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What I've Learned (so far) from Covid-19

WANDA KENTON SMITH · 21 HOURS AGO

Who among us could have imagined a pandemic of such epic proportions? Our world, our livelihoods and virtually everything about the way we do business was sucker punched so hard that we went reeling into the discomfoting isolation of a new reality. Our industry, like all others, had to figure out a survival strategy, and fast.

As a veteran marine marketer of more than 35 years, my thoughts turned to other formidable challenges we've sustained. Remember the crippling effect of the 10 percent federal luxury tax levied in the early 1990s? It devastated an already weakened economy and sunk sales of vessels priced more than \$100,000, resulting in the loss of an estimated 19,000 marine manufacturing jobs.

And who could forget the reign of terror and the economic bomb that exploded on the heels of 9/11? More recently, many will recall the Great Recession, which permanently sank scores of marine dealerships and related businesses. We find ourselves here again, in turbulent seas. These are the five top takeaways I've learned so far during the pandemic.

Have a Contingency Plan

Take the time to think through and develop written strategies, protocols and procedures to handle future upheavals. Many of us felt flat-footed and woefully unprepared for this pandemic. The need to have a contingency plan is a lesson we now have all learned.

Embrace Technology

Many of my colleagues struggled to stay afloat with new homebound epicenters and the challenge of mastering remote technology. Many had to learn how to use Zoom or Microsoft Teams (and myriad other online apps and tools), while updating websites, sending e-blasts and juggling social media platforms.

If this recent experience uncovered a crack in your tech-knowledge base, commit now to invest in professional development. Identify the roles and IT responsibilities of team members, along with any outside vendors and resources. Be able to get online again fast if a social-distancing situation repeats itself.

Communicate more than Ever

Internal and external customer communication and engagement is always vital, but even more so during a crisis. Marine retailers have been engaging with customers, selling boats, signing boat club memberships and providing myriad services. Smart marketers reached out to customers who were hunkered down in their homes. They stimulated conversation and created compelling reasons for customers to connect. As an observer and active marketer, I was impressed to witness dozens of marine organizations launching virtual boat shows and video product tours.

And internally, an important lesson is to encourage and help direct C-Suite communications with all levels of the organization. The team needs to hear from its leaders and understand what is happening. Being included in the internal communications loop makes people feel valued. Failure of leadership to communicate frequently during a crisis can have disastrous long-term effects.

Define your Contribution

Marketing leaders must take charge of promoting and proving marketing value, a strategy that becomes even more paramount when things go south. Old-school leaders fail to recognize marketers as the driver of sales activity and as major contributors to the bottom line. This tremendous disconnect is why marketers are often first on the chopping block when companies downsize.

The time for marketers to prove their worth is not in a pandemic, or when the bosses gather behind closed doors to review labor and budget reductions. You must continually educate and validate how your marketing campaigns and activities directly affect sales. Produce and regularly review reports with decision-makers to quantify marketing contributions. Consider all the measurable analytics available, and develop reports on every marketing activity and campaign you deliver.

Continuously Innovate

When times are desperate, some organizations freeze, while others innovate. How did your team respond to covid-19? Our marketing team helped clients innovate. Emerald Coast Marine is an example.

Emerald Coast has three locations in the Florida Panhandle and Alabama. We conceived, developed and launched a branded virtual boat show in two weeks, and hosted it on the premier position of our website home page. We worked with sales team members from every location, producing and editing more than 50 new-product videos. We rotated videos on our virtual show, on multiple social media platforms and in some paid digital ad campaigns. Our website traffic spiked, we generated scores of new leads, and we converted sales.

We produced and distributed a series of upbeat e-blasts and newsletters. We created dozens of social media memes that we posted daily, along with dealership news updates, new boat owner spotlights, feel-good boating imagery and videos, photo contests, product profiles and videos, and departmental specials. The mix and frequency of our social activities generated record views and shares. As restrictions eased, we pumped up real-time fishing and family boating images and stories.

The dealership moved inventory, kept its service department busy, signed a record number of new boat club members, solicited consignment and brokerage listings, and launched boats at the marina daily, all while keeping every team member employed. And the marketing team developed a post-pandemic plan so we're ready to throttle forward when the time is right.

If there is one sobering lesson that we have all learned during the pandemic — and other difficult times — it is that even the best businesses can take on water in an instant. We must be prepared to bail and keep sailing, no matter what the next storm brings.

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