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Industry Viewpoint: Forget the new normal — play offense

By

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As the COVID-19 pandemic heads into its third quarter, it can be tempting to continue working in hunkered-down mode. Instead, we encourage you to get back on track with offense — with some caveats. Your business, and your team, will benefit for it.

We know these past months have been... well, let's just call it like we see it: crazy. You've either been sprinting to meet retail demand to feed consumers eating most of their meals and snacks at home — or like foodservice, your business has slowed to a stroll at best.

Whatever your reality, we have all understandably been jogging in place, in defense mode. It took us time to learn to operate in a pandemic: home offices for non-essential personnel, PPE and social distancing protocols for essential workers, transitioning to virtual gatherings — no face-to-face meetings with customers or trade shows to catch up with industry colleagues.

Since it will be a while before we all can get vaccinated, rather than continuing to jog in place — and losing ground in the process — it is time to release at least part of our brains to think about starting the race forward.

First, check your vitals

About those caveats: First, check a couple of key vitals before you proceed.

Internally, continue to take care of employees. They are your best asset in normal times — more so now. Make sure you attend adequately to their safety and health. That includes PPE and PMH: personal mental health.

Thank employees for their extra effort with gift certificates, time off, a hand-written note. Help your harvest guest workers by grocery shopping, or bringing entertainment to them. Help parents facing the added stress of caring for and schooling children at home.

Externally, keep channels open to your customers and consumers. Show customers how you're responding and adapting to safely meet their new needs, to remind them why they should buy from you.

We forget how idyllic our fields and orchards are; we can help our consumers de-stress with short videos or photos from our beautiful worlds.

On the upside, communications can inform, influence and inspire. Conversely, a communications void can work against us. We should communicate now more than ever.

Finally, update your crisis management plan to capture the experiences and learnings from the past six months.

Some of us can't move out of defense just yet, for various reasons, and that's okay. Watch for that moment when you can take a breath; that's when you can divert some company brainpower to what's next.

Now, plan the course ahead

To get ready to lace on your running shoes again, take a minute to revisit your strategic plan and update your supporting communications strategy for COVID-19 times. If you haven't updated your strategic plan in a while, now's the time.

Remember, we are in the marketing business, not just sales. Focus on conveying how you can solve customers' and consumers' problems of the day. For example, a new, larger product pack not only makes restocking retail shelves easier than bulk produce. It also appeals to consumers who are shopping less often yet feeding their families 24/7.

Even if your business is stalled due to COVID-19, you've got options. If you're a fresh-cut processor, work with your foodservice distributor customers to help them pivot to supplying grocery stores, or selling curbside to consumers. Wherever you are in the supply chain, here's your chance to try out that new vendor.

Here are some guiding questions:

Are you talking to all the target audiences you should be now, internally and externally?

What key messages do they each want/need to hear?

What can your business do to solve today's problems, for existing and new customers?

Do your communications vehicles need tweaking? (Yes, they do.) What tools can you supply to customers to help them pivot? (Hint: Online stores must do a better job with fresh produce listings to sell more goods, we are much more complex than canned soup.)

Caution: The ground under us won't stop shifting for some time. So be watchful, and ready to pivot. Resiliency is the watchword of the day.

You can move on now, even in uncertain times — in fact, in uncertain times, you must. We have enough information to be able to focus at least a year out, perhaps longer.

For example, some things have already changed enough that they won't ever go back to what used to be. Think working remotely, coming together virtually, and shopping online. If you aren't reaching your audiences — internal, and external — through today's new communications platforms, you'll be left behind.

There are many business reasons to shift to offense now, and get back in the race: To maintain or grow your business by gaining a lead on your competitors, and to give your team a goal to rally around. You'll all do — and feel — better for it.

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