

## Opinions

# Do your customers know you care about them?

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Hotels must do more to build relationships with and engage customers to differentiate and emerge stronger in this new era.



By Karen McSteen

We all know these are really tough times for the hospitality business.

Demand is down as business travel has dramatically dropped. Few organizations—if any—are hosting meetings, and many people are simply staying home. Leisure travel is slowly coming back, but while there is pent-up energy to travel, people remain uncertain and hesitant.

Brands have attempted to woo travelers by touting and even branding cleaning protocols, trying to assure people that they will be safe at their hotels. Sanitization and safety practices are important, but not a differentiator. They are an expectation. To differentiate and emerge stronger in this new era, hotels must do more to build relationships with and engage customers.

### Connections matter

Customers form strong emotional connections with your company based on their experiences with your brand, whether through their inboxes or in person—and those emotions strongly influence their near-term and longer-term buying decisions.

Think about the types of messages you are putting in people's inboxes or on social media. Are they purely promotional or are they helping to create a deeper connection? Do they demonstrate you care? Even guests who are not staying at your hotel right now are watching what your brand is doing.

Amid the crisis, now is an important time to show customers through your actions that you truly care about them. Use this time to enhance relationships, build trust and, most of all, show empathy. A recent study [conducted by Ipsos for PepsiCo](#) found that 86% of respondents agreed that it is “critical” for brands to show empathy now if they want to grow loyalty, because the actions a brand takes today will influence how customers engage with those brands in the future.

What kinds of messages will demonstrate empathy and engage customers? The survey found that 86% said it's important for brands to help lift spirits, 74% said it's important for brands to create a moment of escapism and 73% said it's important for brands to offer an outlet for entertainment. These are all sentiments every hotel can communicate and deliver to current and prospective guests.

### Reinforce your brand story while building emotional connections

Using the unique positioning of your hotel, share your brand's story through the lens of empathy. Lift spirits, offer moments of escapism and entertain guests who have been stuck at home for months. These actions reflect the essence of your brand, and also show you care. Here are some thought-starters to help reinforce your brand story in this new environment.

#### *Lift someone's spirits*

If your brand promise is centered around friendliness, reduce the new strangeness and awkwardness that guests might be experiencing during their stay. The hotel experience has changed. Employees are wearing masks, and there's a plastic shield at the front desk. Some hotels have tried to humanize the experience by having employees wear a photo button of themselves smiling so guests can see what they look like without a mask.

Perhaps you can take it one step further and ask your guest to snap a selfie without their mask and have your staff make it into a button for the guest to wear. This move demonstrates empathy by acknowledging the awkward experience, and it offers an opportunity for conversation and engagement.

#### *Provide moments of escapism*

If your brand is about exploration and discovery, open up your world and ask customers to do the same. People are tired of being in their same surroundings



for months. Could you offer them a different view? While your hotel may not have a beautiful ocean or cool city view, perhaps there's a special view or interesting architectural feature that's unique to your location. You could share your hotel's vista and invite people to share what they see from their home. You can then create a montage or an inspirational online wall of these scenes creating a sense of belonging and community. You open your doors to them; they open their doors to you.

Expand the view from your hotel by showing what's in your neighborhood. Identify some local businesses that showcase the spirit of your region and consider featuring their unique offerings in your communications. A memento or a piece of art may trigger a fond memory or give people something to look forward to. Promoting local businesses addresses another key finding from the PepsiCo study: One of the most valued forms of empathy is to support struggling businesses.

#### *Offer an outlet for entertainment*

If your brand is about giving people quality time together, there are many ways to achieve this from afar. You could have your chef share his or her secret recipe for a special drink or dish the family could whip up together. Share a one-minute video on social media each week and encourage guests to post pics of their results or tell you what they liked best about the recipe.

Let's not forget about the couples who are finally ready to venture out for a getaway. This may be a time to rethink the rules. For instance, to make the most of their time, consider offering free early check-in so they can enjoy a full day at your property, rather than making them wait until 4 p.m. To ensure social distancing, offer guaranteed seating at your outdoor restaurant rather than first come, first served. People traveling may be spending more time in the room. Maybe offer a free movie rental with snacks to enrich the experience and show you understand how much they need this away time together. If there was ever a time to rewrite the rules, it's now.

What ideas do you have?

While the past several months has been tough, people have learned that the little things matter more than ever. They matter to your customers and they should matter to your brand. Seize this new opportunity to demonstrate who you are and what your business cares about. Show customers that they are at the top of that list.

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