

7 NEW LESSONS

FOR ONLINE SELLING IN A TIME OF VIRTUAL COMMERCE

WORKING[®]
SOLUTIONS

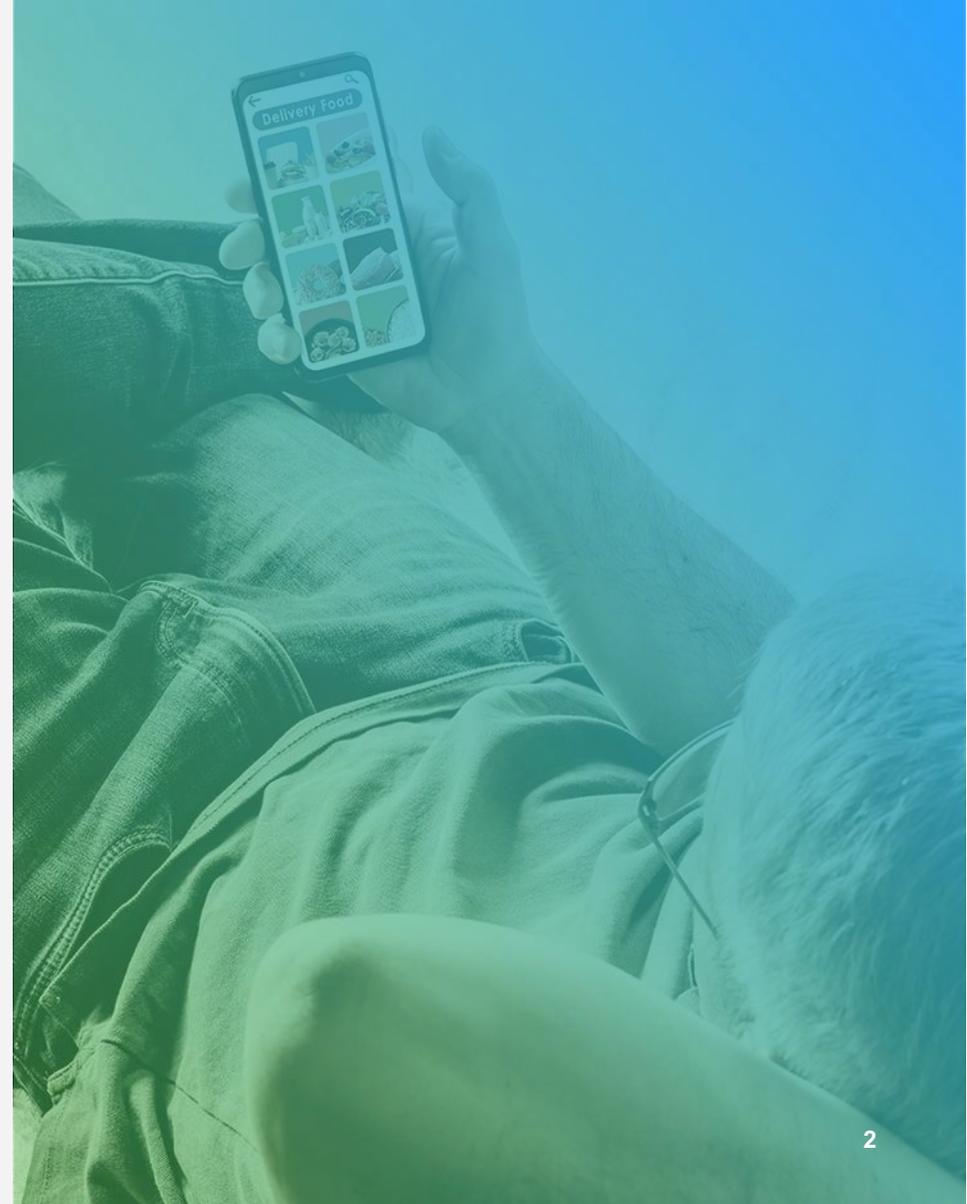


Already well in place before 2020, online selling is now the only option in the wake of Covid-19 — a status quo that’s likely to stick around for a while.

As such, many businesses now find themselves thriving in a time of increased demand, yet also struggling to adapt to the virtual marketplace.

According to a growing chorus of experts, the companies that not only survive this period but also thrive and emerge as tomorrow’s leaders will do so by emphasizing service. Think of today’s leading brands — Lyft, Peloton, Apple: These are household names not just because of the products they sell, but because they **offer extraordinary virtual convenience** and **work to build relationships with customers**.

These aren’t mysterious tricks, either, but clearly defined paths of action. So, take your place among the businesses offering unique, superior, memorable service at a time when it’s never mattered more: Here are 7 new lessons every business should learn about the new virtual marketplace.



LESSON #1:

CUSTOMER SERVICE HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT

If people aren't meeting you at your store, then they're meeting you over the phone. And that doesn't necessarily mean voice communications, either. More and more often, the smartphone is used for its many other digital interfaces, be it web browsing, email, social, or another emerging format. (And it isn't just young shoppers making this shift — it's *everyone*.)

New elements of eCommerce



For some companies, business is booming, but customer service hasn't kept pace. While it's understandable that priorities have been, so far, focused on sales and order fulfillment, for companies that haven't yet beefed up their customer service strategy to meet the new normal, the time to do so is now.

"The latest data from McKinsey shows that consumers are likely to keep the behaviors they've adopted amid stay-at-home orders, such as more online shopping and fewer mall visits," [reported the Harvard Business Review](#) in July.

"Retailers can't afford to be in a wait-and-see mode. First, they need to reimagine their baseline requirements and then turn their attention to taking their customer experience to the next level."

No two ways about it: You need to have a better and more robust customer strategy now if you want to stay in business in the years to come. Customers who have gone fully virtual are simply no longer satisfied with 9-to-5 windows for interaction. They also have little patience for businesses that aren't prepared to keep up with new levels of demand.

It may be these failures that have contributed to [McKinsey's remarkable findings](#) that more than 75% of consumers “have experimented with a different shopping behavior” during the Covid-19 pandemic, “including trying new brands and places to shop.” Among shoppers who have switched brands, “**availability, convenience, and value were the main drivers.**”

In other words, companies that haven't adapted are literally losing customers. And they should be realizing, therefore, that they can't simply apply their models of pre-pandemic business to the virtual space. No matter how successful they used to be, those models can't be expected to work in a new setting.

“Most retailers with roots in brick-and-mortar simply try to replicate their in-store experience online, but such efforts are fruitless and misguided,” [writes the HBR's](#) Denise Lee Yohn. “Beyond the transaction basics discussed earlier, customers don't expect a virtual experience to be like an in-person one – nor do they want it to be.”

LESSON #2:

GO (DIGITALLY) NATIVE WITH VIRTUAL CARE

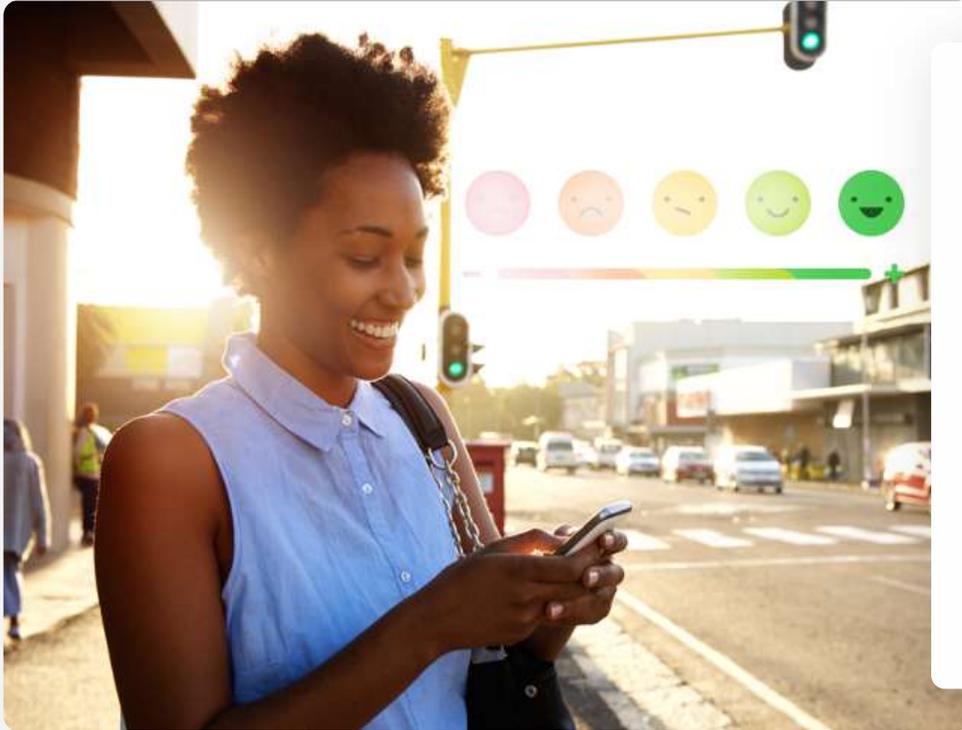
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of consumers “have experimented with a different shopping behavior” during the Covid-19 pandemic, “including trying new brands and places to shop.”

-McKinsey



The solution?



Offering a “digitally native customer experience,” which means **treating virtual interactions as the unique experiences they are.**

Some businesses have been developing virtual customer service strategies for decades. They understand that there’s a marked difference in virtual marketing, and have approached it accordingly, as its own, separate, unique – and lucrative – thing. It shouldn’t be treated as an adjunct of a traditional marketing plan, but its own entity, with its own strategy and rewards.

In other words – and this could be painful – it’s going to require an investment, in time, resources and expertise. But the good news is that the payoff for that investment will be more than worth the cost.

LESSON #3:

SEIZE THE POWER OF VIRTUAL TO THINK BIGGER

Certain companies have been highly successful in capitalizing on the dramatic and rapid market changes caused by Covid-19. Nobody's really surprised that Amazon and Netflix, two brands that pioneered the idea of at-home consumption, are thriving like never before.

But they're not the only ones. Most major retailers have beefed up their operations to accommodate new forms of virtual shopping, with companies like Target and Best Buy quickly integrating sophisticated curbside pickup options. Restaurants had to change their business model entirely out of necessity, but other companies have the luxury of doing it proactively, carving out a **unique experience that leverages the new (and almost unlimited) opportunities of the virtual space.**



EXERCISE & FITNESS



Already expert at building market share with the use of such peripheral crowd pleasers as an engaging workout app and trendy clothing line, **Peloton** has stepped up its legacy of offering inventive opportunities during the pandemic. A recent workout with 23,000 participants [set a streaming record](#), while the latest edition of its [annual Pelothon](#) gives customers a chance to virtually team up with others to meet charitable goals, like raising money for non-profits such as Food Bank for New York City and Daily Bread.

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT



The **City of Orlando** is turning the necessary shift to virtual appointments into a chance to speed up its development process, and in the process spur more construction and thus build jobs — all stemming from a smarter use of virtual tech. It's an innovation that's designed to last: "There's really no reason for us to not continue a service like this" after the pandemic, the city's permitting services division manager [told the Orlando Business Journal](#).

FASHION



Jewelry designer **Kendra Scott** deliberately worked to recreate its in-store customer for virtual commerce with an interactive “try-on” feature that’s helped boost engagement during the pandemic. Customers who have used the new feature “are more than three-times as likely to make a purchase than other visitors, and are spending 20% more per order,” writes Hilary George Parkin [at Glossy](#).

ELECTRONICS & TELECOM



Huawei, China’s primary telecom provider, was already moving aggressively to dominate international locations where coverage was in short supply, like Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. In South Africa, where it’s also moved into retail electronics, its [eCommerce sales have surged some 800%](#) between April and July. It’s that kind of aggressive growth that has helped the company overtake Samsung as the world’s largest smartphone maker in 2020.

These examples **demonstrate not just the potential of those who seize the moment, but also the risk of failing to do so**, as any of their competitors can sadly attest. In other words, the current moment doesn’t represent just a struggle to keep up with consumer demand, but also to preserve your space in the market. Put another way, if you’re operating in an industry that’s still thriving in the wake of Covid-19, get ready for company. It won’t take long for potential new competitors and venture capitalists to notice the growth opportunities in your backyard.

What all the above success stories have in common is giving customers something they want, and that they have emotional reactions to, as well. And doing that requires thinking beyond the product or service itself and focusing instead on the overall experience.

The secret? **Leveraging cutting-edge technology to meet real needs, in a way that doesn't call attention to that technology but genuinely engages people.**

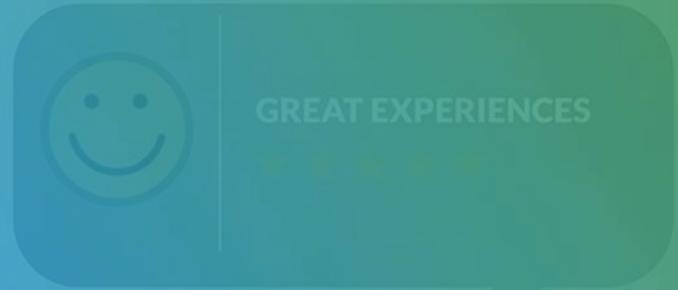
“During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies that lead with empathy and genuinely address customer needs can strengthen relationships,” as a [recent McKinsey report](#) makes clear. It goes on to define seven core areas to address to empathize with customers who may be in difficult situations, from minimizing physical risk to “promoting and guiding the shift to online channels.”

In other words, the more you can guide customers through the process of doing business with you, the better your chances of winning them over. If that sounds simple, consider that companies rarely consider all the opportunities of engagement within the virtual experience itself. Because physical interaction has all but vanished from day-to-day business, offering actual engagement is critical — after all, the human instinct to talk through a major purchase with a sales rep hasn't gone anywhere.



LESSON #4:

FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT



“During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies that lead with empathy and genuinely address customer needs can strengthen relationships.”

To this end, the experienced use of instant communications technologies like SMS messaging, live chat and even tweeting can offer a valuable engagement tool. The idea is to **bring the most beneficial elements of the in-store customer experience to the digital arena** to improve the process for the customer (and, ultimately, their satisfaction, too).

“Take, for example, social commerce, which not only enables companies to sell through social media channels but also incorporates social interactions; peer support, reviews, and recommendations; multimedia content; personalization; gamification; and more,” writes Yohn.



“A retailer can use these new capabilities to create a social, interactive, immersive experience wherever customers are — that’s something no physical outlet can provide.”

LESSON #5:

COMBINE EXCLUSIVITY AND PERSONALIZATION

Exclusive sales or promotions available only to an elite few — those who have joined a rewards club or signed up for a mailing list — have long been effective methods for in-store retailing. And during a time when customers are more willing than ever to switch brands for more convenience or a better deal, they could very well make the difference in how well you weather the crisis.

Exclusive sales, bonus bucks, elite traveler status — the form will vary depending on the industry and type of customer. Linked closely with these exclusive offers is personalization, or developing and documenting unique relationships with each customer, and then giving that relationship real value. A holdover from the traditional, in-store customer experience where clerks may know customers by name, and even anticipate their needs, personalization cultivates brand loyalty and satisfaction via ease of use.

The sudden shift to near-total virtual commerce provides the chance to expand personalization in entirely new directions. **By exploring alternate areas of customer touchpoints that you may not be used to — like social media or list-based email marketing — you not only increase touchpoints but expand your personal relationship with each customer.**

Keeping track of that relationship will impress. Even better, offering incentives for them to expand that relationships will increase their engagement to you and drive satisfaction and word-of-mouth referrals — incentives that are built-into the exclusive rewards programs that double as engagement tools.



Underlying this advanced personalization are advanced analytics. With the almost limitless capacity to track, compile and analyze every interaction, the integration of advanced analytical systems can provide valuable insight on how and when to reach customers for maximum impact – from the perfect time of day to send an email, to the best time to announce your flash sale on Instagram for maximum impact.

“Investing in some of the unique capabilities of digital – including real-time inventory management, predictive analytics, AI-powered search, and personalization and co-creation functions – can create completely new and different shopping experiences,” as Yohn points out. This includes “apps that track usage of current products to make recommendations for new ones.”

But the use of analytics offers more than the power to personalize consumer content. It also improves operational efficiencies by providing the data to more effectively schedule agents’ shifts, anticipate times of increased utilization and track metrics with the goal of making improvements. A dedicated contact center partner includes analytics at every step of the customer experience to ensure ongoing improvements and ease of feedback.

With a virtual, 24/7 customer service plan, you can carry the potential of analytics to its logical conclusion, giving customers the chance to reach you at any time. And with AI, you can offer automated answers to common questions to give consumers quick answers to easy questions, improving the general efficiency of the entire system, as well as saving the use of live agents for moments when they’re actually needed.

LESSON #6:

LEVERAGE DATA, ANALYTICS AND AI



LESSON #7:

DON'T SKIMP ON INFRASTRUCTURE

“Customers expect technology to always work and often don’t take notice of it (unless it’s malfunctioning).”

In the old days, successful retailers of all sizes were those that would never accept substandard lighting, plumbing or heating in their stores. Similarly, online-focused sellers shouldn’t expect much success if their digital infrastructure doesn’t support an equally comfortable customer experience. A sluggish load time, a difficult-to-understand storefront, website security concerns — these are all valid reasons for customers to jump ship and head to a competitor’s website or app.

[According to PricewaterhouseCoopers](#), this means making sure the nuts and bolts are secure and optimized before investing in the more cutting-edge, “wow”-factor tech: **“Customers expect technology to always work and often don’t take notice of it (unless it’s malfunctioning). They want the design of websites and mobile apps to be elegant and user-friendly; they want automation to ease experience. But these advances don’t matter much if speed, convenience and the right information are lacking.”**

So, every aspect of your customer experience should reflect high-quality hardware and software, from your live-chat platform to the servers housing your website and ecommerce data. Here again, partnering with a dedicated customer experience provider can help ensure that every aspect of your infrastructure is up to the task — updated, fully secure and ready to go.



About Working Solutions:

Based in Dallas, Texas, Working Solutions is a recognized leader in on-demand, onshore contact center outsourcing. Think virtual call centers, freed of bricks and mortar. Founded in 1996, the private, woman-owned company draws on a network of 150,000+ home-based contractors across the United States and Canada to provide best-in-class contact center services. Its remote workforce model enables businesses to deliver customer care in a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

