

## The Brand Marketer's Guide to Social Media Marketing in Times of Crisis

For years, social media has been shifting away from its social roots to become more of a branding marketplace, but the COVID-19 pandemic gives us all a chance to swing the pendulum back in the social direction.

When I wrote *The End of Marketing* last year, the world looked a lot different, but the lessons from the book are even more applicable now. Brands need to showcase a more personal side to connect with customers, especially in an era where the values that make us human are so clearly on display.

During these difficult times, more people are appreciating the value of real community, not just the number of likes on a post. Social media users want to form genuine connections with others, especially since they're not getting that as much in person right now.

But that doesn't mean brands are being shunned. They just need to adapt to the current environment, which often means building relationships—and ideally whole communities—that will pay off once life gets back to normal, rather than trying to go for the sale now.

In times of crisis like we're currently experiencing due to COVID-19, companies might instinctively shy away from marketing. With stores closed, employees furloughed, revenue down and people worried about their health and finances, this may seem like a time to hunker down and wait until the situation improves. But doing so could cause companies to fall further behind.

Instead, brands can leverage social media marketing now to build their potential customer base and customer loyalty so that when the healthcare crisis improves and the economy rebounds, they can capture more revenue. Social media marketing in times like these can also help brands find new revenue streams to stay afloat, all while improving their positioning with stakeholders like employees and the communities they operate in.

Social media marketing can be particularly appealing in these times, because people have more time to spend online since in-person interactions are limited. Around the world, app usage on Android devices grew by 20% in the first quarter of 2020, according to App Annie.<sup>1</sup> That could grow even more over the coming months since some stay-at-home orders in some areas did not start until Q2.

Plus, social media marketing can be a relatively low-investment activity. While sponsored posts can expand your reach, many brands can gain an ROI on labor and small costs such as design tools through organic social media marketing.

<sup>1</sup> Venkatraman, Adithya. "Weekly Time Spent in Apps Grows 20% Year Over Year as People Hunker Down at Home." App Annie. 2 April 2020. <https://www.appannie.com/en/insights/market-data/weekly-time-spent-in-apps-grows-20-year-over-year-as-people-hunker-down-at-home/>

Of course, successful social media marketing, especially now, is easier said than done. While brands might have more opportunities to reach their customers, brands also have to be careful to not appear tone-deaf to the current crisis and turn customers away. Thinking of social media as primarily a place to connect with customers rather than a place to advertise to them is a good starting point.

That's not to say that brands can't use sponsored posts — when done well, they can be a great sales tool — but it's important to differentiate from sales and marketing.

For brands that have already been truly social with their audience online, marketing in times of crisis might not look all that different as it would in normal times. Others will have to quickly adapt, but in doing so, they can set themselves up for long-term success.

These are some of the key points I discuss in my book [\*The End of Marketing: Humanizing Your Brand in the Age of Social Media and AI\*](#), which has become particularly relevant during this crisis.

As an award-winning digital storyteller and former LinkedIn marketing executive who has also led social media for various B2C and B2B brands including Winn-Dixie, Save-A-Lot and BMC Software, I've seen and experienced firsthand the many ways that brands thrive and fail on social media. The secret isn't outsmarting algorithms. It's about getting real with your audience, especially in times of crisis.

In particular, brands can find social media marketing success in these times by:

1. Being empathetic to the wants, needs and fears of customers and broader society.
2. Erring on the side of over-communicating and being overly transparent.
3. Being human, i.e., social and conversational with individuals online, taking more of a one-to-one than a one-to-many approach.
4. Personalizing marketing by highlighting the voices of employees, partners, customers and others that comprise your community.
5. Getting creative to find new customers and new revenue streams.

In this guide, I'll walk you through these five areas in more detail, showing you how you can make the most of this situation to find ways to improve the effectiveness of your social media marketing to ultimately boost sales.

## Leading with Empathy

Marketers that send out pre-scheduled social media posts during a crisis, as if nothing unusual was happening, risk alienating customers or, at the very least, getting lost in the huge digital ocean. In these trying times, so many businesses and individuals are worried about paying their bills and affording basic products and services, so whether you market for a B2B or B2C brand, there's a good chance you have to adapt your messaging to meet the current situation.

That means leading with empathy. Every marketer should make it clear that they understand what their customers are going through and ideally find ways to give back to those in need.

For example, a clothing company that simply posts about an online sale they're having probably won't get very far. Yet if that clothing company is giving back by providing masks to first responders and others in need, donating a portion of sales to food banks or doing anything else charitable, that can feed into great social media content that audiences might be more receptive to in these times.

From sharing photos of these charitable efforts to writing about the positive impact your brand is trying to have on your community, there are lots of ways to create great social media content that's empathetic in a way that interests people in your brand, without you being overly promotional.

Take the [#ALLINCHALLENGE](#), for example. Started by Michael Rubin, founder of online sports retailer Fanatics, this viral campaign has already raised millions of dollars in charitable donations, with the goal of hitting \$100 million, by having celebrities auction off fan experiences.

Similarly, Verizon has created the [#PayItForwardLIVE](#) series, where famous musicians perform livestreamed concerts and viewers share the small businesses they're supporting. Verizon also donates \$10 to small businesses, up to \$2.5 million, when others use the [#PayItForwardLIVE](#) hashtag.

Even if a company isn't in a position to make donations or create a charitable giving campaign at this time, you can still be empathetic and create content that helps others. For example, you can share stories and tips about how your employees are trying to stay digitally connected with one another at this time, something that many of us can relate to and which can help others feel less alone.

You can also reach out to your digital network simply to see how you can lend a hand, whether that means providing business advice to entrepreneurs, directing customers to trusted resources

that can help them navigate this difficult period or simply providing conversation for those who want to feel more connected.

Being empathetic and giving back not only feels good, but brands that follow this path can form stronger bonds with their networks and extend their social media reach in ways that can ultimately lead to sales from those who have the ability to purchase now or from those who can do so in the future.

### **Being Open and Honest**

Related to leading with empathy is being open and honest about what your brand is going through, including how this pandemic has affected your operations and the people that comprise your company.

Err on the side of over-communicating when it comes to sharing information such as store closures, new hours or new practices to try to limit the spread of the virus. For example, if you're still able to sell products, such as food and beverage companies that can ship orders to customers, be as clear and open as you can about how orders are packed and what protections employees have so that customers can feel safe about purchasing from your brand.

Be specific and try to anticipate customers' questions, or at least be ready to answer them. For example, many areas still allow alcohol delivery, but if you create a post about how customers can enjoy drinks from home by ordering your products, include details such as how couriers will check IDs or get signatures in a way that minimizes contact.

For B2B brands, marketers can also be open and honest about what operations look like and the challenges you may be going through. For example, software companies may be used to operating remotely — and you can share tips on how to do that successfully — but maybe your platform needs to schedule maintenance or has experienced outages due to unexpectedly high traffic. Communicate with your customers about these issues, using social media as one of the channels, (along with your website, email, etc.) to get that information out.

Social media can also be a great way to get conversational with your customers and prospects about these types of issues. Even if you don't have news to share such as new store hours, you can jump into conversations on platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn about ways to solve some of the challenges so many of us are going through at a time like this.

Chipotle is one example of a brand that's been very active during this crisis not only to alert customers to promotions but also to take the time to respond to customer issues like order errors and explain how they're supplying masks to employees.

This type of communication might be a departure from your normal marketing tone, but in times that are anything but normal, you need to adapt and be there for your customers as best you can.

## **Humanizing Your Brand**

Now more than ever, brands need to be human in their social media marketing, which means marketers need to communicate more like they would as individuals rather than adopting an overly formal corporate voice. In other words, be social.

Because of COVID-19, marketing will never be the same. Brands can no longer hide behind logos and stay out of social issues either. Now is the time to be human, and if you don't convey that to your customers, they'll turn to a competitor.

Brands should have been doing this anyway pre-crisis, because people tend to respond to people and generally don't like being overly sold to. But if you're not already humanizing your brand, now is the time to do so considering how much people crave connection, not corporate sales copy.

So instead of just tweeting out a link to a press release or posting about a sale you're running, get conversational and personal with your content. Being empathetic, transparent and honest is a good place to start, and you can also be informative or entertaining as you might when personally speaking with colleagues or even friends.

Take Wendy's, for example. Instead of just posting about their food in a generic voice, the brand's Twitter channel consistently responds to other brands and individuals in a funny, topical manner. If you're unfamiliar with their Twitter marketing, take a few minutes to scroll their feed and you'll quickly see how it feels like a real human is writing those tweets rather than a corporate entity.

Another brand that has done a great job being human, especially during this crisis, is [Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams](#). The company has been actively sharing user-generated content of people brightening up their days with ice cream during this difficult period. The brand also was sure to respond to moments like when a clip from The Late Late Show showed Nancy Pelosi's home freezer had Jeni's ice cream in it.

Even if you want to maintain a serious tone, you can humanize your brand, especially in times of crisis, by discussing issues that many of us face, such as managing work/life balance while schools are closed and your kids are home, or pivoting a business to deal with these difficult conditions.

Humanizing your brand also means forming deeper connections with customers or prospects you already have, rather than blasting out content to always try to reach a newer audience.

Too often, I see brands ignore comments on their posts or mentions of their brands from other people, yet these are golden opportunities to respond in a conversational way and build brand loyalty. Then, when this crisis ends and business gets back to whatever the new normal might be, you're more likely to have that customer stick with you.

### **Personalizing Social Media Channels**

Another key aspect of humanizing your brand that deserves its own section is personalizing your social media channels by putting actual names and faces to your content. At a minimum, you can accomplish this through content like sharing photos of employees' work-from-home setups or retweeting posts that customers might share about how they're using your products or services while staying home.

Going a step further, you can add more of a human, personal touch to your social media channels, such as by having employees take turns managing your Instagram feed for the day. For example, a restaurant that can keep staff on payroll during these times but which might be slower than usual due to only being able to provide takeout and delivery could have employees doing Instagram takeovers where they share cooking tips or discuss how to pair wine with food through Instagram Stories.

But increasingly, I believe that brands relying only on corporate social media channels will lose out to companies that empower their executives and other employees to share content directly from personal channels. For example, Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream's founder [Jeni Britton Bauer](#) has been creating videos on her personal Instagram account on how to make ice cream.

Some brands may be hesitant to get personal, as using a certain corporate voice and driving all communications through a corporate channel might help you follow your brand guidelines. But if doing so leads to barely any social media traction, you may need to rethink your strategy.

You can still have guidelines in place to follow compliance rules and reduce other risks, and you can use employee advocacy platforms to help guide messaging. Ultimately, by letting your employees share content from their own channels, you can expand your reach to wider networks while forming stronger connections with employees and customers.

In times of crisis, this personalization can be particularly powerful, as employees can share how they're coping with the situation and executives can showcase their empathy and how they're giving back, rather than potentially seeming out of touch.

### **Finding New Customers and Sales Opportunities**

While brands shouldn't be overly salesy on social media, that doesn't mean you can't use these platforms to find new customers and sales opportunities, which many companies will have to do in this type of crisis.

First, marketers can simply conduct research on social media by looking at what other brands are doing to still earn revenue at this time. You might find digital events or online classes that others are offering, and you may be able to then adapt that to your own brand as something you can sell.

Retailer REI is another good example of a brand that's been clever on social media during this time, such as by creatively sharing ideas on how to make the most of staying home. The brand has shared content on topics like growing an herb garden and repairing outdoors gear, while also sharing user-generated content about indoor camping, which could inspire some sales from customers who might have otherwise put off purchases until they could travel again.

Next, you can use social media to crowdsource ideas. Ask customers what they might prefer if you're considering launching new products or services. For example, a home goods retailer that has had to close stores might be interested in offering organizing or decorating classes for a small fee to try to stay afloat, and you can solicit ideas from your followers on what classes they would specifically be interested in. You can do so by conducting a Twitter poll, for example, or by direct messaging top customers to see if they'd be interested in a pilot run.

You can also find new customers during these times using social media, as marketers may have more time to search social media conversations for opportunities to jump in. For example, if you find a post about someone being unable to obtain a product or service because the business they normally purchase from is closed, out of stock or unable to meet their needs for some other reason, you could have an opening to jump in and offer to help.

Doing so might be a bit on the salesy side, but if you're responding to a direct need, such as explaining how you have a certain item in stock, then that person might be appreciative that you reached out.

## Put in the Work Now to Reap Rewards Over Time

Social media marketing can be challenging for brands at any time, but a crisis like this could cause a resurgence of social media being used socially, rather than just as sales tools. That means brand marketers may need to adjust their social media marketing strategies, as the old way of mass communications may not be as effective as more personal, individualized marketing.

This approach can take more time and effort, but it can be far more effective than blasting out messages in hopes that they land somewhere. It's better to market well to 100 prospects that become loyal customers rather than 1,000 people who aren't listening.

Brands that can put in the work to build up their social media presence and form deeper, genuine connections with customers can find ways to earn at least some revenue now while building up a stronger base that can help them bounce back quicker after this crisis ends.

### About Carlos Gil



Carlos is the author of *[The End of Marketing: Humanizing Your Brand in the Age of Social Media and AI](#)*, an international keynote speaker, and an award-winning digital storyteller with over a decade of experience leading social media strategy for global brands including LinkedIn, Winn-Dixie, Save-A-Lot, and BMC Software. A first-generation Cuban American, Carlos's work has been featured by *Harvard Business Review, Inc.*, *Entrepreneur*, and *Social Media Examiner*, in addition to dozens of trade publications. Presently, he is the CEO and founder of Gil Media Co., a full-service digital marketing firm. You can connect with Carlos on Twitter, [@carlosgil83](#); on Instagram, [@carlosgil83](#); or on [LinkedIn](#).