

B2B

CX SESSIONS

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Managing relationships in
a post COVID-19 world





In July 2020, with several months of the COVID-19 pandemic behind us, Ipsos' teams in the UK, Australia and New Zealand convened a roundtable with a cross-industry group of business-to-business CX executives. We debated, shared reflections and our experiences of the CX challenges COVID-19 has raised, what it's meant for managing customer relationships and the implications for Voice of the Customer programmes.

Special thanks to our roundtable participants for sharing their perspectives, CX executives from: Euler Hermes, a credit insurance company and subsidiary of Allianz; Sibelco, a material solutions company; and Lion, a beverage and food company.

THREE THREE THREE VALUABLE LESSONS

The massive economic shock delivered by the global pandemic is, hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime event. It has raised huge issues for B2B organisations in managing customer relationships, issues that are likely to continue in the recessionary economic climate triggered by COVID-19. Reflecting on recent events and the challenges they have raised, the roundtable discussion surfaced three universally applicable lessons for managing B2B customer experience:

1

In a crisis, there is an opportunity to strengthen relationships with customers, but speed to market is important to take advantage of this;

2

What you say to customers matters just as much as what you do – and communication messages must evolve as the situation does;

3

It is essential to root your response in a deep understanding of what matters to customers, both practically and emotionally – and this will mean working Voice of the Customer programmes harder to deliver the insights your business needs.

The Forces of CX

A structure for our discussion

To guide the conversation, we used the Ipsos Forces of CX: a human-centric framework comprising of six key ingredients (or Forces) that distil the essence of emotional attachment on relational strength – and ultimately positive business performance.

Because the framework is human-centric it is equally applicable in B2B and B2C environments and it can help understand changes in behaviour resulting from COVID-19, and subsequently design and deliver better customer experiences. The Forces are:



Fair Treatment

Make customers feel that there is a fair exchange in their relationship with you



Certainty

Make customers feel that things are clear, transparent and working as expected



Control

Help customers feel in control of the situation and in the driving seat.



Status

Make customers feel valued, respected and worthy of special treatment



Belonging

Help customers feel a sense of belonging and show you care about the greater good



Enjoyment

Make customers' lives easier, so they feel a sense of freedom



For more information and to download the full research paper, go to:
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/forces-customer-experience>

Four discussion themes

The discussion content can broadly be grouped into four themes which are explored in more detail overleaf



A complex, evolving CX challenge

“We are running two different races at the same time”

What has made the pandemic particularly challenging is its multifaceted nature. COVID-19 has been a major public health issue that rapidly led to significant changes in working patterns, consumer behaviour and corporate spending. Many B2B customers have seen their markets effectively closed, their cashflow cut and their future thrown into doubt. Even those businesses that have continued working have had to change how they operate, in order to protect the health of their employees. As a result, they have demanded a lot of their suppliers, and responses will need to evolve over time.

Just as much as consumers and citizens, business have been affected by uncertainty about their future. There has been a sense that things that they used to take for granted are not fully in their control and, at times, a feeling that they are on their own.

This sense of uncertainty and lack of control is no surprise from a customer experience perspective. Recent Ipsos work based on insights from behavioural science and our own R&D has crystallised six Forces that underpin strong customer relationships – Control, Certainty, Fair Treatment, Status, Belonging and Enjoyment. Each of these Forces has been challenged in a significant way by the pandemic.

1

A rapid response with practical help is key to strengthening relationships

2

“Speed to market is key now – customers can’t wait two or three weeks for our processes, they need our support fast”

We have seen a multitude of ‘emergency’ responses being rolled out by B2B organisations to their customers. These have included changes to commercial or credit terms to support cash-strapped businesses, ramping up the information available to reassure customers around their supply-chain and changes to product/service packages to provide additional tools to continue operating in the new environment.

Many of these responses have been rooted in an understanding of what business customers need to keep operating. B2B sales and customer service teams have played a key role in this as the people who are interacting with customers daily and are hearing first-hand about their challenges.

However, the responses shouldn’t be seen purely in functional terms, important though those are. Much of the support has also been about giving a sense of certainty (‘Now I know what is happening in my supply/distribution network’) and helping customers regain at least some measure of control (‘Now I have the tools to enable my employees to work remotely’).

Getting the communications right is crucial to emotional engagement

3

“We are trying to be on their side, but the ‘second tone’ of our conversations is about the economic realities”

The communications aspect of the response has been as important as the practical support. We have heard of sales teams being refocused on customer communication – providing reassurance, empathising, addressing technical problems and helping customers find creative ways of dealing with problems. Where the financial pain has been shared by suppliers – especially those that are typically larger than their customers – this will have fostered a sense of Fair Treatment. Some responses will have also reinforced a feeling of Belonging – both supplier and

customer are part of the same industry and have a mutual interest in surviving tough times.

It seems likely that the communications will become more challenging as we move out of the lockdown phase. Some of the initial emergency support provided to customers is likely to be temporary as it is not commercially viable over the longer term. Withdrawing it without damaging relationships and undoing the goodwill built up in recent months will not be easy. Some organisations are already providing more training for employees on how to maintain empathy while communicating difficult messages to customers.

CX teams will be working their Voice of Customer programmes harder

4

“How we can reassure and strengthen the bonds with our most valuable customers”

Customer experience teams will have a critical role in helping their businesses navigate the pandemic and its aftermath. While our roundtable participants told us that CX is fully embedded in the language and mindset of the boardroom, there is the challenge of balancing the short-term crisis against longer term plans.

Because of this, they are already seeing new demands on their Voice of the Customer programmes. While satisfaction/Net Promoter trends and efforts to identify areas of potential differentiation will remain important, in the

short term there will be much more emphasis on providing detailed and actionable feedback on the specific processes and interactions that are most crucial to customers in the post-COVID, recessionary environment. Not surprisingly, the economic downturn is also expected to sharpen the focus on the Return on Customer Experience Investment (ROCXI) as budgets come under scrutiny.

The Forces of CX will be important across all this work. Organisations can use this framework to think about how they build strong relationships and ensure their customers feel they have suppliers who are committed to supporting them through uncertain times.



Listening:

To learn more about what makes for a great B2B relationship, and to get some advice on best practice B2B CX measurement and management, listen to episode 12 of our Ipsos Customer Perspective podcast:

<https://www.ipsos.com/en/customer-perspective-ipsos-podcast>

Further reading:

Find out more about Customer Experience latest thinking here:

<https://www.ipsos.com/en/knowledge/customer-experience>

About B2B CX Sessions

A series of roundtable discussions with CX practitioners and experts who work in B2B. We're an inclusive group who debate the key issues facing customer experience in a B2B context. Findings, insights and new best practices are shared with peers across our community with a view to improving the maturity and capability of CX in B2B.

If you have a topic suggestion, would like to get involved in a session roundtable or would like to contribute in any way, please contact helen.wilson@ipsos.com