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The

Reset



CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Marketing Execution After the Crisis

Volume I

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THE RESET: CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Volume I

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*Pandemic. Lock down. Work at home. Rollercoaster economy.
Social upheaval. Contact-free shopping. Social Distance. Masks.*

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Take a moment and think back to the beginning of 2020. Back to when “Coronavirus” was a phrase just below the surface of most of our consciousness, and “pandemic” was something that happened in movies and TV. If you were a frequent business traveler like me, think back to the trips you took in the early part of the year (my last trip was Boston to London and return at the beginning of March).

The front page of *The New York Times* on Monday March 2, 2020 reserved its boldest type for an article on the Democratic primary in the upper right, and this article was a third of the page down, “Death at Nursing Home as Virus Spreads in the U.S.” Already, the country was beginning to “...scramble to assess emerging risks” of the disease. The dateline on that article was “Kirkland, Wash.,” an affluent suburb of Seattle just five miles from where my teenage daughter and her mom live. Within weeks, my daughter would attend her last day of school in a classroom for her junior year. Next week, she begins her senior year the same way, at home, on her computer, along with millions of other students and workers across the U.S. and the world.

Perhaps when this all began, you started to think about how you would respond as a marketer; what you might have to do differently as an advertiser; how you were going to rearrange your business priorities in the weeks ahead. Weeks, maybe months, of some degree of uncertainty seemed assured. Certainly, this virus was something, like our somewhat dim memories of H1N1 or Ebola, that would be handled and then we would be back to business as usual. Now, as September dawns, we realize that this was not *business as usual* at all. This crisis is truly something different, something far more fundamental. This is a distinct change, an inflection point, a shift from one time to another.

This is **The Reset.**

What has emerged from the ongoing crises – pandemic, economic uncertainty, global political tensions, impending U.S. elections, social transformation – is something unprecedented in our lifetime. Something that fundamentally rewrites many of the rules and beliefs that have carried us to this point. The Reset impacts every sector of society, every individual, every business and institution, and every nation. Some will emerge with newfound strengths and capabilities; some will not emerge at all.

For marketers, The Reset manifests itself in several important ways: Trust, Values, and Action. Understanding each is a requirement as we build our plans. Even now, as the crisis continues and the end is not yet in sight, marketers must begin to move from an endless reactive stance to a definitive proactive one.

Here are the key elements of The Reset, each of which will be discussed in detail throughout this series. They are tightly coupled with each other, and with a broader understanding of the macro-conditions around us. The successful marketer in the future will keep a close eye on rapid change as well as the newly establishing social norms.

First, the Trust Reset represents the lens through which marketers must think about every engagement they create, from digital to physical. Consumers around the globe have been at the center of an unprecedented and unexpected shift in how they live, work, and play. At the core of all these changes has been the relentless erosion of trust. Trust in brands, governments, public institutions, and even other people. Trust that has been built up over decades was eroded in weeks and months. People fear an invisible virus, an unexpected social uprising, the media, and even their Uber driver. Wearing a mask – hiding the smiles and frown essential to so much non-verbal communication – has become the new social norm.



The Values Reset is the other side of trust. As consumers and businesses have their trust eroded, they also are having their values rewritten. Months of isolation have created an opportunity for individuals and families to evaluate and potentially change the things they have long valued. From questioning the need for certain types of clothing (who really wants to wear a jacket and tie on a video call?) to realizing that they can bake their own bread, simple values are shifting. More importantly, the values of commuting every day to a job or accepting that the mall should even exist begin to drive a sweeping set of changes that marketers must understand and accommodate.

Finally, the Action Reset is the structure under which we begin to write our playbook for the future. Action here means the mechanisms, tools, and protocols of engagement among people, businesses, and social institutions. This covers everything from the importance of video communication to voting by mail, the blending of work and personal time to erase the boundaries of 8:00-5:00, and the rise of “contactless” as a broad descriptor of new transactional protocols. The Action Reset is ultimately where marketing must lead in creating and embracing new channels, new tempos, and new ideals.

The Reset presents significant challenges and opportunities for marketers to review and rewrite their playbook. Winning in the world after ongoing crises and seismic shifts in consumer expectations requires careful planning, deep understanding of customers, and revolutionary thinking in the use of digital marketing tools. Marketers must step up now and build new best practices quickly if they want their brand to survive and thrive in the new world.

How We Got Here

*In the eye of a hurricane
There is quiet
For just a moment
A yellow sky*

~From “Hurricane” by Lin-Manuel Miranda

No one ever wants to be in the middle of a crisis, but many of us spend a considerable amount of our professional career preparing for and often dealing with one crisis after another. Marketers and communication professionals tend to be highly sensitive to the onset of a crisis and know the playbook for responding quickly. In fact, for most of us, the very concept of “crisis” carries the implication that it will be short-lived, high intensity, and with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Crises are something that gets resolved, and the business moves on.

Welcome to 2020 and the crisis that seems to never end. To understand how to move forward, overcome this crisis situation, and make smart decisions in the short- and medium- term future, it is first important to find some stable ground from which to observe the situation, gather relevant data, and chart a course. Essentially you must create your own “eye of the storm” and use that as your reference for what happens next. As situations change, refresh the vantage point, but keep in mind your bigger goals and objectives along the way.

For our discussion, we will first identify the input factors in the current situation and the role they play in the changed landscape and road ahead. To build a plan that allows us to thrive in The Reset, we must understand exactly what pushed the big reset button.

Factor 1: The Coronavirus Pandemic

If there is a spark that ignited the current crisis state, it is certainly the global pandemic that appeared to have started in late 2019 and as of this moment has infected over 23.8 million people worldwide (5.7mm+ in U.S.) and resulted in over 800k confirmed deaths (178k+ in U.S.). This horrific virus has touched all of us in some way, and the hope of a vaccine remains on the horizon.

To create a useful reference point for our analysis, it is important to separate the devastating cost of the pandemic in human lives and suffering from the psychological, emotional, and social impacts it has had and will continue to have in the future. As we will discuss later, these many months of lockdown, quarantine, and wave after wave of changing information has profoundly, and perhaps permanently, altered the perceptions and behavior of humans around the globe.

Almost everyone has read a pandemic thriller, seen a movie or TV show about a pandemic crisis and the resulting world, or maybe read a novel or history about the Black Death or 1918 flu pandemic. These reference points may give us context for the current situation, provide valuable lessons for how to behave or what to expect, and remind us that our current reality is not completely unprecedented. But it is important to not judge this moment in time solely on these historical and fictional analogs. Our crisis – like all crises – is unique and must be considered holistically.

Factor 2: Economic Uncertainty

The pandemic is the first input factor, and it is nowhere near its conclusion. If it is the rain and wind of our global hurricane, then the flooding that naturally follows is our second factor, economic uncertainty.

Much of the population in the U.S. are suddenly working from home, working under drastically changed conditions outside the home, or unexpectedly unemployed. Major sectors of the economy,

such as retail, restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues, and transportation are either closed or operating with reduced capacity.

All these conditions create deep uncertainty on the part of individuals and businesses about the future. Consumers are looking at their spending and savings with new perspective, perhaps concerned about the next paycheck or considering moving from city to suburb, and businesses are warily watching for signals that will guide their own investments in the quarters ahead. The stock market continues to rise, either detached from the reality of 2020 or somehow already investing in 2025. Meanwhile, the U.S. waits for the 2020 presidential election to see if it will hold clues to the future direction of the economy.

Marketers have always had to respond to economic ups and downs and have well-worn playbooks of tactics that work in a recession and those that work in an expansion. This moment, however, seems to hold more questions than answers. The playbooks of the past may know how to deal with one overall macroeconomic situation, but they likely come up short when the economy is only part of the bigger picture.

In the context of The Reset, we must look at the way in which individuals and businesses will spend as much as we look at how much they will spend. The shift to home offices and digital connections impacts public and private transportation, commercial real estate, logistics and delivery services, along with education and health care. Sorting through the way in which marketers must approach their customers in the future just became a lot more complex.

Factor 3: Social Transformation

The flood of economic uncertainty is closely accompanied by the shifting soil of our social fabric. From the simple act of wearing a mask to the complex logistics of companies completely changing their work at home policies, the social transformations taking place right now will have far-reaching implications. The accepted standards of social justice and social conduct are changing in real-time in tweets, posts, and cable news. Society seems to be remaking itself daily.

Consider the simple elevator in a typical 30-story downtown office building. If the capacity of that elevator is capped at 4 people, instead of the historical “as many as will fit,” then how much longer will it take to get all the workers to their designated floors in the morning, and down to the lobby in the evening? If it adds an extra hour or more to the process, what will be the impact on rush hours for public transportation and highways? How will changing schedules for workers manifest in daycare facilities? Small changes ripple forward, creating new opportunities and challenges.

Transformation means that the psychology of the consumer will be different in the future; their hopes and expectations of other people, businesses and social institutions be rewritten. Marketers, always sensitive to the real and perceived underlying needs and motivations of their customers, must pay careful attention to every message they put out and the often real-time responses they get back.

Three input factors: Pandemic, Economic Uncertainty, Social Change that are the drivers for The Reset. Three massive forces swirling across the business landscape and driving the need for a new way of operating. But marketers must direct their attention and activity to people, and it is how these input factors are redefining people that is our next focus.

Customer Expectations Redefined

“I hope this email finds you staying safe and healthy.”

~ nearly every email received in in 2020

The rise of “contactless” experiences over the past 9 months is one of the most telling signs of the changing expectations of consumers and the ways in which businesses will try and meet those expectations. It takes a very literal interpretation of a complex phenomenon – the desire to slow the spread of a virus – and attempts to address it head-on. From behind a glass door, sheathed in mask and gloves, a conscientious worker carrying your food/drink/clothing/car/pet in a sealed carrier will emerge and bring it right to your waiting vehicle. The customer drives away happy.

But what went on behind the glass door before your items were ever sealed up? Does that matter? When we dig deeper and try to really understand the impact of the current situation on customers, the answer quickly becomes far more complex, and far more interesting.

The “contactless” label is really a way to address the set of psychological and emotional issues at stake for most humans in late 2020. For consumers, *trust* along almost every dimension has been eroded.

Trust in other people – do they have the virus? Do they even know if they have been exposed?

Trust in science and governments – are they telling the truth? Are they providing all the necessary information?

Trust in businesses – have they taken all the necessary precautions to provide a safe environment? Are they charging a fair price?

With this erosion of trust, people begin to question things that they would never have given a second thought to in the past. This extends beyond the obvious and potentially colors every interaction that someone has, especially interactions with companies trying to create a connection or make a sale.

Another element of the underlying forces behind the “contactless” label is a growing aversion to interactions that might involve *touch*, both literal and figurative. This is simpler than trust, which has many emotional and psychological elements to it, and really centers on the desire to avoid unnecessary touches in the physical world.

Physical touch – avoiding situations which require close contact with strangers, especially if it involves touch. Favoring virtual meetings even when physical alternatives are viable. Limiting the number of people allowed into a newly expanded and enforced “touch zone.”

Words and images – people will look for words and images that reflect their new contactless reality, showing people solo or socially distanced. Language that reinforces the idea of no-touch will be preferred. (Some marketers are already finding clever ways to do this, as KFC recently did with the blurring out of their classic “Finger Lickin’ Good” phrase in ads.)

Contactless does not mean no contact at all. People still desire human connection, but months in quarantine have created new rules for those connections. Small, selected groups of friends and family (the “quaranteam” as it has been called) will be allowed access and contact. Will these individuals be allowed to safely enter the touch zone? Is this an opportunity for a new type of influencer, one who can demonstrate their safety and establish a trusted relationship quickly?

For many brands, the very concept of “relationship” has been at the heart of their marketing efforts for several years. Building strong customer experiences is supposed to help create a strong relationship between brand and customer. But that has always been more of a desire on the part of a brand than reality for the consumer. Some research has already shown ([McKinsey, 2020](#)) that consumers have been losing brand loyalty during the pandemic. What does this mean for the future, when brands are called to task for their hygiene, social equity profile, political stance, and many other characteristics?

Finally, in thinking about customer expectations, it is important to consider the impact that months of enforced lockdown behavior has had on how people consume and evaluate all media. Given the choice of any channel across multiple devices, people are gravitating towards content that provides comfort in the face of chaos. The news cycle, already churning at a fast pace, has been accelerated even more. Brand activity, whether for good or bad, is immediately seen and judged by target audiences.

The past few weeks brought the Democratic and Republican national conventions to the screens in the U.S. One of them was a mixture of live and recorded speeches and segments that fully embraced the new world of social distancing. A major party candidate accepting their nomination in a nearly empty auditorium was an unprecedented sight. The other party tried to straddle the line between the old and the new, having an audience – sometimes socially distant, sometimes not – to provide the live feedback for speeches. It is impossible to say right now which model was more successful, but fascinating to watch how political advertising – since that is all the convention broadcasts really are – tries to embrace the hopes and desires of their audience. These experiments, and the lessons learned, will influence marketing and advertising for years to come.

What Comes Next?

For the marketer, almost everything comes down to results. Those results may be measured in sales, market share, brand loyalty, and many other metrics. Even when sitting in their home office, on another endless video call with colleagues, marketers must be focused on the outcomes they are tasked with driving for the business.

To achieve those results in the context of The Reset, marketers must reframe their playbook to consider the new expectations of customers, the new ways that people experience pleasure and pain, and the overall changed social milieu. Frustrations of the past may no longer be tolerated by consumers – if they can't get what they want delivered from you, your competitor is really just a click away – and newfound pleasures (“let's bake some bread!”) are rewiring consumer tolerance levels (“sold out of flour again?”).

Marketers who have built and relied upon detailed psychographic personas need to review and rewrite them now and on a regular basis going forward. The Reset is not over, it is happening in real time right now. In the next chapters, we will dig deeper into the ways in which this manifests itself in customer behavior and then how to build a new marketing playbook for ongoing success.

NORMAN GUADAGNO

Norman Guadagno is currently CMO at Acoustic, where he is helping reimagine marketing technology. Over the past two decades, he has held a number of marketing and strategy roles with a deep focus on business transformation, marketing acceleration, and brand building. Norman was previously SVP of Marketing at Carbonite, helping to successfully transform that company from B2C to B2B. He has also held senior marketing positions at digital marketing agency Wire Stone (now part of Accenture Interactive), Microsoft, and Oracle.

With both a B.A. and M.A. in psychology, Norman has always viewed marketing challenges first through the lens of human perceptions, motivations, and emotions. Combined with a deep understanding of data, proven skills as a storyteller, and rich experience as a business and people leader, his unique perspective on the social and business landscape today offers valuable insights for professionals across industries.

ABOUT ACOUSTIC

Acoustic is an independent marketing cloud with the open platform needed for success in a dynamic world. We're reimaging marketing technology by lessening the burdens of repetitive tasks and equipping marketers with powerful technology that is simple and easy to use. We give marketers more time to do what really matters—to think bigger and put themselves back into the work. We help marketers aim higher, bringing humanity back into marketing. Acoustic serves an international client base of more than 3,500 brands, including Fortune 500 companies, providing digital marketing, marketing analytics, content management, personalization, mobile marketing, and marketing automation solutions.

For more information, visit www.acoustic.com.

The logo features the text "The Reset" in a dark blue serif font. The word "The" is smaller and positioned above the "R" in "Reset". A bright green circular arrow surrounds the text, starting from the top left, curving around the top and right, and ending with a downward-pointing arrowhead at the top right of the "t" in "Reset".

The Reset

Stay tuned for more content in
The Reset series—coming soon!