

Delivering brand resilience in the digital era

Written by

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Category

[Marketing](#)

Key topics

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Brand resilience is a term used to describe how strong brands can withstand external pressures through difficult times. If properly cultivated, brand resilience will ensure your brand stands the test of time - time and time again

In the digital era, brands are subjected to increased scrutiny. Online reviews, social media and intensified competition mean things can go wrong quickly, with any issues amplified.

In this context, building brand resilience is essential – even more so after the events of the last year.

Credit built up in good times can help brands endure the bad, from PR gaffes to global pandemics.

Customer participation is key to brand resilience

Brand resilience may be built through strong customer relationships. These can be cultivated over time through strong customer-brand connections and distinctive brand value propositions.

Brands can also strengthen customer relationships and build up resilience through customer participation and brand transparency, strategies which my Imperial colleague [Andreas Eisingerich](#) and I (alongside others) have researched.

Increased scrutiny may make some unwilling to invite customer opinions. Brands should resist this temptation and do exactly the opposite.

We have found that brands which invite feedback, reviews, suggestions, and even complaints, develop [strong customer relationships](#). This has tangible results, including brand loyalty and improved sales.

Brands that go further, openly sharing positive and negative customer comments and feedback, gain even more. Transparency, we found, can increase [purchase intention and willingness to pay](#).

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We've even come across reports of developers building minor bugs into software, which they then fix publicly as customers report them, showing engagement, responsiveness and transparency. This approach is a little extreme, and not something we would encourage, but reflects organisations' increasing awareness of the benefits of customer participation and transparency.

Conversely, organisations that merely pay lip service to customer engagement, treating it as an unwelcome chore, will not enjoy the benefits.

We have found customer participation drives a greater sales uplift than the much-coveted word of mouth, which arguably prioritises new over loyal customers. Ultimately, the latter is perhaps best left to grow organically. Customer participation can be a more active process.

Honesty can be the best policy

Credit can be built up during good times, but brands can also show off what they're made of during difficult ones. The current pandemic has merely amplified ever-present realities related to [brand transparency](#).

Brands that have responded well during the pandemic, with transparency and integrity, will have built up good will among customers. Others, seen to have been evasive and greedy (certain budget airlines may fit the bill), will see their resilience tested.

While brands may be unwilling to show weakness, admitting the last year has been difficult may resonate with customers, who have also had difficult years. Many praised the way (the now late) Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson handled his honest but contrite admission that he would have to [lay off staff](#).

Trying to sweep issues under the carpet will weaken customer relations, eroding trust.

As a cautionary note, we must add that [customer participation](#) must not be allowed to negatively impact employee relations. Employees' well-being, participation, and protection from customer negativity all contribute to brand performance. A balance should be sought between internal and external participation.

How to build brand immunity

Building strong customer relationships can help confer brand immunity, protecting brands from negative information that might otherwise be fatal. Remember Volkswagen's emission scandal in 2015? Somewhat surprisingly, the company bounced back in 2016 to become the world's top-selling car manufacturer, only being overtaken in [2020 by Toyota](#) (which itself recalled eight million defective vehicles in 2008).

I am part of an Imperial London research team exploring ways in which brands can actively prime immunity to negative information. We have found that brands can do this by stimulating specific psychological processes among customers.

For example, merely asking customers how they would feel about a brand if it were hit by hypothetical negative information can boost future brand immunity. This suggests that, besides building strong relationships over time, there may be more immediate ways to build brand defence mechanisms, at a time when these are most

needed. This is a very promising and timely research area.

Developing marketing talent to navigate difficult times

The [MSc Strategic Marketing](#) programme at Imperial Business School covers customer engagement, brand strategies, and building brand resilience across multiple modules and perspectives.

As well as academic researchers, provision comes from those with frontline experience. The crisis management module in our online programme, for example, is taught by a colleague who led American Airlines' brand recovery strategy after the 9/11 attacks and other brand crises.

To anyone wondering whether this is a good time to enrol in an MSc in marketing, the answer is unequivocally yes. The skills to generate and analyse market intelligence and develop customer-centric strategies will be essential to brands' survival.

Customer-centricity will be more pivotal than ever in the post-pandemic world. Brands must strive to hold a distinctive and relevant place in consumers' minds (no, not all publicity is good publicity). This must be married to a narrative: a positive story that connects prospective consumers with the brand.

I've previously written (with Professor Eisingerich) that [brands should not sacrifice marketing budgets post-pandemic](#), and that they need to find ways to adapt. Those who prosper will be those who manage to invest strategically. And highly skilled marketing talent may be the best investment of them all.

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About Omar Merlo

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Dr Omar Merlo is Associate Professor of Marketing Strategy and Academic Director of the MSc Strategic Marketing programmes at Imperial College Business School. Previously, he was a Lecturer at the University of Cambridge and the University of Melbourne, and has held visiting positions at institutions including LSE, UCL, Oxford, ETH Zurich, USI, and EPFL Lausanne.

His main research interests are in strategic marketing, services and relationship management, and brand management. His work has appeared in leading journals such as Journal of Marketing, MIT Sloan Management Review, Harvard Business Review, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Industrial Marketing Management, and Journal of Service Research. A consultant and executive educator with extensive international experience, Dr Merlo has worked with organisations including McKinsey, Samsung, Unilever, Audi, Barclays, HSBC, ING, and others.

Read [Omar's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

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