

# Amplifying the customer experience

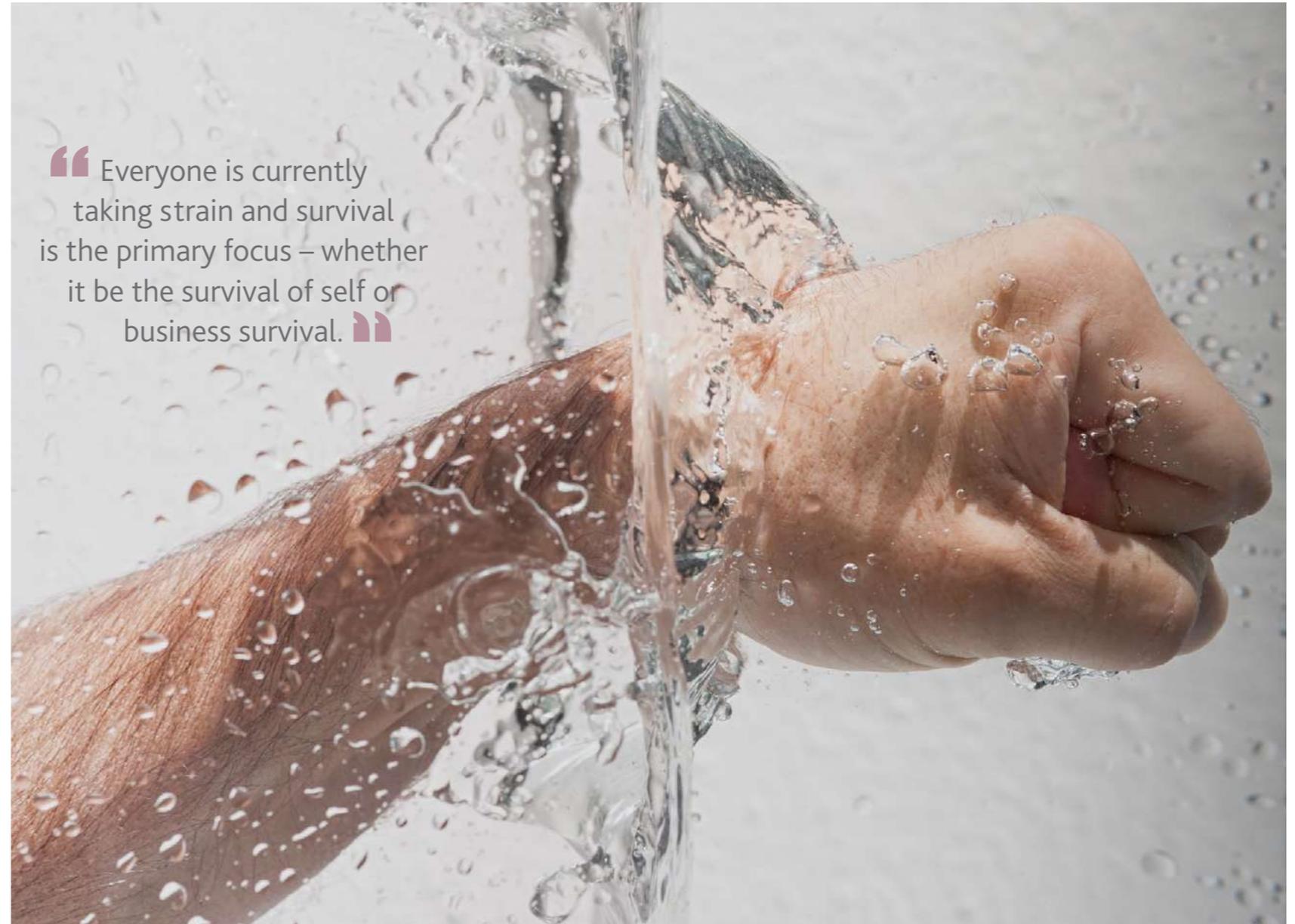


George Bourdos  
VBN Consultants

The mind-boggling disruptions and chaos that Covid-19 has left in its wake will be felt for years to come, and in some cases forever. The retail and restaurant environment has been upended and with it has come a dramatic change in the customer experience (CX).

“Businesses may have previously ignored or placed less importance on CX, but now they have no choice but to make it a key element in their business strategies,” says George Bourdos, CX specialist and owner of VBN Consultants. “Everyone is currently taking strain and survival is the primary focus – whether it be the survival of self or business survival. Today the human factor in business is core and has become synonymous with care. More than ever before, the customer’s perception of the retailer really matters now.

Current day customers are fearful and need to be reassured that the space they are entering is a safe one and that the utmost care is being



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taken to ensure their wellbeing. It is essential that all safety measures are visible – are staff wearing masks, are sanitizers being applied on entry, and are social distancing markers visible and being observed? Whilst the physical

customer experience continues to be strictly monitored even as lockdown relaxes, the questions being asked are will new shopping patterns emerge and will new behavioural trends be established in this new normal?



“ Whilst the customer journey in-store today is dramatically different from pre-Covid times, it must be remembered that this isn't the first time that retailers and restaurants have had to comply with statutory regulation changes. ”

The smoking ban in South Africa in the '90's was an enormous adjustment, whilst changes such as eco-friendly shopping bags, paper straws, HCCPP regulations and the like continue to be incorporated into the operational standards of many businesses. It is likely that some Covid-19 regulations will morph into the operational fabric and become part of the new normal.

Even though the virus will be around for some time, customers still need to be welcomed as humans, as opposed to 'specimen carrying germs.' The primary purpose of frontline teams will be to connect with the customer, build a relationship and make the customer feel more valued than in the past. A warm welcome with your eyes is essential as our smiles are mostly hidden. There is no doubt though that brands will continue to seek new ways of enhancing the customer experience and that alternative service offerings will emerge with innovations driving new business growth.

Whilst Covid has placed strain on the traditional retailer, so too has the online customer experience. In the past, traditional retailers relied heavily on physical retail space and some also enjoyed an online alternative, which unfortunately wasn't given the focused attention it deserved. In fact, some retailers viewed this option as a 'nice to have'. It is now those same retail groups that are playing catch-up to be on a par or surpass the leaders such as a Take-a-lot, Uber, or internationally, Amazon, Nike or Apple.

The online customer experience can make or break a future relationship with a brand or

retail outlet. It is essential that all elements work together and that the ordering services are streamlined and easy to navigate. Brands should ensure that they offer alternative methods of delivery and drop-off solutions (including gate and entrance drops for when the customer isn't at home), quicker turnaround times, slick exchange and return policies, and most importantly knowledge of stock availability.

I recently ordered a reputable dishwasher brand online from a large national retailer that facilitated the purchase, received the payment, and promised a delivery date. A week later no delivery had arrived, the order had been cancelled and the money returned with no explanation given. It was at this point that I queried the status, only to be informed that no stock was available! What a shocker!

Even though the online experience is generally automated and should be a seamless transaction, the importance of the human factor is highlighted when something goes wrong, and the customer has to interact with a person in order to find a solution. It is those brands that excel in this part of the customer journey that will attract repeat sales and build a reputation of having a 'solutions driven offering'.

With the earth-shattering arrival of Covid, many people lost their jobs overnight, salaries were slashed, businesses shut their doors and disposable income shrunk to levels not seen since the Great Depression in the early 1930s. We were told to stay at home and keep safe, and even though we



are over the worst, customers have become very selective about what restaurants, retail outlets and other non-essential service venues they will go to, depending on affordability, Covid care and whether or not it will be a worthwhile experience. Once they have decided, they will automatically limit the time they spend there.

At the start of lock-down it was predicted that customers would fall into one of four groups. Now based on our own personal relationships with business associates, friends, and family we have real-time confirmation, as well as the related customer segmentation categories (SevenRooms May 2020):

- The customer who doesn't want to go out/dine out and prefers a home delivery, kerbside or store pick-up
- The customer who wants to go out/dine out, but is nervous, and makes an online reservation, uses the virtual waiting-list and accesses the digital menu
- The customer who wants to go out/dine out in a safe and contactless way
- The customer who is care-free and ready to get back to normal

When Covid ensnared the world, the indomitable human spirit came out in full force! Business survival is key – from large corporates to the one-man operation – change has been the only constant. Business

zoom calls of 'dress up the top half and dress down the bottom' have kept group meetings alive. Growth in the DIY sector has soared with households undertaking home improvements and maintenance during lockdown. Hairstylists, beauty therapists and manicurists have made 'olden-day' type house-calls to their clients, whilst customer experiences, the world over, have been completely altered from what they were before.

But a caution goes out to businesses and brand champions who think that the old conventional methodology will yield the same ROI as before, it won't. No longer will developing a great outdoor advertising campaign, or a 30-second TV ad campaign, do the trick. Marketers and business owners will need to redirect some of their brand-building funds to real investment in employee experience and customer experience. These are the elements that will make a sustainable difference to the brands that survive and thrive.

Whilst the business future is uncertain, it is imperative that a finger is kept on the pulse of the brand or company. A benchmark should be established so that the regular customer experience can be mapped, enhanced, and measured on an ongoing basis. It is important to stay attuned to progress, know where the touch points are and identify future opportunities. **SR**

