

Dick Maggione: Five ways to steer your business through the pandemic

By [Dick Maggione Special](#) to The Canton Repository

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Let's take a look at what we can do with our businesses to keep them successful.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be the biggest shock to our lives and livelihoods since the Spanish flu in 1918. Our lives and the economy have come to a near full halt. There's major economic upheaval from Wall Street to Main Street. The ground below us has shaken.

The pandemic pulled the future forward. It served as an accelerant.

Telemedicine went from near zero to 60 in the blink of an eye. Telecommuting went from "please don't!" to "why not?" overnight. Zoom's stock zoomed from \$50 a share to \$250 in a blink. Remote learning and online banking are now commonplace. Bidet sales skyrocketed due to toilet paper shortages!

The rich are still getting richer and the poor are still getting poorer. That hasn't changed. The pandemic, however, has catalyzed the already-trending drivers impacting human behavior. Let's take a look at what we can do with our businesses to keep them successful.

1. Re-imagine now

Tap into what customers expect from your brand and re-imagine new ways to serve.

Many restaurants did this by offering curbside pickup and delivery. Some went further by offering new menu items that worked better for carryout. For many, curbside pick-up is here to stay.

Others moved into an adjacent category by selling products not previously sold.

Some now sell uncooked higher-end meats and seafood not available from grocery stores. This is a form of diversification while staying true to its brand. Fuddruckers decided to bake and sell loaves of bread directly to consumers due to the shortages in grocery stores. Subway also began selling bread and deli meats.

Several restaurants have even increased sales while building their [brand](#) during this period. This has enabled many to not only hang on during the pandemic but to grow.

A local distillery, Gervasi, began manufacturing hand sanitizer while liquor sales were down. This kept some revenue coming in and employees working while also meeting a very serious need in the community.

Imagine how you can serve your customers in new and different ways. Find out how they want to be served. Then think of the customer journey at every touchpoint. For instance, we're now conditioned to expect touchless transactions, clean surroundings and more electronic communications. Make the changes.

Now is the opportunity to think differently and flex your company's model to go with the new consumer trends. Instead of looking at your product offering (inside-out thinking), switch to a customer-solution orientation (outside-in thinking).

2. Bottlenecks exposed

Eliyahu Goldratt points out in his best-selling business novel, "The Goal," that your business or organization will only operate as fast as your narrowest bottleneck will allow. The pandemic is uncovering these within your operation.

Are your customers' expectations for instantaneous service growing? Ask them how they are changing. Have you experienced interruptions in your supply chain? Does your technology give you the flexibility you need to meet the changing demands? Do your employees know what is expected and are they equipped to make the adjustments?

It's critical to find and eliminate key bottlenecks.

Avoid the tendency to retreat to the familiar. Inertia is riskier than action. Now is the time to adapt to the new environment. Be bold, experiment and be agile. What do you need to do and what's in the way of achieving it?

3. Purpose-led accelerator

Businesses are struggling with whether they should be talking about how good they are or the good they are doing. Does the restaurant talk about feeding the less fortunate folks in their community or how they serve the finest steaks in town? Should Bounty tell you they are the "Quicker Picker Upper" or how they give away paper towels to the needy?

It's a fair question.

Simon Sinek popularized the term "why" with his famous TED talk video in 2009. The "why" stands for the higher purpose. We still want features, we still want benefits, we still want an experience—but now, we also want a purpose with which we can identify.

Everybody sells the what – tennis shoes, smartphones, cars and coffee. Everyone is selling something.

Today, the "why" is having a bigger influence. The "why" is the reason your organization exists beyond making money. Your customers care, as do your employees. The "why" has a direct effect on recruiting and retaining the right people. And those people are more productive and innovative.

Purpose has many flavors and can focus on its employees, customers, society, the local community or something else.

The pandemic is hastening the realization that there is more to life than things.

More of us are interested in buying from companies that have a purpose beyond making money. More of us are interested in working for a company that has interests beyond making money. We are becoming more interested in relationships than we are with stuff.

Companies must communicate their purpose with transparency, sincerity and authenticity.

4. Online explosion

Online sales are soaring. Amazon's page views were up 50% this April versus last year.

Walmart's were up nearly 100%. Costco is up more than 200%. Just about every online retailer is up. Chewy is hiring 10,000 workers to handle fulfillment. After the pandemic, online sales are not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Companies unable to make this pivot are going through liquidation including JCPenney, Pier 1, Tuesday Morning and many more.

Online activity already was on the rise prior to the pandemic. The pandemic accelerated the adoption curve. If your company's sales are online, now is the time to ride the e-commerce wave.

If you have never considered selling online, now is the time to reconsider.

Build a community of evangelists, a customer tribe, for your brand through social media platforms.

The other online opportunity that nearly every organization can and should take advantage of is to generate leads that can convert to sales. The two methods are organic and paid.

It's a good time to refresh your website. Work with your in-house and outsourced teams to make this happen now. There may never be a more favorable time. Internet usage is up about 50%.

5. Advertising leverage

During economic downturns most companies cut their advertising budgets. Some have no choice. They are cash-strapped. But for those that have the option, continuing to invest in advertising will help to maintain or increase your market share.

Advertisers have a unique opportunity to increase their share-of-voice when others are reducing their advertising spend.

Advertising can be a bargain during a downturn as rates drop due to lower demand. The cost for clicks on Google and impressions in traditional media are on sale. We've never seen market share cheaper than it is right now.

Research has consistently proved companies that advertise during an economic downturn come out on top during and after the downturn, supporting the adage, "When times are good you should advertise. When times are bad you must advertise."

Pause. Take a breath. We are in pandemic, but not forever.

George Harrison says it best: “All things must pass.”

Communicate simply, frequently and honestly. The crisis will end. Optimism is about staying focused on positive outcomes. Create a vision on how the organization will survive and even thrive during this pandemic and you will emerge whole and maybe even stronger.

Dick Maggiore is president and CEO of [Innis Maggiore](#) founded in Canton in 1974, and today recognized as America's leading positioning ad agency helping brands compete and win in the marketplace here and across the country.