

## **Navigating the Seven C's To Relevance.** **By Claire Ratushny**

Think of it: there are many businesses offering similar products or services. Prospective customers can purchase goods or services from any competitor, literally anywhere in the world if they choose to, thanks to the Internet.

Net result: effectively marketing a business, which translates to owning a slice of customer mind-share, is more challenging than it ever was. It takes something more to market successfully now. And it certainly takes something more than a one-time strategy and a couple of marketing tactics to be effective.

That “something” is relevance.

Many business owners and marketers think the answer is to continuously innovate; that by continually improving current offerings, or adding new ones, they add incremental value for their customers. Hence, continued relevance. While that is true to some extent, there will always be competitors that will go one better, so innovation alone is not sufficient.

### **The Seven C's for Relevance and Sustainability.**

Long-term relevance makes a business truly sustainable. It comes from a deeply ingrained set of values that go to the heart of a business. Like anything else of merit, the quest for relevance has to be constantly worked at while conducting day-to-day business activities.

This is the most important thing businesses can do, since continued relevance sharply differentiates one company's brand from myriad others.

It also leads to something competitors can't touch, regardless of price. Something that offers a higher perceived value.

Here are my seven C's of relevance:

- **Conviction.** A deep moral conviction at core of the business, and an unwavering commitment to its brand. A system of values that are clearly spelled out and adhered to. That conviction consistently aligned with every business decision made, every bit of communication and every touch point.

Not only do customers benefit from doing business with companies that exhibit conviction, so do employees. Make sure your employees understand what the company is all about, the direction it is going in and the important role they play in “making it happen”.

Remember: employees represent the company to your customers. Building an internal team is a vital key to building a successful business. We all need to stop thinking of employees as “units of production”, and think of them as brand builders.

- **Commitment.** Taking the time and making it a point to understand customers' core needs, consistently tuning in to what they value and delivering it. That means asking customers for their honest feedback. In doing this, we can understand the values our customers appreciate, and learn about the areas where we need to improve—in their view. Not ours from a vague gut feeling.
- **Communication.** With all of the means of communication at our fingertips today, it's amazing that true communication between businesses and their customers is either nil or inconsistent, at best. Is there a customer who doesn't appreciate a phone call or email when there is an unforeseen delay in delivering a product? Completing a project or

repair? Or receiving an update during a lengthy project? Many businesses operate in silence, in a vacuum, when strong communication affords them the opportunity to deepen their relationships with their customers.

- **Caring.** In showing the customer genuine empathy and caring, and simultaneously delivering uncompromising service, a true relationship can take root. While competitors may offer the “latest and greatest” and even excellent service, empathy and human bonding will lead customers to your door and keep them coming back again and again.

Solicit customers’ honest opinions about your business and learn to accept negative comments as graciously as compliments. Here’s an opportunity to fix problems and strengthen customer relationships. Always say “thank you” to the customer for their business. Show genuine appreciation; everybody likes to be appreciated and valued.

- **Crystal clarity.** A brand should not only authentic, but unfailingly honest. The lack of honesty and transparency has plagued many large corporate entities, causing real harm and in some cases, total destruction to their brands. The end result of a lack of trust by consumers. Take Shakespeare’s quote in and live it: “To thine own self be true.”
- **Community.** Become part of a larger community. Businesses can and should look for ways to become participants in their communities, and to “give back”. Finding ways to conserve energy use, cut down on waste, and donate time or financial resources to worthy causes are always good ideas.

Can you mentor a young person, or several young people, and share what you know? Can you start a blog and converse freely with your customers? Great insights can be gleaned in conversations among friends. Especially if businesses keep the conversation real and honest. If your business becomes woven into the fabric and culture of the larger community, it will succeed.

- **Cultural Shifts.** Many business owners think if business plateaus or drops, more advertising or promotional activity is in order. But is it really? Are you losing business to competitors because you aren’t engaging in enough marketing activity; or have you lost touch with a rapidly changing culture?

For example, if you own a sandwich shop, have you gradually added healthier options for your customers? They are looking for lower salt, fat and cholesterol deli options, multigrain breads, wheat-free, gluten-free choices. . .are you offering the products your customers are looking for? Are you giving them locally grown produce in their sandwiches and salads as much as possible? How about giving your regulars their own coffee mugs to fill up, instead of using an excessive amount of paper cups that end up in the landfill? This is where your customers are going; are you going there with them?

All of the marketing efforts in the world will fall flat unless a business is supported by a unique relevance.

Establish your business’s values and then to stick to them. Engage your employees as much as you engage your customers. Continue to adapt to your customers’ needs and deepen those relationships by establishing good communication and empathy with them. Be honest, no matter what. Be transparent. Become an active member of a larger community.

Do these things and your business will succeed.

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