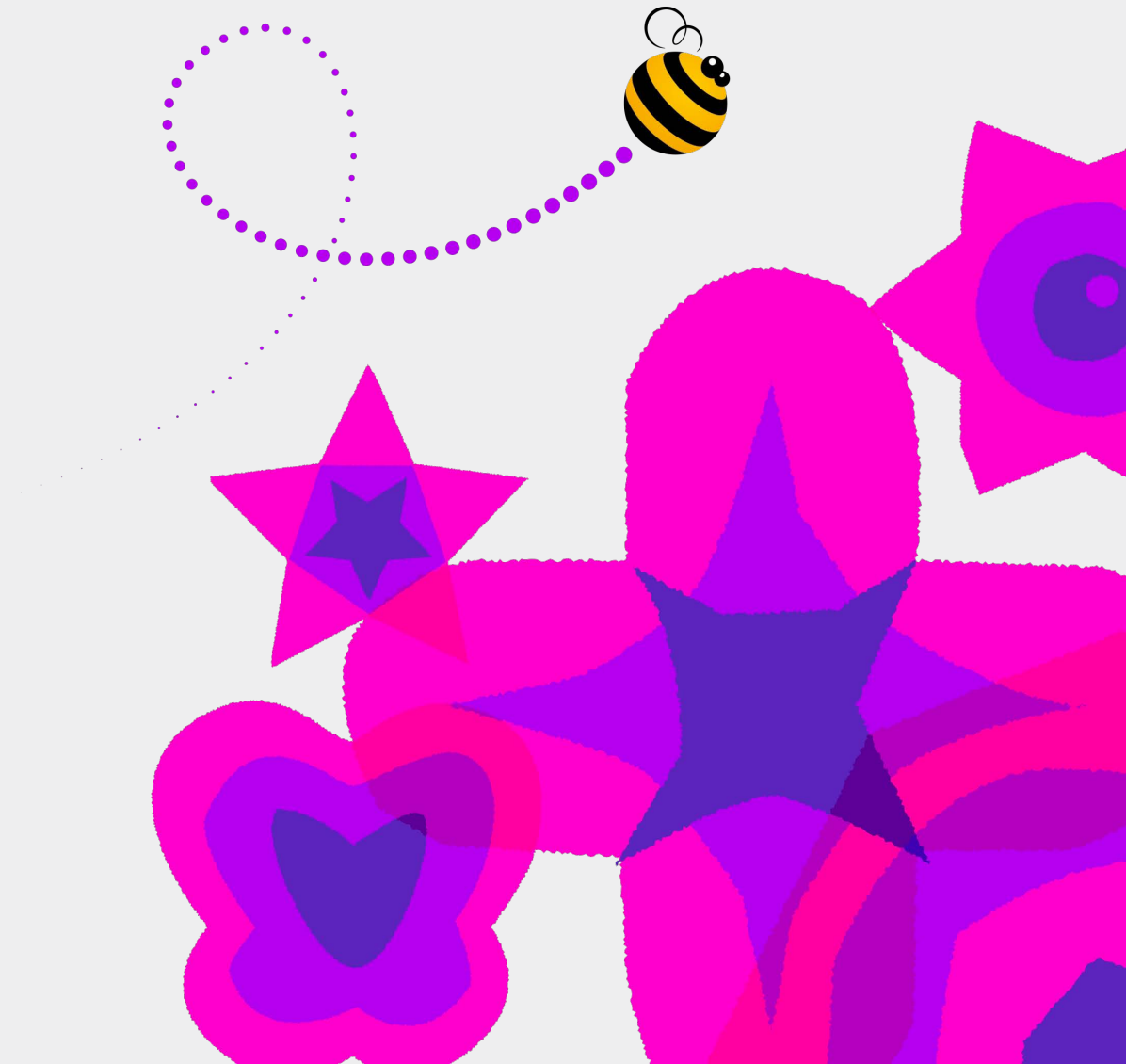


CX as unusual –

10 considerations for Customer Experience
in the time of Coronavirus

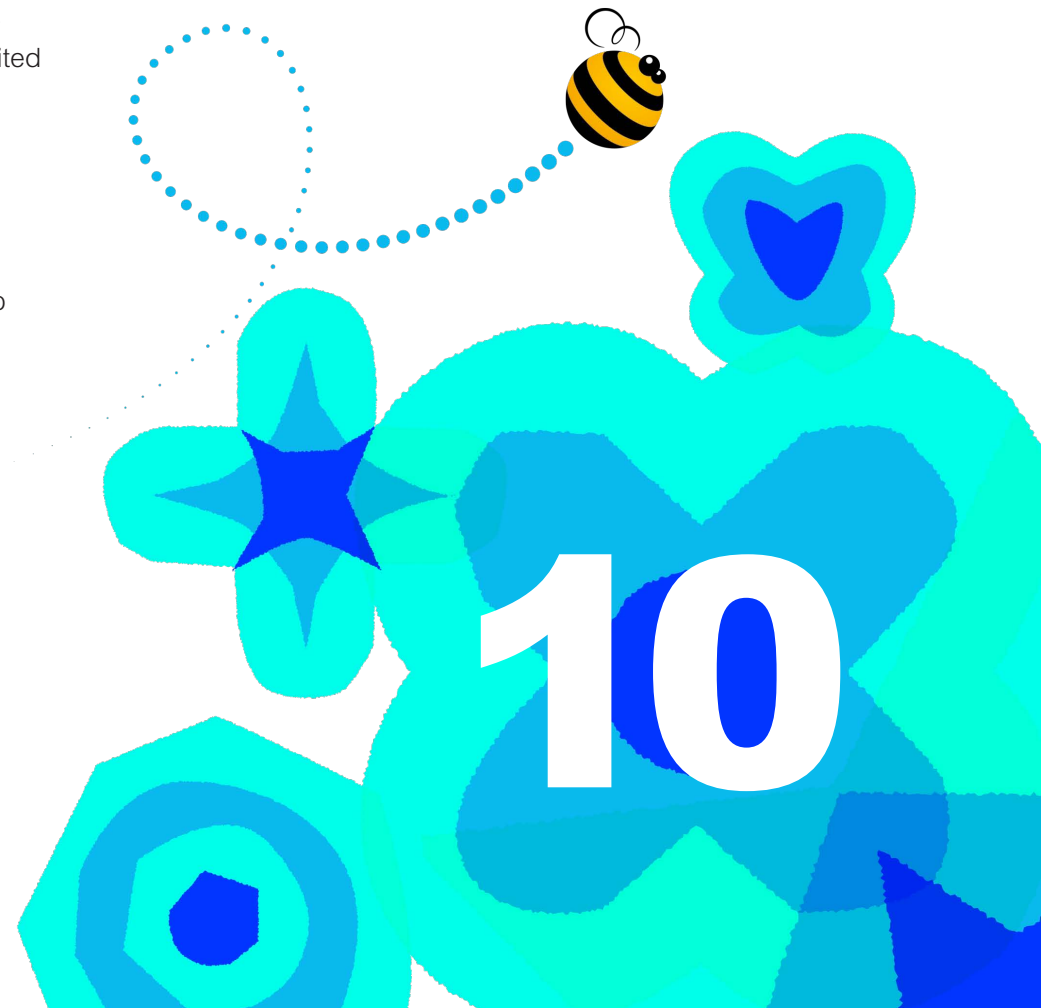


According to Winston Churchill a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty. Covid19 however is testing even the most naturally sanguine of us. There is much talk of the new normal but the likelihood is that we won't see any sort of real 'normality' for a while now. Margaret Heffernan's latest book *Uncharted : How to Map the Future* is serendipitously topical with its references to pandemics. She talks about our collective addiction to prediction and certainty about the future. But even before Covid19, our ability to look much more than a year ahead was limited and now, our vistas today seem to be a matter of weeks, or at best months. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, it is vital not to be passive – fresh thinking is required. Thinking that is relevant, urgent and topical and reflects the times that we find ourselves in.

With this in mind, we offer 10 thought starters that we hope will spark some of your own thinking as you plan your own customer experience in these times. You may be up and running already. Or you may be looking after customers as you wait for your operations to return fully. Whether you are at 'full service' or not, your customers are still thinking about you, considering whether to continue to do business with you.

- > So, what does customer experience in a Covid world actually look like?
- > What should organisations across the world be considering as they start to move out of lockdown?
- > What consumer trends are we seeing?
- > What actions can businesses start to take in order to deliver a relevant experience for today's consumers?

Read on for some potential answers.



1.

Live your purpose

2.

Put your people first

3.

Look after those less fortunate

4.

Pause, listen and think

5.

Think digital, act human

6.

Build trust through authenticity

7.

Make high touch, low touch

8.

Give back control

9.

Be emotionally intelligent

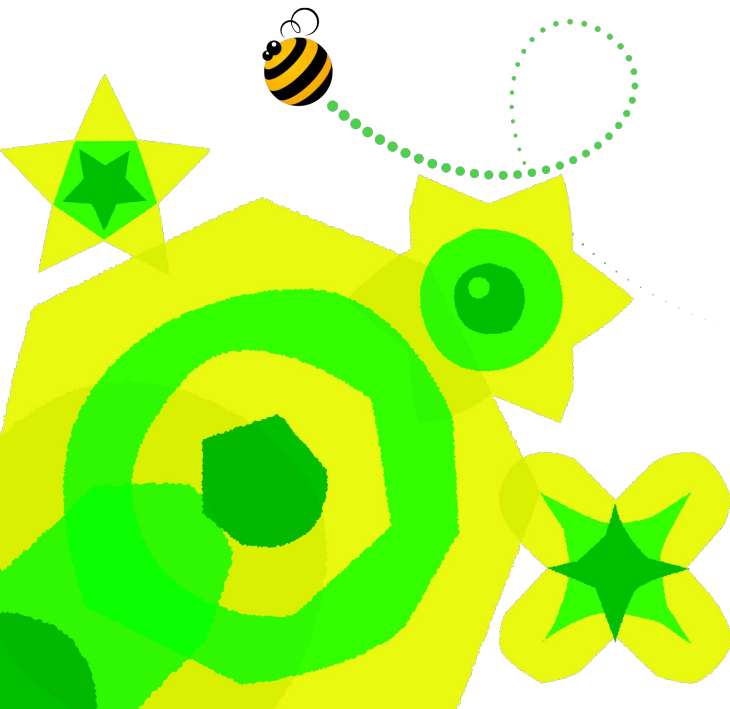
10.

Become a healthcare business



1.

Live your purpose



Many businesses over recent years have devoted a lot of time and energy to defining their 'why' – their purpose. A rallying cry to engage its employees and differentiate them from their competitors. Covid19 has shone a bright light on these purposes. Within days, the public lost tolerance for organisations whose actions were misaligned with their stated purpose. Suddenly the retail brand that had been shouting about 'radical transparency' started to run foul of its unions; the airline whose group mission was 'changing business for good' was lambasted for telling staff to take 8 weeks of unpaid leave. These mis-steps are not insurmountable and some say might even ultimately be forgettable. But is it worth the risk? We will be emerging into a far more competitive world than we had previously seen. Consumers will be able to decide whether to give their business to brands who appeared to act with integrity throughout the crisis rather than those who fell at the first hurdle. This is borne out by recent research from Porter Novelli which says that 70% of US consumers say they will stop purchasing products from companies they perceived to be irresponsible during this pandemic.

Bottom line – consumers won't accept perceived hypocrisy.



There are plenty of examples of smaller organisations taking a similar stance with employees including Timpson the shoe repair retailer in the UK who have vowed to keep all “its family” (as they call their 5,500 strong workforce) on full pay until the crisis is over. Some gestures that have rightly attracted positive feedback include this beautiful letter that the CEO of a UK hospital sent to all the children of their key workers – such as this physician – applauding their heroic efforts.

In these challenging times caring about customers starts by caring about employees.

3.

Look after those less fortunate



Linked with the previous point, consumers are looking for other evidence that brands care – particularly about people in need. In the US Ford reacted quickly to the pandemic launching their “Built to Lend a Hand” campaign which provides support such as payment relief but also repurposing their factories to make PPE and ventilators.

Hotels around the world including IHG group have stepped up to house medics and displaced members of society. The Berkeley Hotel in London have kept their kitchens open to offer a complimentary “drive-through service” for London’s emergency services. It offers 250 hot meals every day to frontline staff.

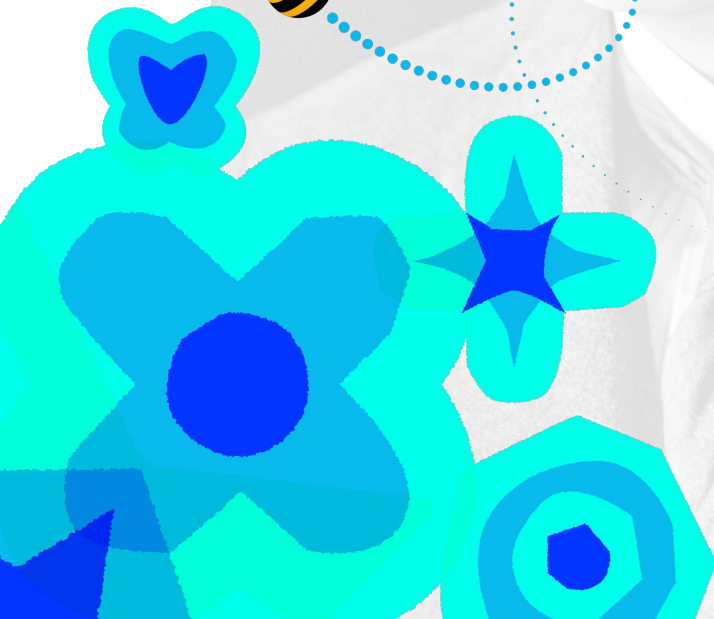
Uber is offering 300,000 free rides to NHS staff in the UK.

In the absence of being able to look after actual customers, these brands are showing their compassion and their commitment to the community which will undoubtedly have a ripple effect on how their consumers think of them.

This is the time to ACT rather than advertise.

4.

Pause, listen and think



In 1932, Ernest Rutherford led a group of scientists in a race to split the atom. They were up against American and German counterparts who were reputed to be better funded. Rutherford is said to have told his team *“We haven’t got the money, so we’ll have to think”*. This maxim rings even truer now. Many organisations’ budgets have been stripped. But as businesses grapple with exactly what sort of customer experience their customers will want over the next few months and beyond, it has never been more important to listen and think carefully about next steps.

The rules of the game are inevitably going to be different. More importantly, our customers will be more polarised than ever. Pre-Covid, customers in many sectors behaved in relatively homogenous ways. Yes of course customers had some differences in what they wanted but they were often subtle. A hotel guest’s primary needs at check-in were by and large the same as another. What different shoppers wanted from a supermarket experience didn’t necessarily vary hugely. So in the main, organisations were able to cater to a ‘generic’ customer.

A much-repeated mantra of this pandemic has been “we’re all in this together”. But that belies the breadth of needs and emotions among consumers. Additional security in a supermarket or on a train platform might be “reassuring” for some; “heavy-handed” for another and “anxiety-inducing” for others still.

There are some complexities to ‘listening’ right now. Predicting behaviour is more difficult than ever. Some changes will pass, whilst others will have a lasting impact. For example, recent research by Kantar into the fashion industry post-Covid says that 49% of shoppers state that they don’t need any new clothes right now but we don’t know when or if that will change. Many of us, to a large degree, still locked down in our homes, might think we know what we want and how we’ll act, but in reality might do exactly the opposite once things open up. How we are in the first month post lockdown, in the third, after the first year etc. will change. So not only do we need to listen, but we need to listen more deeply and more regularly than we did before.

Listening doesn’t have to be expensive but it has to be well-planned and well-structured. This is not the time to issue a hastily thrown together Survey Monkey to base decisions on.

5.

Think digital, act human



Unsurprisingly, one of the consequences of Covid19 is the increase in online penetration. According to McKinsey in China this increased by 15-20% and in Italy, e-commerce sales for consumer products rose by 81% in a single week during lockdown. So, yes, enhanced digital access has been essential but obviously that comes hand in hand with an ability to meet demand.

But digital does not mean eschewing the human touch. In fact, if anything, given that this is often the only interaction we now have with brands, being human 'digitally' has never been so important. Organisations need to amplify their 'humanity' more than ever before. A great example of this was a recent exchange with insurance provider More Than. A customer enquired about whether their car insurance would cover voluntary work to which the answer was (of course) yes, but with a sign off saying "We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for supporting our NHS in this difficult climate." Simple but effective.

Going digital is also about reviewing activities that might have previously seemed to be only possible in the face to face world and looking at how we might be able to pivot them digitally. We've had Zoom weddings, online Pilates, even the Met Gala went virtual this year. But there were some even more creative 'pivots'.

We love the example of HomeSuiteHome from the Netherlands who offered a 'hotel-like' experience within your own home. Once guests 'checked-in' online, they then received a curated welcome box of amenities, access to a digital concierge who provided movie suggestions, dinner and breakfast deliveries from local venues. OpenTable – the restaurant bookings services – switched from offering restaurant bookings to time slot reservations for retail/ supermarkets.

Continue to look for ways of becoming more digital – but only if it genuinely adds value to the customer.

6.

Build trust through authenticity



We admit it, we used to hate the 'A' word as well. Brands would rush to tell us how authentic they were when in fact it was just overhyped marketing. But something special has started to happen over the last few weeks. We have literally seen into each other's lives. No longer are we talking to anonymous call centres but now we can sometimes hear the reality of their home lives – a toddler playing in the background, a dog barking to be let out. Zoom meetings give us a glimpse into other people's rooms (bookcase envy anyone?). Now that we're stripped bare of our corporate artefacts, all that remains is us as individuals, sharing what we genuinely know.

It is no surprise that many wonder whether there will be a role for influencers and celebrity endorsements once we emerge. The more uncertain our times are, the more people look for people they trust and indicators show that consumers are increasingly trusting employees who they feel are "telling it like it is".

Lin Qingxuan is a cosmetics company in China. They were forced to close a large number of stores during the crisis including in Wuhan – the epicentre of the virus in China. So it redeployed all its beauty advisors to become online advisors and influencers. As a result sales in Wuhan increased by 200% compared to the previous year.

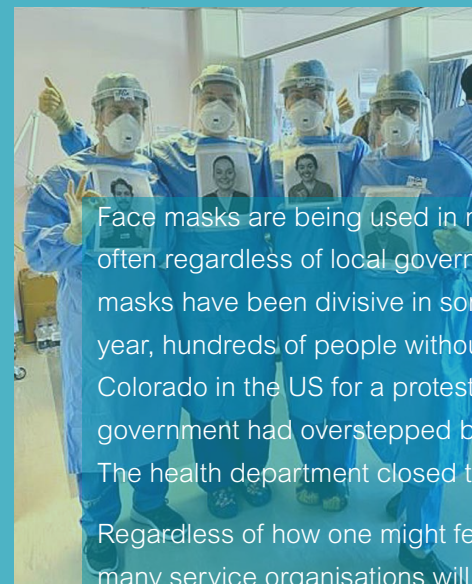
Let your employees genuinely be your brand's spokespeople – giving them the knowledge, skills and empowerment to do so.



There are some interactions which will still need to remain physical. People talk of yearning for travel, or just for a great meal in a local restaurant. We need to carefully rethink our customer journeys and look at how we can make what was once 'high touch' into 'low or even no touch'.

We have seen a significant increase in drive-through shopping experiences around the world – including brands such as Walgreens in the US. "Sneeze guards" have been introduced at many check-outs. Many banks in different countries have increased the limits on contactless cards to minimise the need to use chip and pin devices.

It is though important to plot these journeys by watching how customers and colleagues interact within these physical journeys. Processes may need to be reconfigured because we humans have to unlearn so many things that we did as rote previously.



Face masks are being used in many hotels, shops and restaurants – often regardless of local government requirements. The use of face masks have been divisive in some markets. On Mother's Day in May this year, hundreds of people without masks crowded into a restaurant in Colorado in the US for a protest party organised by owners who said the government had overstepped by requiring workers to wear masks. The health department closed the restaurant the next day.

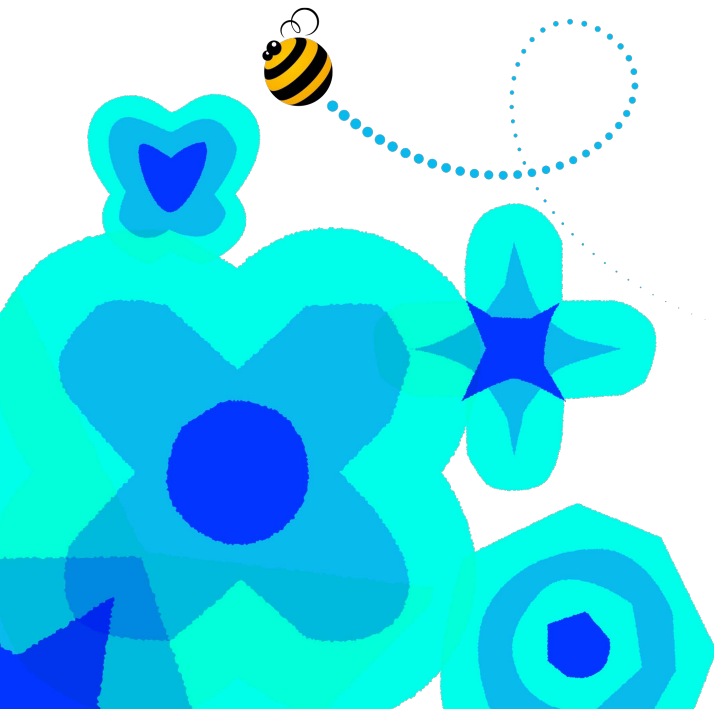
Regardless of how one might feel about these requirements, the fact is many service organisations will need to tread the tightrope of offering a warm and welcoming experience while complying with new safety measures. Burger King is currently reviewing how they can make masks an integral part of the uniform – so possibly that they look less 'clinical'. Medical staff in many hospitals who need to be covered head to toe in PPE clothing are looking at innovative ways of looking more 'human' – including having photos of themselves stuck onto their uniform.

At the three Michelin star The Inn at Little Washington in the US, the chef has ordered custom-made masks stamped with the smile of Marilyn Monroe and George Washington. He has also ordered mannequins dressed in 1940s attire to alleviate the barren look of a restaurant complying with social distancing. *[We're not convinced ourselves. Ed]*

Remove or minimise contact. Enhance how employees interact with customers – making the transaction, personal.

8.

Give back control



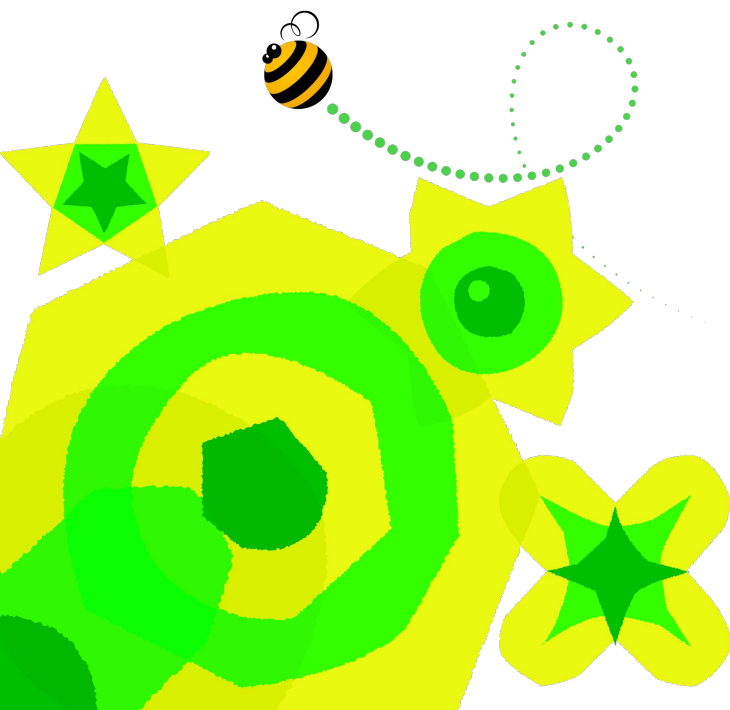
Many years ago, a study in a blood bank found that when giving blood, if a nurse offered the donor the choice of which arm they would like the blood to be drawn from, donors perceived significantly less discomfort. This is a fascinating study and gives us some guidance as to what may be important in these 'out of control' times. The blood bank study demonstrates that people are happier (or at least less uncomfortable) when they have some sort of control over a process. In this case, the control is largely symbolic – i.e. which arm to have the blood drawn from. However, it gives the donor a perceived rational choice to make – one where they can potentially disengage some of their emotions around anxiety or fear – and focus on something where they are entirely in control. In these times of crisis, the lesson for service providers is clear – how can we build in choices (no matter how small) to enable our customers to feel more in control?

Part of our feeling of loss of control is our lack of ability to see into the future. We crave certainty – when can we see our friends? When can we next go on holiday or (most importantly) when can we go to the hairdressers? This is a fine line to tread. On the one hand, it's important to be able to give hope but organisations should not be pushing sales or services that they cannot guarantee will happen. Some organisations have been great at communicating enhancements in 'baby steps'. For example, Ocado in the UK, communicated very effectively with customers about what would change (positively) in small windows of time. e.g. when more regular online grocery slots would be available, when they would be able to take recyclable bags again. Small but important steps along that slow and tentative road back to some sort of normality.

Find ways to give control and certainty – but always with integrity.

9.

Be emotionally intelligent



The service skills we might have equipped our colleagues with before certainly need to be reviewed and refreshed in the light of coronavirus. Never has the idea of emotional intelligence been so important.

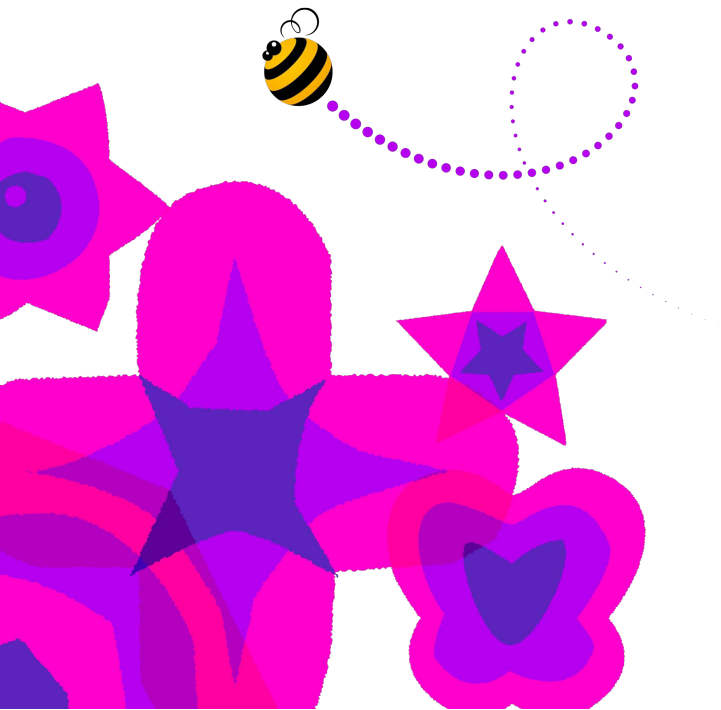
Harvard Business Review conducted a review of service in call centres in the two weeks following the WHO declaration of the pandemic and found that the percentage of calls scored as “difficult” more than doubled. In one company, financial hardship-related calls went up by 2.5 times in just one week, and that was in the relatively ‘early’ stages.

Now more than ever, employees – whether in contact centres or face to face – need to be able to ‘read’ customers. Some customers will have high levels of anxiety – particularly in the first few months. Others may find themselves ‘rebellious’ against the rules and / or other customers. Managing this anxiety and potential conflict might be challenging. Frontline colleagues will also need to be clear with customers about what’s possible and what isn’t – what they can say yes to and what they can’t. Communicating clearly and emphatically will be critical.

Ensure customer-facing colleagues have the right skills, support and coaching to enable them to deal with a more nuanced and complex level of service.

10.

Become a healthcare business



Earlier in May, a YouGov poll in the UK commissioned by Positive Money found that 8 in 10 Britons said that “We should prioritise the health and well-being of citizens over economic growth.” Over 6 in 10 also think the UK should prioritise improved social and environmental outcomes over GDP when the pandemic is over. The likely subtext here is that perhaps many of us, as individuals, feel that we should focus on our own health too. As Accenture pointed out in a recent report “health experiences will be in demand, and vice versa health should be considered in every experience”.

One of the interesting outcomes of this new mindset is how consumers view different products or services. For example, research conducted by Ipsos that related to the impact of Coronavirus on car purchase found that 72% of Chinese consumers had increased their purchase intentions with regards to a new car – deeming a car to ‘lower the likelihood of infection’. 51% of consumers outlined that they would prefer air conditioning with a ‘germ filter’. In other words, we need to consider how we configure our products and services with healthcare in mind.

Being a healthcare business isn’t just about a customer focus. It is also, if not more critically, about healthcare within the workplace. Coronavirus has put employee health in the spotlight. Employees will look to and expect their employers to provide advice, guidance and care. Research prior to the pandemic highlighted that 16% of flu transmissions occurred in an office. The fact is, any single individual can put the health of others at risk. So what’s required is not just processes and equipment but a sense of purpose, responsibility and commitment.

Organisations cannot view health as a tick-box exercise. This needs to become a cultural orientation.

About SignalCX

SignalCX is a customer experience consultancy working with brands all around the world defining their desired customer experience and equipping and enabling colleagues to be able to deliver these.

If you would like any help defining your post-Covid service or employee experience, or would like to subscribe to further thought papers and trends letters, please contact us at hello@signal.cx

