

# 5 OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

By Matt Johnson

Anyone who has experienced their office job shift to a remote position or watched their children sit on the computer for hours of Zoom classes knows that connectivity and technology have become more ingrained in our daily lives than they were even a year ago. As a byproduct of official lockdowns, calls to quarantine and general safety concerns, people are spending more time online. In April 2020, 53% of American adults said the internet had been “essential” to them throughout the pandemic.

As many core businesses are adapting their models to keep pace with this new economic landscape, consumers have likewise had to adopt a new virtual-first mindset.

As a result, customer engagement is evolving to center around a largely digital marketplace. Businesses are investing in new forms of innovative product digitization to break into new markets or remain viable in old ones. For example, many

restaurants have moved to a system of online ordering for curbside pickup or delivery to keep their doors open. Doctors are using telehealth, and hospitals have established field units to treat patients. Supermarkets have enacted distancing protocols to keep shoppers safe. Schools have switched to virtual or hybrid models. Service center agents manage customer experience from home.

Even beyond the pandemic, most experts agree that the trend toward digitization is here to stay. This evolution brings with it a number of real challenges for businesses and individuals but also new opportunities. As many core businesses continue to adapt their models to keep pace with this new economic landscape, consumers are likewise adopting a new virtual-first mindset.

Take this self-assessment to see where your organization ranks on the customer relationship management (CRM) maturity model.

[Begin the assessment.](#)

On the whole, consumers are open to the idea of digital interactions, and the most advanced organizations are using this momentum to better understand their customers, bolster brand loyalty and optimize engagement. Businesses should take advantage of five key opportunities to strengthen their virtual customer relationships.

- 1. Maintain lines of communication with customers.** While efforts should be strategic, coordinated and consumer-centric, this is not the time to back off on outreach.

[Use customer insights along each stage of their journey](#) to drive decisions about how, when and where to engage with target audiences. This data will be a critical input for leaders as they design and execute an omnichannel customer experience strategy.

- 2. Create a sense of community.** Still, it is not enough to simply pepper customers with constant emails and social media posts. Most companies have upped the ante on their customer outreach as global consumers have increased their time spent online. To cut through the noise, interactions should feel meaningful, customized and familiar to customers looking for a sense of community in a virtual world that can feel cold and isolating.
- 3. Use data to get to know customers better.** By integrating and cleansing enterprise data, businesses can deliver insights that enable organizational agility in the face of constant change. For years, businesses have pursued a [360-degree view of their customers](#), but if achieved at all, it was often limited to data collected by marketing or sales and housed in the organization's customer relationship management (CRM) system. By integrating more data sources (not just those that are directly customer-facing) across enterprise functions, companies will be better equipped to meet the needs of today's customer and also anticipate the demands of the future.
- 4. Build or enhance digital trust.** Building digital trust with consumers is a critical differentiator for businesses operating in a virtual world. According to a 2019 survey, more than half of [consumers said they may hesitate to use a product](#) or service if the company is perceived to be lax on privacy. The time is ripe for businesses to start repairing lost trust with their customer bases.
- 5. Modernize and integrate legacy systems.** Today's consumers expect seamless experiences. Businesses still leveraging outmoded or siloed technologies are destined to fall behind. Leaders in this space are [reinventing customer experience](#)

by investing in state-of-the-art tools that enable meaningful interactions and insights that attract and delight both internal and external customers.

Consumer expectations are redefining benchmarks for success across industries. Understanding what customers need and how they behave gives businesses a competitive edge beyond the disruption of the current moment. Businesses that take advantage of consumers' increasing appetite for exceptional digital experiences by focusing on these five consumer-centric growth strategies will attract new customers and foster loyalty among key demographics.

### Key Takeaways

To strengthen customer relationships in a largely digital marketplace, leaders should:

#### Think differently.

Reframe organizational approaches to customer engagement for a modern audience.

#### Plan differently.

Integrate and upgrade technology to provide more customer-focused data.

#### Act differently.

Leverage comprehensive enterprise data to inform consumer-centric growth strategies.



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