

# How To Make An Emotional Connection Virtually

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How to connect emotionally with customers and employees even when you are separated physically from ... [+] Getty

Emotion has always been an essential element of vital and valuable connections between brands and customers and between business leaders and employees. But in times like today when the coronavirus has caused anxiety to run high and physical interaction to run low, an emotional connection is even more important. If you are able to make an emotional connection virtually, you will stand out, win people's trust, and be remembered long after the crisis passes.

Most of making an emotional connection has to do with how you communicate – but communication should be backed up by action too. Here's how you as a brand and/or business leader can connect emotionally with your customers and employees even when you are separated physically from them.

**Empathy.** Convey and demonstrate empathy.

You need to show people that you understand what they might be feeling. Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield shared his emotions in a stream-of-consciousness series of tweets last week. Included in his posts were heartfelt messages such as, “The last few weeks have been [emojis showing exploding head, flushed face, crying face]” and “I’m a human. I worry about my family...”

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos tried to establish common ground and share his emotions with his employees in a letter. He admitted, “I’m sad...” and “My list of worries right now — like yours I’m sure — is long: from my own children, parents, family, friends, to the safety of you, my colleagues...”

Gregg Renfrew, CEO of Beautycounter, translated her empathy into action. As reported in the New York Times, she recognized that “everyone was feeling a bit frazzled.” So she told company employees to take Friday off. “We all need to figure out how to manage everything,” she said. “Then we can come back and get to work.”

The key to empathy is listening and learning. Merriam Webster defines empathy as, “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present *without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.*” (emphasis added.)

That means you must read between the lines and seek to truly understand your customers and employees. And that, in turn, means you must actively seek out input from them and invite them to share their feelings, their stories — even their questions. Too many business leaders and marketing managers seem more concerned with issuing messages to employees and customers respectively, than on soliciting input from them. Chobani President Peter McGuinness spent a recent morning helping the company’s grocery partners pack out product. Doing so not only showed support and respect for his customers but also enabled him to learn firsthand what they are dealing with.

**Transparency.** Communicate transparently and truthfully – even when it might hurt.

Now is not the time to issue empty reassurances and sugar coat bad news. Customers and employees deserve to be told how things really are so they can form accurate expectations. Even when the information may seem negative or unfavorable, people are more likely to trust you if you are transparent and forthcoming.

In his letter, Bezos wrote, “...I predict things are going to get worse before they get better.” He also explained that the company had placed purchase orders for “millions of face masks we want to give to our employees and contractors who cannot work from home” — but he reported, “very few of those orders have been filled.” While others might have felt the need to cheer-lead or gloss over this information, Bezos chose to be realistic and informative.

Butterfield was similarly honest. After acknowledging his fiduciary responsibility to investors and analysts saying, “Our job in this moment is to help others predict our future,” he tweeted, “...we literally have no idea what is going to happen and neither does anyone else, really.” He extended his transparency to Slack customers, writing, “If you’re just getting started on Slack, I’m sorry: there are still some rough spots. It’s not as easy to get used to as we’d like.”

When natural and organic online retailer Thrive Market realized that, due to increases in orders customers could expect an up to two-week delay in their deliveries, it didn’t bury the information or wait to tell customers until after they had already gotten far enough along in the buying process. It posted the message in a pop-up window front and center on its homepage. Furthermore, despite the risk to revenue, the company asked its members to keep orders under \$100 and to consider waiting to place an order if they had already done so in the last two weeks. CEO and cofounder Nick Green told [Supermarket News](#) that response from customers has been positive, noting their understanding “has been a humbling display of solidarity.”

**Personality.** Show your humanity and uniqueness.

Just because you have to convey factual information doesn’t mean you have to follow a generic boilerplate. Don’t be afraid to show your personality and add levity, or even a bit of humor, if that fits with your brand.

Like many other retailers, [Chubbies](#), a retailer of men’s shorts, sent to customers a virus response email — but unlike most, it made sure the message conveyed some personality. The opening line, “Just what you were hoping for, an email from another company about COVID-19,” reflected the fun, light-hearted nature of all its communication, [Drip.com reported](#).

Sandwich chain [Ike’s Love & Sandwiches](#) applied its cheeky brand personality by [offering](#) a free roll of toilet paper with every sandwich order. An ad promoting the offer sported a tagline that was sure to stand out and be shared, “We got your back(side).” Like other savvy brands, the company knows that every touchpoint – even in the middle of a crisis – is an opportunity to do something different, creative, and even valuable for customers.

Even business leaders can take some license in communicating a serious message with humor. Celebrity chef and restaurant mogul José Andrés recently posted a [video](#) in which he and his daughters made fried rice while playing a song from the Hamilton soundtrack. Using singing, laughter, and funny speed-cooking antics, the video enabled Andrés to pay “homage” to the people of China who “have been going through a lot of hardships and are beating this virus” and to reinforce one of his central philosophies – that leftover food can be re-purposed and not wasted.

Even if your brand – personal or corporate – is more muted, why be boring when you can be memorable?!

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Making an emotional connection matters, because people – customers and employees – are emotional beings. We identify with others who connect with us emotionally – and we trust them more.

As the coronavirus requires quarantines and physical isolation, many brands and business leaders are discovering that it's difficult to convey emotions through digital devices and online channels. But even after the pandemic passes, it's likely that digital communication is going to be more prevalent than before. The conveniences that people are benefiting from now mean more employees will work from home, more shoppers will buy online, and more customers will use delivery services. So now is the time to exercise empathy, transparency, and personality — and establish emotional connections that shore up your relationships with customers and employees going forward.



Denise Lee Yohn

Denise Lee Yohn is the go-to expert on brand leadership for national media outlets, an in-demand speaker and consultant, and an influential writer. Denise is the author

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