

# Managing Customer Uncertainty

By Kennette Reed

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## A Month That Will Live In Infamy

This year, we saw the best, and worst, of mankind. September was a month of experiencing the full range of human emotions. Nothing could have prepared us for the emotional and visual experiences of September 2001. The tragic events of the month, included the continuing search for thousands of missing citizens, massive airline layoffs, reduced flight schedules, stock market instability, commencement of a war on foreign soil, chemical contamination/inhalation, and the fear of additional terrorist attacks. Yet we had to continue on.

Many people have said we should work towards returning to our "normal" lives. How can anything feel normal? In a word, there is a great deal of "Uncertainty". We all feel it. And most importantly, our customers feel it. Now, more than ever, we need to reach out and touch our customers.

We all need signs of reassurance. We're anxiously awaiting (or dreading) the next announcement, press conference or special report. And most of all, we're all awaiting the next glimmer of hope. In all of this negativity, we are continually looking for the positive images, news and life experiences. This is where all of you come in.

## How You Can Help Your Customers?

Be the bearer of good news. Contact every customer, and share your good news. Ask if they and their loved ones are safe and healthy. Assure them that despite the economic slowdown, your company is working to serve them better. Ask if there are any ways in which you can better serve them. What other products or services would they like to see offered by your company?

During these uncertain times, you can strengthen your Customer Connections. Don't wait for a sign from the stock market, the president, or your competition. We all need to reach out and touch our customers NOW!

## 3 Steps You Can Take Today

### 1. Communicate

- Let customers know your company is solid, and prepared to serve them.
- If you've had recent successes, share them with customers.

- Tell customers about new products or service offerings.
- Are you offering discounts or special products to stimulate business? Do a special mailing to announce this change.
- Have you added additional staff to serve your customers? Announce that you now can offer faster, more efficient service.
- Start a newsletter to keep customers updated about what's going on at your company. There are many ways in which you can encourage customers to consider your company's products or services. It won't always be easy, but communication and persistence are the keys.

## 2. Ask What You Can Do For Them

As I stated above, ask questions. Do a mini survey. Find out exactly what your customers want, need, are considering, and what they anticipate their purchasing patterns will be for the next few months.

Though most people will be uncertain (until they have a better idea of what our long-term military actions will be), they will provide some indications of what you should plan for. Your best gauge is your customer's responses.

Some customers may have already decided to cut spending, and go into a holding pattern. This could result in order/service agreement cancellations. If you receive cancellation calls, here are a few things you can do:

- Show empathy for the customer's situation.
- If they want to cancel orders, offer to divide receipt of the order into portions. Rather than taking 100 pieces at once, offer them the option of taking 50 now, and 50 in thirty days. Or 25 now, and increments of 25 over the next three months.
- If the contract is for weekly service, offer to service every two weeks instead. If this is still too much, offer a mini service every two weeks, and a major service once a month.
- If debt repayment is an issue, offer more flexibility with the repayment. Find ways to get the debt paid, but maybe it will require an extension of the repayment period. In the coming months, it is anticipated that bankruptcies may be at an all-time high.

It is better to be financially flexible with your customers now, and get a little less of something. Otherwise, if they cannot make it through till better times, you may get only a fraction of what they owe.

## 3. Show Appreciation

I can't stress this enough. Your customers are your business. Without them, there is no business. They pay for all that is, and comes from your business. Treat them like gold. Cherish them. Show them they are appreciated, and important to you and your staff. Little things mean a lot. Especially now.

Try these tokens of appreciation:

- Send a letter to your best customers. Thank them for their business, and include a coupon for a free item or service.
- Send a gift, and include a note card expressing your appreciation for their business.
- Take a customer to lunch, or if they are an out of area customer, send them a gift certificate for a free lunch.
- If you are a landscaper or interiorscaper, replant a flower bed or give them a color bowl, at no charge. Be sure to include a "Thank you" note.

### Reach Out And Touch Someone, Today

Whatever you do, do it expeditiously. Start talking to your customers today. Phone, drop by, send a card, or an email. Be the bearer of good news and tidings. Give them (and yourself) a reason to smile.

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