profits and losses (P&Ls). Different regions (domestic and international) have different brand and go-to-market priorities and P&Ls, so it becomes more granular on a local level. Agility is not the ability for decentral entities to do what they want. This creates chaos and often does not comply with corporate brand guidelines. Rather, agility requires teams and departments to act or react individually while following the lead of headquarters.

HQ should drive the ship

In critical situations such as the current environment, leadership should come from HQ and guide the way while delegating decisions in order to not become a bottleneck and hamper agility. This approach allows HQ to have visibility on budgets, campaigns and performance, capture data, reallocate resources to brands less impacted or better positioned for success in the current environment—and then push findings and direction downstream. These are unprecedented times, which means the ability to learn fast, fail fast, adjust and then push learnings through an organization in order to course correct lead generation pipeline is business critical.

Lead and sales opportunities are not only impacted by the cancellation of

conferences and events. With in-person meetings slowing to a trickle (if not canceled altogether), the sales and marketing teams have to collaborate on course correction. This requires the ability to quickly change planning, as well as shift

possess these three characteristics across their go-to-market systems:

- **Customer understanding** — data management and customer analytics
- **Brand strategy** — marketing resource management and real-time performance management
- **Brand experience** — content and channel to customer, plus marketing automation tools

Adopt real-time dashboards

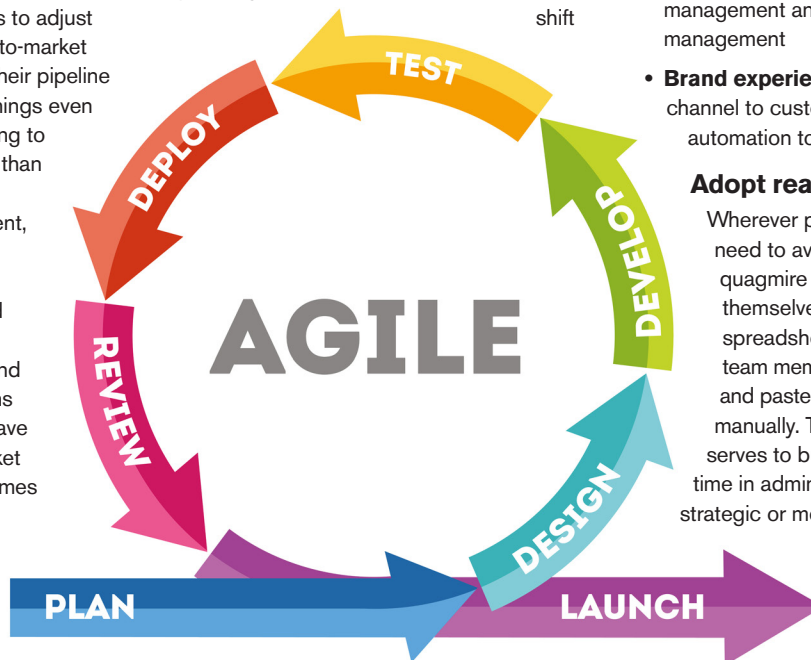
Wherever possible, organizations need to avoid the spreadsheet quagmire where marketers find themselves reviewing and updating spreadsheets to share with other team members who then copy and paste and consolidate data manually. This approach typically serves to burn up valuable marketer time in administrative rather than strategic or meaningful execution.

Organizations that do not have marketing technology systems in place that provide real time dashboards

with tracking and measurement tools to give visibility into the entire planning, budget and execution process are going to find themselves slow-footed. They'll be not only slow-footed to respond to the current situation, but also slow-footed to change when the environment returns to norm.

Agility is essential in these turbulent times. Rarely can we forecast demand, but we must always respond promptly to safeguard organizations from chaos. Organizations that are agile and have fast access to sales and marketing data and analysis, and that can react quickly in the form of execution, will be far better placed to weather and recover from this storm.

Mirko Holzer is CEO of BrandMaker, providers of scalable marketing resource management, marketing efficiency and customer engagement management solutions for B2B sales and marketing teams.



budget and content production and delivery. Discovering which sales and market enablement content and engagement produce the best outcomes — such as messaging, webinars, social advertising and digital assets — is paramount. The ability to move from this new strategic direction to fast execution is equally important.

Forrester Research recently published a report highlighting the key criteria for successful [marketing resource management](#) tools, which directly impact how well and how fast marketing teams can respond to changing markets.

Characteristics of agile companies

To learn quickly, fail fast and then be able to push learnings and direction throughout an organization requires the ability to update marketing strategy fast and move to execution even faster. Organizations able to move with speed and agility typically