

Teach your salesforce how to help customers through the crisis



The current pandemic has caused value chains to shatter. Particularly small and medium size customers are fighting for survival and their business continuity.

Yet, many sales and field tech support people are still entrenched in the traditional way of dealing with customers. Pushing contracts (to achieve the quarterly sales quota) or explaining fantastic technical performances of a product is now irrelevant — but not only that: it is often annoying and insensitive in the eyes of customers.

Today, the customer conversations should shift entirely towards understanding frustrations and burning issues, while offering aid beyond standard supplier duties. Such a shift is difficult given the constraints of social distancing. Many experienced front-line employees feel uneasy with digital channels like Zoom or Skype. Their challenge is the ability to generate on-going, intimate, and empathic digital communications with their customers.

However, there are simple techniques that can be learned and applied in three easy steps:

1. Set a new mental frame for your frontline people
2. Show them how to conduct empathic conversations to surface their customer burning issues
3. Educate them on how to lead these conversations frequently and effectively over digital channels.

With our clients, we practice a simple approach that redirects the focus and skills of front-end employees to the discovery and resolution of customer burning issues. We call it **catalytic questioning**. It draws from the academic work of MIT Prof. Hal Gregersen. How does it work? Consider the example of this simplified Zoom conversation of a few minutes.

A key account manager (KAM) of a large B2B company conducts a video call with the purchasing manager of his medium-sized customer.

KAM: “Hi Michael. Glad to see you’re healthy. It’s a difficult time for everyone. Our task force is working relentlessly to ensure our deliveries. I assume you are facing challenges too... so I wanted to check-in to understand how you and your business are doing. How are you (silence)?”

Customer: “...oh you can imagine... things are bad. We are struggling on all ends. If nothing changes, I guess in 10 days we will have to halt operations...”

KAM: “That’s awful... **Why** will you need to halt operations? Where lies the main problem? Is it your supply, production, distribution, or cash flow?”

Customer: “It’s mostly supply. Some suppliers are still shut down. We are running out of some raw materials and don’t know how to compensate. Demand is still there – actually, some of our customers are stacking up as they fear that we will run into production issues soon.”

KAM: “**Why** is it so difficult to find these materials? Is there no alternative supplier or perhaps a different formulation and production set-up?”

Customer: “Maybe there is a different formulation – but we just don’t have the time to look into it. You know we don’t have as many resources like you, particularly during this crisis”

KAM: “Look, I have an idea, we have created a task force of chemists, supply chain experts, production engineers and finance to help our customers. They are on-call 24/7. Let’s see if I can organise a quick Zoom call with them.”

Customer: “If you can do it, I owe you a lot. I will ask our head chemist and production manager to join too. We will not forget it when we will be out of this damn crisis”.

While the conversation might sound simple (real details have been omitted), it displays a significant shift in the approach:

- Intimacy has been established through empathy for the customer’s personal and business struggle, exposing own difficulties first
- Through **catalytic questioning** and active listening, the conversation surfaced the customer’s burning issue. Checking potential issue areas (organised around the value chain) beyond the helped the KAM to engage in a more strategic and less transactional conversation
- By asking “Why” repeatedly, the understanding of the root-cause of the issue was deepened, as a precondition to formulate support solutions
- Advice and support are offered. The supplier organised internally to be able to offer help on the 2-3 most common issues of its small and medium size customers.

The advantage of **catalytic questioning** is that it can be easily conducted through video calls, following few guidelines. Staff can be trained on a simple outline, the 5-whys technique to surface issues and root-causes, as well as on breaking the ice and creating empathy in body language through video calls. All it takes are few hours of training and action learning.

While your 2020 revenue target may be gone, the strategic priority should be to set-your company up for strong growth next year. You will grow faster if your customers get out of the crisis stronger. Helping them beyond your supplier duties does just that. Due to improved trust, customers will remember how you helped them during the crisis.



Notes:

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Alessandro Di Fiore is the Founder and CEO of the European Centre for Strategic Innovation (**ECSI**) and ECSI Consulting, based in Boston and Milan. He is a consultant, author and media commentator on strategy and innovation. He has been included in the radar list of Thinkers50. Alessandro has worked in management consulting for more than two decades. Along the way he has advised more than 25 Fortune 500 companies throughout the world on strategy and organisational change. He started his consulting career as a product manager at Gemini Consulting, where he was responsible for life sciences in continental Europe, Managing Director for Italy and global head of its Market Focused Strategy Center of Excellence. In 2000 Alessandro founded his first European boutique strategy firm, Venture Consulting. The firm was sold in 2008 to Tefen, an international management consulting company floated on the Tel Aviv stock exchange. Alessandro went on to found ECSI in 2010 with the aim of creating a truly unique global consulting firm. You can reach him at adifiore@ecsi-consulting.com or follow him on Twitter [@alexdfiore](https://twitter.com/alexdfiore).



Gabriele Rosani is a senior manager at ECSI Consulting Milan. He has 15 years of experience in strategy and innovation consulting. In 2013 he joined ECSI Consulting, managing international assignments for large corporations in the area of business model innovation, platform economy, innovation management and organisational agility. He has co-authored several articles on innovation. Email: grosani@ecsi-consulting.com Twitter: [@GabrieleRosani](https://twitter.com/GabrieleRosani)



Jonas Vetter is manager at ECSI Consulting, a strategy and innovation firm located in Boston, London, and Milan with years of experience in strategy consulting and venture finance. You can reach him at jvetter@ecsi-consulting.com