



Expert Insights

# Deepen B2B relationships during COVID-19 and beyond

Business from a distance demands digital closeness

IBM Institute for Business Value



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“What moves us is not sitting at our computers, it’s the relationships we have with people.”<sup>1</sup>

Catharine Nixey, Death of the office

## Key takeaways

### Disruption breeds innovation

Handled effectively, disruptions such as the global pandemic can be fertile ground for marketing and sales innovation.

### From triage to transformation

Digital closeness can help mitigate sales decline, maintain and grow key business-to-business (B2B) relationships, and transform enterprise go-to-market activities.

### Become the “go-to” resource

In this time of business-distancing, B2B organizations are distinguished by their utility to clients, offered with empathy, overarching support, and expertise.

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## Meet the B2B client, Jeannie W.

*Jeannie W., Vice President of Customer Care at a large global financial services company, has had another long day. Her first webcast started at 6:00 AM with colleagues in Hamburg, Germany. The video calls continued until late in the evening, ending with her presentation to the operations team in San Francisco. For months now, Jeannie and her husband have been sharing a home office, jockeying time for their respective online conferences, and taking turns tending to their kids.*

*When the coronavirus hit their community and Jeannie’s office closed, her team had been overhauling their company’s customer experience. First, she had to cancel her visit to development teams in Bangalore. Then the annual technology conference, where she’d hoped to meet vendors to spark innovation, was canceled. She registered for their virtual sessions, noting the replays she’ll download as soon as she has time.*

*Before the pandemic, Jeannie had been hired to drive transformation as an ongoing enhancement. But now customers are overwhelming her company’s ability to respond quickly and effectively. Her initiatives are being elevated to mission-critical with revised budgets, and the CFO wants more oversight. Jeannie knows she needs help from business partners, but integrating it all is complex and requires input from many different experts. Her inbox is flooded with vendor offers, but so many aren’t relevant. It’s difficult to vet the best solutions, her team is falling behind schedule, and the pressure is mounting.*

Many B2B marketers and sellers are scrambling to find new ways to support clients who are also pivoting to digital channels.

## The B2B challenge

B2B enterprises have traditionally relied on relationship building to drive pipeline. Client connections like those with Jeannie, our fictional executive in need of a partner ecosystem, are typically nurtured over time with face-to-face conversations at meetings, conferences, meals, and other events. These physical experiences have been the catalyst for generating trust.

Overnight, COVID-19 changed all that.

Now, months into rolling waves of lockdowns and re-openings, remote working, restricted travel, interrupted supply chains, and unparalleled uncertainty, businesses have been forced to reevaluate—and in some cases, reimagine—their business models and reprioritize their investments. This has left many B2B marketers and sellers scrambling to find new ways to stay relevant, interact with current and prospective clients, and support clients' immediate and long-term initiatives as they, too, pivot to new digital channels, processes, and strategies to differentiate their brands.

This urgent need to adapt has laid bare the weak links in B2B organizations' digital transformation, particularly for marketing and sales. Many are still challenged by time-consuming manual workflows and a lack of data integration, modernized cloud solutions, advanced analytics and artificial intelligence (AI), making it difficult to accurately track and anticipate client attitudes and behaviors, and personalize communications, experiences, and offerings. By digitally enabling key resources, systems, and processes, organizations can go beyond simply mitigating disruption to rebuilding market momentum.

To better understand the unique challenges the pandemic has placed on three business personas—the B2B client, the B2B marketer, and the B2B seller—the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) partnered with digital marketing intelligence company NorthPage Inc.<sup>2</sup> to conduct data analysis of online activity and commentary from thousands of content sources globally between mid-March and the end of June 2020. Using IBM Watson™-based AI Ingestor, we captured a data-driven snapshot of the key issues facing each persona, as well as leading practices to help B2B marketers and sellers drive digital closeness in an era of business distancing.

Around the world, countries have been experimenting with ways to re-open for business. New digital modes for engaging and working may have been borne out of necessity, but they'll reveal advantages we won't want to relinquish, even after we can meet again in person. Like other points in history when disruption spawned innovation and quality-of-life improvements, some predict this pandemic could "propel humanity 20 years ahead in tech."<sup>3</sup>

## The B2B decision-makers' distance-based reality

B2B decision-makers' work environments have been turned upside down. Executives accustomed to bustling offices are now working from home and leading their staff remotely. According to IBV research, 11 percent of people in the US worked remotely pre-COVID-19. By June 2020, that proportion had exploded to 45 percent.<sup>4</sup>

While the flexibility to work from home has long been viewed as a benefit, some workers are experiencing the loss of resources and leverage. About 25 percent say remote working has left them feeling isolated and lonely, and concerned about meeting family obligations.<sup>5</sup> Our Watson analysis indicates that remote employees are increasingly productive individually, but collectively, they're more detached. This setback could improve as teams are given the tools and training to collaborate more effectively. But in the meantime, our analysis suggests that some organizations are seeing this as a significant step backward in overall business productivity.

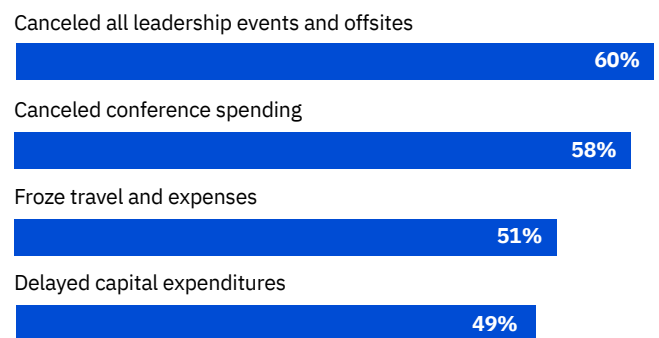
As the pandemic wears on, the remote workforce sprint has transformed into a marathon, and companies are coming to terms with the possibility that it may become semi-permanent. Some organizations, like Twitter, have already announced that employees may work from home even beyond the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> It appears many organizations plan to continue remote work for their employees as a cost-saving measure: 74 percent of CFOs say this shift will be permanent for a proportion of employees.<sup>7</sup>

Widespread belt-tightening is causing workers to do the same (or more) with less. Studies indicate that more than half of employees have experienced either a reduction or a restructure that changed the dynamic and size of their team, leaving workers feeling overwhelmed and disengaged.<sup>8</sup> CFOs are also considering other cost-cutting measures that will have a direct impact on B2B engagement (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

The B2B marketers and sellers who need to connect with decision-makers like Jeannie face a daunting challenge. Stripped of tried-and-true approaches that primarily depend on in-person interaction, they have to find new digital ways to capture clients' attention with messages and offers that get to the heart of what clients want.

**Figure 1**

COVID-19-driven executive actions to cut costs



Source: ZDNet. April 2020. <https://www.zdnet.com/article/cfos-looking-to-make-remote-work-telecommuting-more-permanent-following-covid-19-says-gartner-survey/>

Focus on being a go-to source for support—not just for a narrow solution—but as a trusted business partner.

## *Meet the B2B marketer, Emilia A.*

*When COVID-19's safe distancing practices forced the cancellation of industry conventions, Director of Solution Marketing, Emilia A., knew she had to pivot fast. Her events team undertook the herculean effort to convert their biggest annual conference to a virtual summit within four weeks. But for Emilia, it meant losing the opportunity to interact in person with current and prospective clients. Alone in her apartment, with a kitchen table for an office, most of her human contact is through a screen, and work feels all-consuming.*

*Now the daily edict from management is “find points of leverage,” and Emilia is under pressure to do “whatever it takes” to increase engagement on all fronts—with current customers, active sales opportunities, and by generating new prospects. Her company's sales force is clamoring for support, and it's her team's responsibility to find creative ways to demonstrate the company's value.*

*Emilia has always relied on her strong campaign tools, capabilities, and experience. But the market dynamics have changed precipitously, and she knows a dramatically different approach is needed. Her CMO recently announced they will be shifting more investment toward digital customer experience management tools and, frankly, Emilia thinks it's long overdue.*

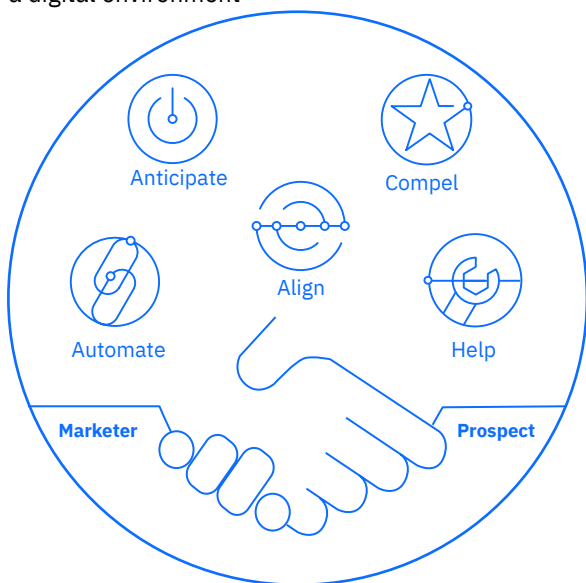
## The B2B Marketer's call to action: Achieve high-fidelity engagement

A recent survey found that 62 percent of marketers say their function has increased in importance.<sup>10</sup> The need to build brand and customer retention through digital, mobile, and social strategies has contributed to the heightened emphasis on marketing's role. Because of the pandemic, 73 percent of B2B CMOs say they're shifting to more online activity to promote their companies and offerings.<sup>11</sup>

In this time of continued social and business distancing, digital closeness is essential to help mitigate sales declines and maintain—or grow—client relationships. To uncover how B2B organizations around the world are using digital technologies and channels to engage with clients in meaningful ways, we used Watson to gather and interpret massive amounts of content to uncover trends and areas of interest specific to B2B decision-makers, marketers, and sellers. The results for marketing reveal five essentials of digital closeness that can help B2B marketers address the challenges wrought by COVID-19—in essence, the five elements create marketers' new digital handshake with prospects and clients (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

How B2B marketers achieve high-fidelity engagement in a digital environment



Source: IBM Institute for Business Value.

### Automate

The lines between marketing and sales become less distinct when organizations weave together a strong network of applications, data, and processes spanning customer relationship management (CRM), marketing automation, and personalization. Automate marketing along the engagement journey so sales teams can focus on their most promising leads. In light of the pandemic, and to possibly avoid further spread of illness, turn to automated software platforms focused on employee solutions to streamline productivity with confidence, and assure teams are engaging safely.

For example, for those businesses re-opening their offices, Salesforce's work.com offers a contact tracing platform for COVID-19 that enables tracing interactions across employees, customers, meetings, and locations to identify possible points of transmission.<sup>12</sup>

### Anticipate

Studies indicate more than half of surveyed B2B specialists trust that account-based marketing (ABM), which allows for a far more targeted and personalized approach, is the right strategy for their business.<sup>13</sup> Build out detailed account-based personas and scenarios informed by rich customer and contextual data from a wide range of inputs—including pipeline stages, knowledge of other vendors, and detailed industry expertise—to anticipate decision-makers' drivers and doubts with precision and orchestrate a digital outreach that will truly resonate.

Work closely with sales on key accounts to craft micro-targeted campaigns that respond to specific pain points, issues, and interests. Stress customer-centricity and experience management using Voice of the Customer (VoC) listening programs that capture and analyze customer feedback to pinpoint and correct areas needing improvement. Software-based programs like Medallia and Qualtrics gauge customer feedback via survey responses, exposing potential pain points and issues that could impact customer loyalty.<sup>14</sup>

### Align

Address the new challenges clients face using a tone that's personal, helpful, and enticing. Tailor outbound communication frequency, channel choice, and content mix, to be valuable and persuasive. Revisit automated emails and social messaging strategies. And instead of relying on rule-based triggers like open rates, consider leveraging detailed personas to determine how to better personalize campaigns.

Decision-makers and influencers may not have time to explore your offers when they receive them. Provide limited-term opt-outs. Let clients reduce contact frequency or switch to a preferred channel, like Instagram. These options can increase the chance of staying connected while demonstrating awareness of and respect for clients' availability and preferences.

## Compel

Our analysis indicates that business professionals have significantly increased the time they spend reading online, with the majority of it being news-related. Think like a publisher and create and curate content that feeds a portion of the audience's appetite for information. What medium and which channels would work best to share with which clients? Long-form blogs or papers? Videos, podcasts, tweets, or live webcasts? Build a digital content strategy of paid and earned media that will reach targeted online audiences where they're most likely to go.

Enable easy online access to research-based content that provides thoughtful analysis and insights relevant to clients' immediate and long-term concerns. For B2B businesses, targeted content marketing, as one communications specialist noted, can be the "red carpet that lines the walkway to the stage where the sales rep puts on a show."<sup>15</sup>

## Help

Focus on being a go-to source for support—not just for a narrow solution—but as a trusted business partner who fully appreciates a client's circumstances and is ready and able to assist. Offer virtual workshops or opportunities that allow prospects to experiment with products or services at no cost. For example, IBM opened up its Enterprise Design Thinking education platform with free courses and toolkits.<sup>16</sup> Communications expert Heidi Rosenberg said, "Corporate reputation and customer loyalty can emerge stronger than ever if you demonstrate to customers that you really are there for them when they need it most."<sup>17</sup>

Look for innovative ways to extend the essence of what your brand stands for, and as IBM CMO Michelle Peluso says, "contribute to the cure and the solution."<sup>18</sup> For example, IBM joined the COVID-19 High-Performance Computing Consortium, which will deliver an unprecedented amount of computing power to help researchers develop treatments with the hope of ultimately eliminating the virus.<sup>19</sup>



For all the damage COVID-19 has caused, disruption tends to boost innovation.

## Meet the B2B seller, Lucian R.

*Strategic Account Manager Lucian R. was planning to introduce himself to Jeannie W. at his company's user conference. He knew her organization was ripe for modernization and was glad to hear they'd hired someone to transform their customer experience. He's confident his solutions will be a good fit. When the event went virtual due to the pandemic, Lucian noticed Jeannie had registered, but she didn't attend the sessions, and he's not sure how to get her ear.*

*Lucian is pursuing multiple prospects like Jeannie across six top accounts. He's hosted a handful of calls to regroup with some key decision-makers, but he hasn't made much headway. Their budgets are now up in the air, and they aren't sure which projects will move forward.*

*Lucian is normally upbeat and optimistic. But he worries he'll lose influence and relevancy if he can't be onsite with his clients. Until he can meet face-to-face again, Lucian feels the phone is his best option, but he knows that's not enough for him to stay top of mind, even with his existing accounts. Lucian needs help and is leaning heavily on management and Emilia A.'s marketing team for creative ideas and support.*

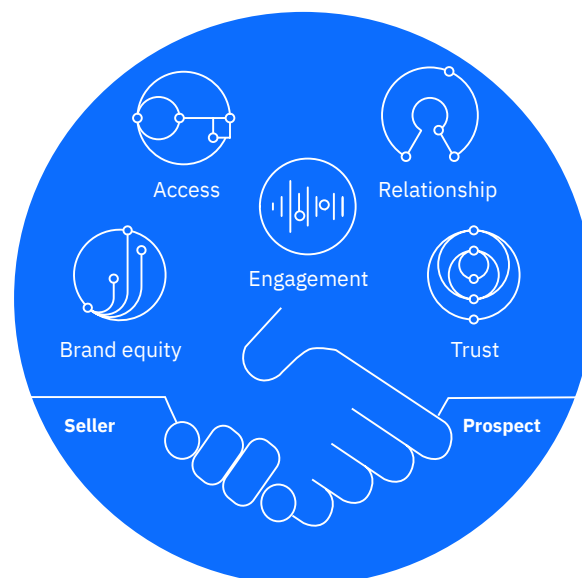
## The B2B seller's mission: Overcome business distancing

B2B salespeople are facing a distance-based pursuit of a collection of individuals. A webcast isn't the same as bringing people together in person. Still, successful sales organizations are turning to digital methods and solutions to connect and get closer to decision-makers and influencers.

As we did for marketers, we used Watson to mine content that sheds light on what sellers can do to get closer to clients online while maintaining a healthy physical distance. The results from the seller's digital handshake with clients and prospects consists of five pillars to deepen relationships via digital means (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

How B2B sellers can achieve digital closeness while doing business at a distance



Source: IBM Institute for Business Value.

## Brand equity

Though the pandemic is forcing many organizations to revisit their offerings and go-to-market approaches, their brand vision should remain constant. Yet many struggle to communicate, let alone execute, against these ideals. In an IBV study on enterprise experience, more than half of the 1,000 executives surveyed confessed their employees only “generally understood” their companies’ brand vision.<sup>20</sup> In this environment of business distancing, what differentiates your company’s brand needs to be crystal clear, and reinforced in every interaction, whether in person or online. It’s salespeople who personify the brand, and every interaction either builds or depletes brand and relationship equity.

Seize this time as an opportunity to formally assess brand experiences for consistency and effectiveness enterprise-wide. Impact areas could include customer access, customer priority, value type, delivery friction, delivery model, help and sales friction, purchase scope, purchase duration, and product availability. Align data from marketing and social analytics, CRM systems, customer experience analysis, and customer support to determine how best to leverage brand equity to create customized, relevant outreach strategies.

## Access

Pandemic-driven selling introduces a higher floor and lower ceiling, meaning it’s harder to get on a prospect’s calendar, and once you’re confirmed, easier to have a meeting canceled by prospects who want to reclaim their time. Engage your ecosystem collectively to widen the net, expand into an entirely new market, or partner to add value. For example, in Japan, where building relationships is an essential first step to doing business, B2B companies are producing personalized videos that are forwarded to a prospect by an ecosystem partner who knows the prospect and can make an introduction.<sup>21</sup>

Mandated physical distancing can provide unique opportunities for customer closeness. Turn to collaboration tools to interact with customers, or take it to the next level with imaginative experiences to catch and keep a prospect’s attention (see sidebar, “Flagship Solutions Group: Cheers to unique opportunities for customer closeness”).

## Flagship Solutions Group: Cheers to unique opportunities for customer closeness<sup>22</sup>

US-based Flagship Solutions Group is utilizing collaboration tools to transform its client messaging from a traditional sales approach to educational, thought leadership, and relationship-building activities. For example, the company hosted a virtual wine tasting event to connect with clients in a lighthearted way. The company shipped wine tubes to their agreeable clients to sample and taste during a group video chat.

## Engagement

Digital engagement can be highly effective when it focuses on collaboration and human connection. Platforms like Miro Virtual Whiteboard, Mural, and Adobe XD are ideal for brainstorming sessions, project kickoffs, and team meetings. Subject matter experts (SMEs) from anywhere in the world can join the conversation, providing a versatility that would have been more difficult and expensive to coordinate in-person (see Insight, “Collaborate effectively, virtually”). Ship prototypes or samples in advance of video calls to demonstrate a product while the client has it in hand. Or make use of extended reality (XR), which includes virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), to produce interactive visual references of products that clients can explore virtually.

## Relationship

Expenditure on nonessentials has been dramatically cut in favor of maintaining business continuity, making the relationship management aspect of sales more important than ever.<sup>23</sup> Empathy and flexibility can be a lifeline, so check in to see how clients are faring, be sensitive to their unique challenges, and pay attention to personal or financial travails.

Consider repackaging offerings into smaller engagements or solutions at lower price points with the option to build-as-you-go. Perhaps restructure financial arrangements. Demonstrate value by proactively organizing a team of SMEs, either colleagues or people from partnering organizations, to address clients’ challenges. Or connect prospects to existing clients who may be experiencing similar problems and can offer helpful suggestions, while also serving as a reference for your organization.

## Insight: Collaborate effectively, virtually<sup>24</sup>

IBM Garage is a methodology that relies on intense collaboration.<sup>25</sup> It combines agile practices with a human-centric, outcome-first approach to quickly move from ideas to implementation. Sitting side-by-side, IBMers and client teams engage in activities designed to spur rapid connection and innovation. Today, with so many locales under fluctuating pandemic restrictions, that team room has become a computer screen. Armed with collaboration software, agile processes, and the ability to easily pull in IBM experts no matter where they live, virtual Garage teams stay productive and on track.

None of the traditional elements that make up a trusted B2B relationship have lessened with business distancing—if anything, they’re now more important.

## Trust

According to The CMO Survey, marketers predict that post-COVID-19, customers will place a higher value than ever on trusting relationships, with 29 percent saying it will be their top priority.<sup>26</sup> Build digital trust upon visitors’ first interactions, be they a website, podcast, video, or conversation with a chatbot. Design and functionality say a lot about an organization’s technical savvy and capabilities. Stay abreast of the digital experiences clients and prospects encounter, and take initiative to surface any pain points so they can be fixed.

None of the traditional elements that make up a trusted B2B relationship have lessened with business distancing—if anything, they’re now more important. Trust is earned when the delivery and quality of products and services meet or exceed client requirements. Trust is earned when clients feel their vendors and suppliers are committed to cybersecurity and are adhering to data privacy agreements. Trust is earned when clients’ queries and requests are responded to quickly, honestly, and with transparency. And trust is earned when businesses demonstrate that their corporate values align with values the client holds dear.

## Action guide

### *Deepen B2B relationships during COVID-19 and beyond*

Digital overload is a distinct possibility in this era when many of us “live at work.” Video conferencing fatigue is already emerging as a real concern for remote workers.<sup>27</sup> This is why digital interactions need to be purposeful, human-centered, and effective.

Achieving that demands a fierce, relentless focus on experience design and management. The digital handshake between B2B businesses and their clients is possible when marketers and sellers deliver high-fidelity engagement and if they have the basics in place:

#### **1. Become an expert with breadth and depth**

Build cross-industry market intelligence to gain a nuanced understanding of clients’ needs and how these might shift post-pandemic.

#### **2. Make sure marketers and sellers are “joined at the hip”**

Revisit and align marketing campaigns and sales strategies to create targeted programs for prospects and clients.

#### **3. “Double down” on your top accounts**

Account-based marketing (ABM) is not new. But if you haven’t adopted it yet, now may be the right time to make the shift.

## Related IBV reports

“COVID-19 Action Guide: Beyond the Great Lockdown.”  
<https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/covid-19-action-guide>

“The CMO’s guide for turning mayhem into momentum.”  
<https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/cmo-action-guide#>

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