

How to Talk to Customers Right Now

Not so long ago, “how are you?” was a basic question – a simple introduction to a conversation that was usually met with an equally simple answer. Now, asking how someone is doing will often lead into detailed stories about how both the questioner and the one being asked are weathering the Coronavirus pandemic.

The same is true for talking to customers right now. The kinds of meetings and conversations you had a couple months ago aren't the same. Business needs have changed and stress levels are high, but that doesn't mean there's no room for a sales call. What it does mean is taking more time to listen and being prepared for the conversation to go in unexpected directions.

SOWING SEEDS

It's hard to know what the right time is to reach out to a customer right now, but there are a few places you can look for clues.

• Take a closer look at your customer relationships

Your best customers are probably the ones you speak to most often, and they're the most likely to react positively to you checking in. Take a look at your history with each customer and what you know about them, and reach out to the ones you feel most comfortable with.

• Be willing to experiment

This is not anyone's comfort zone. There will be some trial-and-error involved as you and your customers discover what works within the confines of our shared new normal. Learn from mistakes, expand on successes and most importantly, keep trying.

• Don't force it

If it feels like you're pushing too hard to find a reason to reach out to a customer, it's probably best to wait. Each customer will have their own timeline, and showing respect for that is the best way to preserve your relationship with them. A little patience goes a long way.



CULTIVATING GROWTH

When they're ready to have a conversation, customers want to connect and they're looking for guidance. Here are a few ways to solidify that connection.

- **Reach out with empathy**

Let your customer know that you're here to help, whatever form that help might take. Ask how your customer is doing, and listen attentively to the answer.

- **Make the conversation about the customer**

Show that you understand that the customer's business has changed. Share your experience if it's applicable, but always bring it back to them. If they're struggling, ask what you can do to help. If you feel a little like a part-time therapist, you're doing it right.

- **Don't seek a sales opportunity...but be ready for one if it appears**

If there is business to be made, then it will come up naturally. If there isn't, that's OK too – the conversation is still valuable in itself.

- **Follow up on large orders**

If a customer has made a large order, that's an indicator that they've found a path that's working for them. A call to say thank you could turn into a valuable opportunity to understand what their success looks like.

HARVEST TIME

When the time is right, present an opportunity to your customer. Presenting virtually means using unfamiliar tools and losing the important face-to-face experience, but you can work with that.

- **Don't expect perfection**

We're all learning how to connect via a Zoom meeting or a Skype call. Fumbling and stumbling to some degree is expected now. You forgive technology issues and interruptions when they happen to your customer – make sure you forgive them for yourself too. Be prepared for your conversation to take unexpected twists and turns, and be open to exploring those new directions.

- **Reach for your marketing toolbox**

Other tools can make up for the loss of face-to-face interaction. Use videoconferencing to enhance the experience for both you and the customer. Send samples and marketing materials to your customer before your meeting, and use video and image assets to give your customer the complete picture.

• **Get feedback**

After your meeting, get constructive feedback from your customer about how you did. Your customer will feel included and important because you asked, and you'll learn valuable lessons to help you improve your next presentation.

Nobody knows for sure what the future holds, but one thing is almost certain. All these new things we're learning about how to connect and communicate while separated will change how we do business in the months and years to come. These tips will help get you through the hard times, and they'll be there as we all move forward with empathy and a deeper connection to one another.