



COVID-19

A Human-First Approach as You Recover and Thrive



A typical crisis plays out over **three time frames**: **Respond**, in which a company deals with the present situation and manages continuity; **Recover**, during which a company learns and emerges stronger; and **Thrive**, where the company prepares for and shapes the “next normal.”

1. Respond

As an organization responds to crisis, resilient leaders are defined first by five qualities which distinguish between surviving and thriving amidst crisis. Next, resilient leaders must take specific actions spanning three dimensions and evaluate them within the context of geographic location and sector. Finally, learnings from those experiencing the same crisis conditions should be leveraged to manage the response.

For more information on Respond, please explore [The Heart of Resilient Leadership: Responding to COVID-19](#).

2. Recover

Resilient leaders view recovery as a journey for their organization, teams and stakeholders. There are five imperatives within the Recover phase to guide the business from Respond to Thrive:

1. Understand the required mindset shift;
2. Identify and navigate the uncertainties and implications;
3. Embed trust as the catalyst to recovery;
4. Define the destination and launch the recovery playbook; and
5. Learn from other’s successes.

For more information on Recover, please explore [The Essence of Resilient Leadership: Business Recovery from COVID-19](#).

We have developed supporting material across these priority areas to support leaders as they develop the recovery playbook:

Valuing Trust

Command Centre

Strategy

Workforce

Business Continuity & Financing

Supply Chain

Customer

Technology & Digital

Cyber

M&A

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)

3. Thrive

Preparing for the next normal. Supporting materials to come.

A human-first approach as you recover and thrive

We are all on a global mission to reduce the spread and ultimately eliminate COVID-19. As we do that, though, businesses everywhere also need a steady focus on providing customers, workers, suppliers and partners what they need. Major aspects of our lives are now irreversibly changed, and every business needs to rethink how it will serve newly prioritized needs in ways that help assure safety, demonstrate empathy, and build trust. No company can avoid the imperative to change in reaction to the coronavirus pandemic. Human interaction with customers becomes a higher priority in a world where it is much harder to do.

We see three phases that resilient leaders will likely face amid the COVID-19 outbreak:



Respond

How an organization deals with the present situation and manages continuity



Recover

How an organization learns and emerges stronger



Thrive

How an organization prepares for and shapes the “new normal”



Before you get into this, we hope you've had a chance to look at the [12 items a business should do with its customers to successfully respond to COVID-19](#).



Recover and Thrive Introduction: Getting back to basic human needs

Before Covid-19 spread around the globe, businesses generally didn't have to think too hard about how to serve basic human needs. Everything seemed to work just fine, and businesses invested in offerings to serve more sophisticated human needs versus the basics.

Then, over the course of a few short weeks, lockdowns isolated people in their homes and cut down broad swathes of the economy. What were once basic human needs are now priority human needs. But the problem is that the once-basic needs require a high degree of physical, in-person interaction to deliver. To keep people safe from the virus, businesses need to respond by putting offerings into the marketplace that minimize physical interactions and maximize digital interactions. Done right, these digital offerings for our newly prioritized human needs will replace in-person interactions but still maintain the human touch. It's fair to say that our society has been caught flat-footed, and if the pandemic recurs in waves, business leaders should future-proof themselves now by learning from what we're going through.

The anticipated rise in digital interaction requires companies to re-think their use of digital technologies, and please take a look at our sister article in the series on [COVID-19: Shaping the future through digital business](#).

What may be irreversible is the fear of being in groups. Businesses and their customers overnight had to rethink how to satisfy needs without exposing people to the virus. Once-simple things such as shopping for groceries, getting a prescription filled, or seeing a doctor for routine matters now require higher levels of investment in digitization to keep people safe. What matters most moved from convenience to safety, from cost to simple availability, and from wants to basic needs.

This crisis has suddenly redefined how companies interact with their customers. Every business needs to adapt, change and innovate their practices to remain relevant. There are no exceptions. Businesses that fail to act will likely find it difficult to recover and thrive.



These are times like we have never seen before. Time that require resilient business leaders to change their thinking. As Robert Burns wrote in Scots Wha Hae in relation to a historic battle that occurred over 700 years ago, "Now's the day, and now's the hour." That quote could not be more precise for our current situation: We need to act, and we need to act now. To help you do that we offer five practical steps to achieve a human-first approach as you recover and thrive.

1. Understand your customers deeply
2. Bring empathy and humanity
3. Embrace digital acceleration
4. Be open to collaboration
5. Build for agility and adaptability



1. Understand your customer deeply.

Every business needs to understand what goes on in their customers' lives. That's always been true. But it's suddenly more important than ever to have your finger on the pulse of how rapidly your customers' needs and desires are changing. A deep knowledge of what people have experienced in recent months forms the starting point for strong customer relationships. Everything else follows.

The most important circumstance to understand is how safety has reasserted itself as a basic human need that will color every commercial transaction. Consumers have been giving enormous attention to questions about how they can get groceries, do their banking and see their doctors without putting themselves at risk of contracting a deadly virus. Some may be starting to think about how they could still feel safe while someday traveling again or shopping in a clothing store. Businesses need to be working with these truths as they redesign their customer experience strategy to recover and thrive.

Banks provide a good example. Pre-crisis, many focused their digital channel around convenience and daily transactions such as depositing checks and sending money. Call centers were for service and support. Branches were important as places to provide sales and advice. Such divisions may make less sense when your customers are reticent or fearful about coming into a branch. Sales and advice—and the branch employees' human touch—need to be enabled over video and phone and online chat. The time seems ripe for a rethink leading to an omnichannel approach for banks.



Doctors and patients have had to grapple with how to maintain care during this unprecedented medical crisis, as public health officials strongly urge them to avoid in-person visits to offices, clinics and hospitals. Telemedicine is being widely implemented on the fly. Video links are being used by doctors both to treat COVID-19 patients who are not severe enough to require hospitalization and to see anyone who needs routine care. Insurers and healthcare organizations have been challenged to embrace telemedicine right along with doctors and patients. Hurdles that may have prevented adoption in the past are falling away quickly.

While convenience yields to necessity during a lockdown, telemedicine may be a solution, adopted out of duress, that will create big post-crisis advantages for those

who get it right. Cost and time efficiencies are being demonstrated every day that doctors and patients will likely remember after the pandemic eases. Beyond convenience, telemedicine may become a lasting solution, even after the COVID-19 threat recedes, to those who have long feared contracting an illness in a doctor's office.

Of course, the new priority assigned to safety isn't the only need that businesses must understand about their customers. The isolation of social distancing is shifting how and when human interaction will be most valued as part of a customer experience, for example. The impact of the economic shutdown, and its suddenness, is reshaping how customers approach security and stability. Businesses need to keep up.



Habit forming

The behavior of people across the globe has been dramatically altered by the social distancing measures designed to halt the spread of COVID-19. We are working from home and shopping from home more. We are seeing doctors over video links, and taking business meetings virtually because travel is nearly impossible. We are also growing accustomed to extraordinary measures to keep safe, whether by avoiding crowds, wearing masks, lining up six feet apart outside a grocery store, or simply washing our hands repeatedly.

Some day soon, we won't have to live this way. Things will begin returning to some version of normal. But will people go back to old ways of doing things? The answer seems likely to be no—or not entirely. A person who does things a certain way for a certain period of time forms a habit. A month or two living in a locked down city is more than enough time to create new consumer behaviors—lasting habits. Business will need to react to and understand these habits and build and grow with them clearly in mind.



2. Bring empathy and humanity.

The social distancing required to slow the spread of the coronavirus has refocused our attention toward more basic needs. Prestige and self-actualization become less important when people are locked down at home or worried about how to get to and from an essential job and stay safe at work. The priorities people have as customers of a business have shifted toward family, food, learning, work, and money.

This highlights the need for every customer experience strategy to be grounded in empathy and human needs. It shows why businesses need to sharply focus all customer interactions on building trust.

Straightforward examples of this can be seen every day as we live through the pandemic response. Grocery stores with safer, well-implemented options are winning new customers. A smoothly functioning click-and-collect

system, in which a store employee puts groceries you order and pay for online directly into the trunk of your car, can build trust and loyalty among customers. A store that manages social distancing more rigorously may be seen as the better option, even if people have to line up (six feet apart) to get in.

The burden of proof is on businesses to show customers they will be safe when they interact. The bar for safety gets higher as the customer need that's being served moves farther away from essentials.

The need for empathy and humanity goes further, though. Amid personal loss and economic hardship, people need to know that the businesses they interact with are part of the solution. The insurance industry worldwide is engaged responding to this reality.



In Singapore, the government’s “circuit breaker” measures to slow the spread of the disease mandate that policyholders can defer some premium payments. Insurers have gone further, providing additional coverages to existing customers at no cost. A global insurance company, for example, is providing a S\$200 per day income replacement benefit in case of hospitalization and a S\$20,000 death benefit—and doubling these for front line healthcare workers.

Car insurance companies are giving money back to customers with credits that reduce premiums for a period of time and discounts on renewals. A global automotive insurance company estimates that it’s 15 percent reduction on new policies and renewals will put some \$2.5 billion in customers’ pockets.

These and many similar measures are helping insurers to demonstrate that they understand their customers’ financial hurt. Companies may also be getting ahead of insurance regulators, since they could have a windfall

profits from auto policies that were priced when customers were driving much more. Auto policy claims have fallen significantly in countries around the globe where there are lockdowns, work-from-home orders, and other social distancing requirements.

Data from an Edelman survey conducted in late March in 12 countries show that customers overwhelmingly want the brands and businesses to show how they are protecting employees and helping stop the spread of the disease. There’s strong support for brands that provide support health workers, high risk individuals, and those facing economic hardship. One finding that’s telling: A majority of respondents (54 percent) say they won’t pay attention right now to new products unless they help with pandemic-related life challenges.



3. Embrace digital acceleration.

Most businesses have taken to heart the necessity of digital transformation to stay current and competitive. But now it's suddenly vital for every business to accelerate their effort and boost their urgency. If digital tools are suddenly the only way to reach your customers, the need becomes obvious and existential.

Some businesses have been caught flat-footed with websites that are overwhelmed, call centers that can't keep up and apps that don't do what's needed. A U.K. supermarket chain reported that the volume of phone calls soared as customers tried to figure out how they might shop safely. While the previous peak, on Black Friday, was around 50,000 calls in a day, the company is now getting as many as one million a week—and can't field them all.

In some cases, digital systems that might have been nice-to-have items turned into must-haves when the pandemic arrived. The fast-casual restaurant chain previously streamlined its online ordering system, while still doing most of its business directly with customers in its stores. That digital tool meant that the company was ready when takeout and delivery suddenly became essentially all of its business. It is not inconceivable, by owning the customer relationship and having trust-worthy last mile delivery, that businesses can easily expand into other priority human needs. Why not deliver medical supplies? By contrast, a global sandwich maker, selling a product that would seem to work well for grab-and-go or delivery, had an online ordering system that was merely adequate. Its U.S. stores closed temporarily because of COVID-19.



Efficiency for businesses and convenience for customers typically have been key drivers of digital transformation. Now, both businesses and customers are being motivated by necessity. The digital need might be as simple as a lender that needs to create a new process to close a mortgage entirely online, replacing the conference room meeting to sign documents and swap checks. A renowned global insurer has shut its underwriting floor for the first time in over 300 years. Plans were already in place to modernize, and the crisis has served as a quick way to accelerate the speed of change and move to digital. A seemingly unlikely shift may result in a more efficient and less expensive business process post-crisis. One lesson for resilient leaders is to look for ways that the steps necessary to react to the pandemic can also help position the business to be better prepared to thrive after the crisis wanes.

Right now, around the globe, business-to-business sales operations that have depended on conferences, shows, and face-to-face meetings are determining how to do their work without traveling or gathering in groups. A new priority is for digital tools that can recreate some of the direct human-to-human interaction that's been lost. Virtual highly connected workforce tools will play a role. Heightened use of video will be important, and it will need to be well integrated with other software tools.

Companies everywhere are rethinking their workforce strategies, and if you have time, please take a read of the sister article in the series on [Workforce Strategies for Post-COVID Recovery](#).



4. Be open to collaboration.

With lockdowns and contagion concerns motivating new ways of doing things, some businesses are responding by collaborating with organizations that they would never have considered working with before. This is a matter of business leaders looking past the ways that things have always been done. The ecosystem of partnerships that makes business possible is extensive and varied. Rethinking how it's put together can allow for greater creativity in response to a crisis and, in some cases, an opportunity for differentiation when the crisis ebbs.

In India, the government's lockdown to halt the spread of COVID-19 closed restaurants and left grocery stores overwhelmed, as in many places around the world. In a hyper-local response, grocers have employed delivery staff who had been working for restaurants. In some instances, restaurants have been repurposed to sell groceries, and outdoor yards at shuttered schools have been used as vegetable markets.

Large multinational delivery services were forced to suspend service in India when the lockdown went into effect. They were unable to get the permits they needed to have their delivery trucks and people on the streets. To thrive in the future, taking a cue from the collaborations between restaurants and grocers, larger multinational players may be looking for smaller local partners who can help them create a more resilient last-mile delivery system.



5. Build for agility and adaptability

Successful businesses have long known that being nimble, flexible, and adaptable provides big competitive advantages. The COVID-19 pandemic has simply reinforced that principle. Companies that could pivot quickly to fix holes in their customer model exposed by new social distancing practices have been amply rewarded. Businesses that have adapted quickly have kept lines of communication open with customers and are benefiting enormously with ongoing brand loyalty.

Nimbleness and agility is also needed urgently as the world also rewires its supply chains. You may also want to look at the sister article in the series on [COVID-19 Orchestrating the recovery of organizations and supply chains](#).

Loyalties to a company, brand or product are being swamped by changes in customers' shopping habits and their needs. This means businesses with a fast and flexible response may be finding opportunities that would have been hard to imagine just a few months ago.

The further lesson is that solutions to challenges in the immediate response to the coronavirus crisis should be designed with even greater agility and adaptability in mind. The dramatic changes in customer needs that have already been seen will continue in unpredictable ways as the crisis ebbs. There is also the possibility that an initial easing of social distancing restrictions, and progress in halting the disease, will be followed by a resurgence in infections, perhaps in the fall. The flexibility that's been a boon to some companies up to now may be rewarded again. Smart companies should be designing in flexibility right now.

The solutions that are hatched in response to today's lockdowns and changed consumer circumstances shouldn't be seen as temporary—or permanent. New processes and systems developed based on immediate need should be sustainable. Businesses want to be able to continue them, without draining resources, as long as they are useful. Then, they should changeable in case the ground shifts again.

Conclusion

Creating customer strategies that stick

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, resilient business leaders are those who can listen intently to their customers and understand their needs. They are the ones who grasp the importance of bringing empathy and a human touch to the basic needs newly prioritized by consumers. They are the leaders who embrace the need for an acceleration in their digital transformation—and know the importance of shaping digital tools to replace the human touch that can no longer be delivered in person.

But resilient leaders also must realize that the moves they make today are just the starting point. As we come out of the lockdowns and ease the social distancing measures that have been vital to slow the spread of the virus, the recovery period will be filled with developments that no one can predict. Everything has changed, many aspects of our lives are now irreversible, yes, but there are more surprises to come.

As important as it has been to react fast as COVID-19 has shifted the ground under so many businesses, success in the future will depend on the responses put in place today laying a solid foundation to help your business as life returns to something nearer to normal—the next normal. The solutions to urgent problems that are adopted today need to be creative, with leaders looking outside of existing practices and seeking new methods, strategies and collaborations. For a business environment that keeps changing in unpredictable ways, and could even be subject to new waves of disease, designs must be flexible and adaptable. The goal is to come out of this period with a business strategy that will stick, helping your company and your customers to thrive as you navigate uncertainty and change together.



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