

2020 B2B MARKETING TRENDS REPORT:

HOW TO AUGMENT THE MARKETING ORGANIZATION FOR A DIGITAL-FIRST FUTURE



Real-world insights from B2B marketing leaders



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, organizations that sell to other businesses have had to rapidly change their go-to-market models. In fact, according to [a recent McKinsey survey](#) of 3,600 B2B decision-makers, 96% of respondents say they've had to change the way they do business as digital channels become the default approach.

To cut through the noise and find out what the best B2B marketers are doing to adapt to today's new digital norms, ON24 and NetLine sat down with leading marketing expert and CMO at Conversica, Rashmi Vitta. The trio discussed today's new reality at length and discussed what marketers can do to keep their newfound digital momentum going. Here are a few highlights from their discussion:

MOST B2B ORGANIZATIONS ARE COPING – BUT THEY MUST NOT STAY STATIC

Although 2020 has seen major impacts to the world economy, B2B organizations are demonstrating significant resilience. In particular, the working relationships between sales and marketing are, on the whole, positive.

In the poll of B2B professionals, **59% state that their sales and marketing organizations are performing well**, with 8% of the total describing the situation as “excellent” and 51% stating it was “good.” By contrast, fewer than one in 10 (8%) said it was “poor” or “very poor.”

That being said, the near-complete shift to digital interactions means that organizations must improve sales-marketing alignment going forward, or risk losing ground to competitors with stronger performance in the digital arena.

CANCELED PHYSICAL EVENTS POSE A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE

For high-end enterprise sales in particular, face-to-face interactions remained a standard way of doing business even up to 2019. This can be demonstrated by the numerous, large-scale

conferences present even in the software industry — from Dreamforce in the US to DMEXCO in Europe.

But the reliance on in-person events has posed a significant issue. Data in this report show 73% of respondents cited the cancellation of in-person events as a key challenge — higher than any other problem — quickly followed by fewer sales opportunities being generated. Following this was that **46% said there were fewer sales opportunities being generated.**

DIGITAL CHANNELS SCALE EFFECTIVELY BUT REQUIRE A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The move to digital channels provides numerous benefits, from the ability to perform more efficiently in the absence of business travel to the opportunity to connect with a far wider audience.

However, even though **47% report that reallocating budget from physical to digital has worked well**, marketers need to be aware that the change in business environment has shifted buyer behavior.

For example, buyers have been consuming far more content. [Figures from NetLine](#) show that **the total demand for B2B content rose by 49.8% year-over-year** in May 2020 — but this may represent an increase in the number of touches that now happen in the research stage, rather than a rise in total purchases. Similarly, ON24's [COVID Benchmarks Report](#) shows that in April 2020, **webinar consumption has risen by 293%** compared to the 2019 monthly average. It is therefore important to both adapt the weighting given to content touchpoints during qualification and to tailor messages to the changing environment.

Fortunately, marketers are adapting. Some **67% of marketers say changing communication style and messaging has worked well**, while close to half (47%) have changed roles and responsibilities. More than one in eight (13%) also say they have benefited from adjusting KPIs and targets.

HOW TO LEARN MORE

The webinar generating these insights is always-on and ready to view. [Register now to hear more.](#)

To sign up to future sessions, visit www.on24.com/resources/upcoming-webinars.

Tessa Barron, VP Marketing at ON24 and David Fortino, SVP Audience and Product at NetLine would also like to thank Rashmi Vittal, CMO at Conversica for joining the discussion and providing valuable recommendations for today's B2B professionals.

CHANGE IS CRITICAL IN THE SHORT, MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM

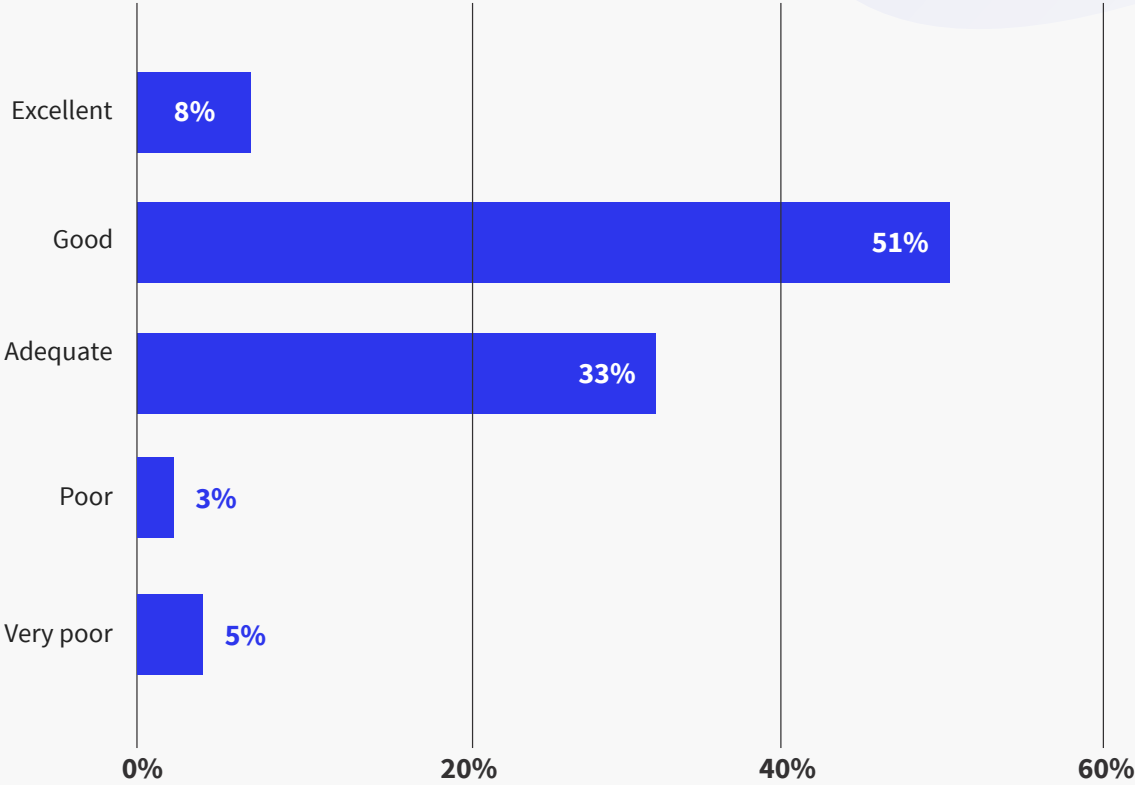
The rise of digital has categorically transformed the marketing world — that is no surprise. But up to now, this transformation has occurred at a very different pace to what sales and marketing organizations have experienced over the past few months as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19.

In a recent discussion, our experts shared recommendations for immediate action to keep

marketing relevant during uncertain times. Now, marketers face a potentially much longer-term digital-first future in which strategy, roles and responsibilities, technology and buyer behavior look different than before.

As it stands, marketers appear to be staying afloat — respondents to an ON24 poll shared how they think their organization is faring at the moment:

In your opinion, how well is your sales and marketing organization currently performing?



Encouragingly, the majority (51%) are experiencing good performance at their organization, with a further 8% seeing performance as excellent. One-third think their organization is performing adequately, and under 1 in 10 think performance has been poor (3%) or very poor (5%). Looking to help marketers get to a place of great performance, our experts have shared just how important it is to keep preparing for change beyond the short-term.

DON'T FREEZE, FUTURE-PROOF

Tessa Barron, VP of Marketing at ON24, notes that while the past few months have condensed the typical shift to digital into a few short weeks, marketers still need to be forward-looking and future-proof efforts. Even as companies move out of crisis mode, the marketing world has experienced an inflection point from which there is no going back. In fact, Tessa suggests marketers need to redouble efforts in digital transformation:



I THINK THERE IS A REAL CHANCE THAT IF YOU STAY FROZEN, YOUR COMPETITORS ARE GOING TO OUT-DIGITAL YOU. AT A TIME WHEN RAPID REVENUE RECOVERY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER, IT'S JUST GOING TO LEAVE YOU EVEN FURTHER BEHIND."

Rashmi Vittal, CMO at Conversica, concurs — she acknowledges companies have had to get by in the short-term with whatever stage of digital transformation they were at when this period of crisis began, but encourages them to keep investing in digital with economic recovery in mind. Though the current situation is largely unprecedented, economic uncertainty and recessions are not. Based on how companies have reacted to those downturns in the past, it's always better to keep investing:



RESEARCH SHOWS THAT IF COMPANIES STAY FLAT, FREEZE, OR DRAMATICALLY REDUCE THEIR SPEND IN MARKETING AND SALES NOW, THAT THEY ARE LESS LIKELY TO RECOVER FAST ENOUGH AGAINST THEIR MARKET COMPETITION WHEN THE TIME ARISES."

For Rashmi, this long-term preparation includes considerations of any workforce reduction or resizing that has taken place in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. Economic recovery is likely to happen in stages and companies need to be able to scale workforce productivity up or down in a cost-effective manner to meet demand.

BE BOLD AND EMBRACE CHANGES

David Fortino, SVP Audience and Product at NetLine, sees the dilemma in simple terms — that to not change would be catastrophic. He reminds organizations that their reaction not only impacts employees, but how customers feel and what market footprint they leave. As such, reacting based on a prospect’s potentially very different needs is crucial. He cites a report by MarketingSherpa which found that 44% of B2B buyers are looking for better ways to extract value from existing members, while just 16% want information about additional capabilities that could bolster flow through.

Changes in customer priorities should lead to changes in strategy. David urges forward-thinking marketers in more archaic or conservative industries that are resistant to change, to push through:



NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO HOLD BACK THE REINS AND STAY TRUE TO WHAT YOU WERE IN THE PAST. IT'S A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO TRY TO INNOVATE AND REACH BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE BASED UPON WHAT YOUR CLIENTS ARE TELLING YOU."

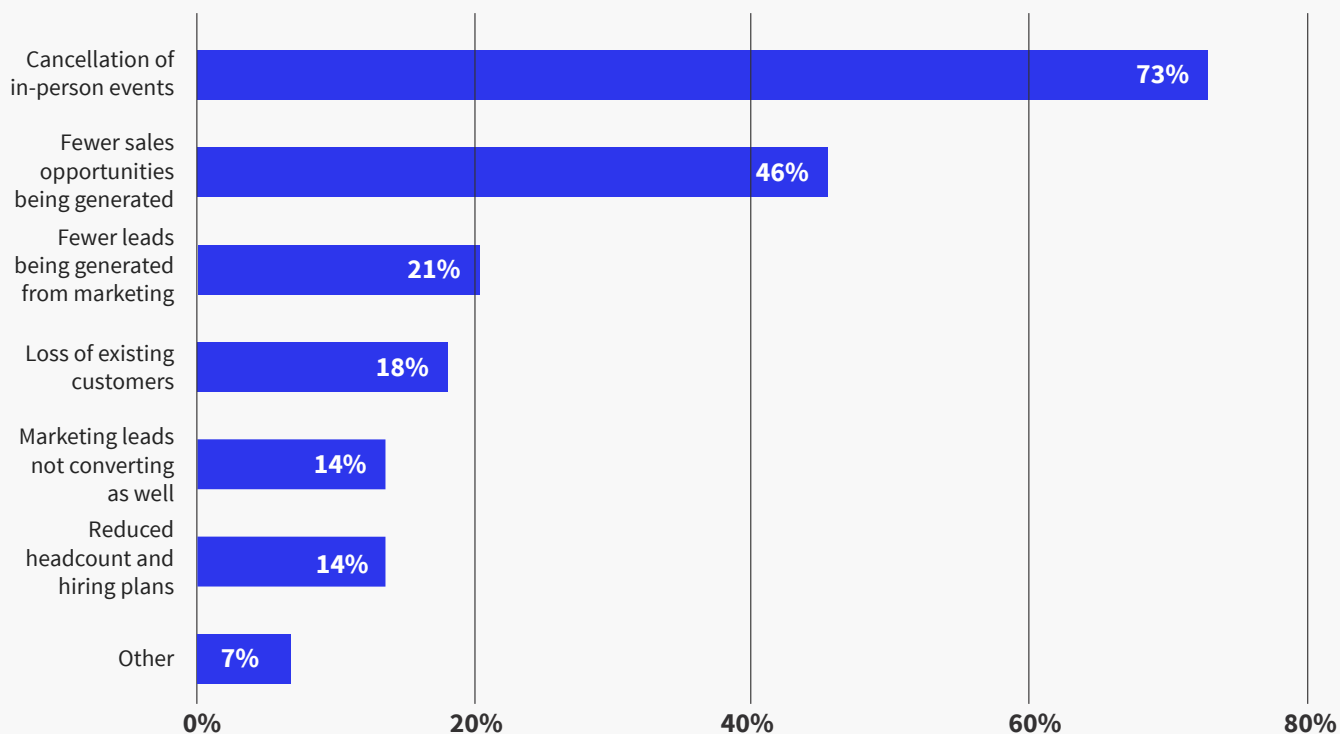
To convince leadership that stasis isn't the answer, Rashmi recommends marketers take a data-driven approach to investment that can prove ROI for every dollar spent.

WHAT ARE EXPERTS DOING TO ACTION CHANGE?

Just as change is critical beyond the short term, marketers are likely to keep facing challenges alongside a developing response to the pandemic in the professional world.

An ON24 poll allowed marketers to share some of the key challenges their team is facing at this stage:

What challenges are your sales and marketing teams currently facing?



Unsurprisingly, more than 7 in 10 (73%) respondents are feeling challenged by the cancellation of in-person events. [In our Q1 report](#), our experts shared their expertise on taking in-person events online (at the time this was newly relevant). Sales and marketing are now facing the likelihood of long-term changes to the nature of events.

Other commonly faced challenges are fewer sales opportunities (46%) and fewer leads generated from marketing (21%), as well as the loss of existing customers (18%), marketing leads not converting as well (14%), and reduced headcount and hiring plans (14%).

CANCELED PHYSICAL EVENTS WILL LEAVE HOLES TO FILL

Just as the majority of respondents feel challenged by the cancellation of in-person events, Tessa has seen this challenge facilitate a remapping of the entire customer journey at ON24. Removing physical events from the mix highlighted gaps in the buyer's journey from the top of the funnel to individual sales meetings, which were being filled by the catch-all opportunity provided by in-person discussions:



AT PHYSICAL EVENTS, IN THE SAME EXPERIENCE YOU'RE ABLE TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO'S READY FOR A DEMO RIGHT NOW WHILE ALSO EXPLAINING YOUR SOLUTION TO SOMEONE WHO MAY NOT EVEN UNDERSTAND THAT IT EXISTS. YOU'RE ABLE TO HAVE THOSE FAR-RANGING CONVERSATIONS. WE WERE USING THAT AS A BIT OF A CRUTCH TO DEAL WITH 'THE MESSY MIDDLE.'

Tidying this messy middle meant creating specific programs for newly distinct stages of the buying journey. This includes adding a sales layer to every single stage, using virtual assistants and automation where needed to allow for more deliberate strategy and creating a new org chart looking at foundational capabilities like brand and demand gen in relation to every buyer stage.

HOW ARE YOU?

At NetLine, David and his team have recognized a big departure in the type of content being consumed via their platform, in particular the high volume of content that speaks to people's mental state. With marketers seeking information on topics like anxiety, stress management and finding confidence, David emphasizes the importance of adapting both messaging and strategy to lean into what key accounts and partners need right now — not just as companies and marketers, but as people.



WE CAN OFFER THE MOST VALUE WHEN WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT EXERCISES AND CAMPAIGNS AND EXECUTIONS, BUT ACTUAL REAL-WORLD DIALOGUE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY ACCOUNTS. IF THAT MEANS TALKING PEOPLE THROUGH A TOUGH DAY, THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES. EARNING THAT TRUST LASTS IN PERPETUITY."

Rashmi adds to this by reminding marketers that digital interactions are now more important than they ever have been. In this context, starting interactions with a simple "how are you?" is crucial to showing an understanding of how testing these times are.

What's more, Rashmi highlights that prioritizing empathy at this time means keeping in mind where the majority of customer interaction and customer connection points take place on a day-to-day basis. Often, this is with customer success teams or account management teams who can feel constrained from providing active, personalized engagement by a lack of resources or overwhelming client-to-rep ratios. As such, enabling and empowering teams involved with these regular touchpoints will allow for better conversations that truly get a sense of what customers need. Rashmi says:



EMPATHY SHOULD BE THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND HOW YOU HANDLE THESE BUSINESS SITUATIONS. HOW YOU DEAL WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS NOW IS A GREAT INDICATOR FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM, AND FOR HOW THEY'RE GOING TO HELP YOU ONCE THE RECOVERY PHASE HITS – THEY'RE GOING TO BE RIGHT THERE WITH YOU."

Empathy with customers needs to be a proactive process, rather than a reactive one. Tessa shares that for ON24, this meant building more infrastructure around customer touchpoints, including a smarter configuration of their inbox where once customers could only contact ON24 via a single email address:

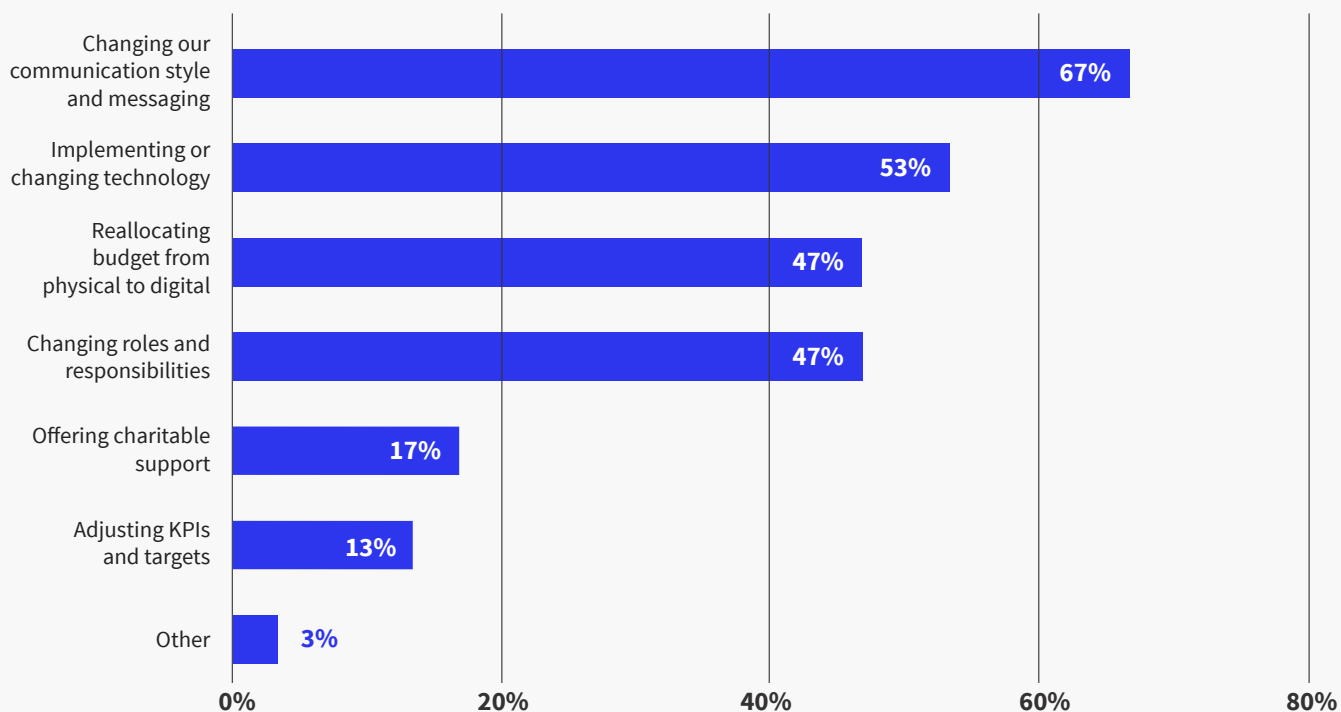


I AM VERY EXCITED TO REBUILD THE WAY THAT OUR WORKFLOW PROCESSES OPERATE, MAINLY SO THAT WE CAN STOP REACTING, BECAUSE IT'S JUST IS NOT SUSTAINABLE."

DEALING WITH SCALE IN A DIGITAL-FIRST FUTURE

So, what steps are marketers themselves taking in their continued approach to this challenging time? Some are indicated in a poll by ON24:

What changes or approaches have worked well for your sales and marketing team?



The change or approach that has worked well for the most respondents is changing communication style and messaging (67%). Rashmi shares that creating bolder messaging to rise above the noise has been a key step for Conversica:



YOU HAVE TO REALLY THINK ABOUT WHETHER CONTENT IS GOING TO BE EDUCATIONAL, INFORMATIVE AND ADVISORY TO YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE – IN WHATEVER SHAPE THAT MIGHT TAKE.”

Other steps that have worked well for the marketers surveyed are implementing and changing technology (53%), reallocating budget from physical to digital (47%), changing roles and responsibilities (47%), offering charitable support (17%) and adjusting KPIs and targets (13%).

These approaches speak to a need to adapt to changing productivity and demand — to this end, our experts consider the issue of scaling for sales and marketing teams whose digital capabilities may be put to the test in the months and years to come.

FOCUS ON CORE KPIS

Now that every interaction is necessarily digital, Tessa considers a key step to be starting to qualify those interactions. This involves documenting and measuring the nature of customers interactions with digital touchpoints:



WHEN EVERYTHING IS DIGITAL, THE SCALE OF YOUR INTERACTIONS WILL EXPONENTIALLY MULTIPLY. YOU NEED TO HAVE PROCESSES IN PLACE TO BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND WHO IS THERE TO CONSUME CONTENT, WHO IS IN A DISCOVERY PHASE, WHO IS READY TO TALK TO A SALESPERSON AND WHO IS READY TO BUY.”

David agrees that without these processes, many companies are at risk of becoming overwhelmed. But he emphasizes that as long as new data is being distilled down into the core KPIs that are right for a team, executive leadership, and an organization as a whole, this will be more manageable:



FOCUS ON HAVING A UNIFIED ATTRIBUTION MODEL THAT IS HOLISTICALLY APPLIED ACROSS ALL TOUCHPOINTS AND SYSTEMS. IF YOU’VE GOT A COMMON PROOF POINT WHERE ALL DATA IS BEING VETTED OUT USING THE SAME STANDARD TERMINOLOGY, IT LESSENS THE BURDEN.”

RECONSIDER HOW YOU SCORE

Rashmi cites the experience of her team at Conversica, reminding marketers that engagement can and should be scored differently during times of crisis or change. Engagement now is different than engagement before, and many sales teams might struggle as the qualification of leads catches up to this new reality.

Assets like an augmented workforce or an intelligent virtual assistant can help to determine lead quality for overwhelmed sales teams, who may also be feeling the effects of frozen hiring or reduced workforce:



DIGITAL INTERACTIONS ARE TWICE AS IMPORTANT NOW THAN EVER BEFORE. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO REACH CUSTOMERS AT SCALE IN A WAY THAT'S GOING TO BE MEANINGFUL, SO YOU CAN GET MORE OF THAT FOR YOUR SALESPEOPLE?"

For David, the knowledge that digital interactions are now more important can also be seen as welcome news. At a time when management teams are asking professionals to cut back on cost and bandwidth, and to economize their efforts in general, it's unlikely that free time is being used to casually peruse vendor websites:



IF PEOPLE ARE FINDING THEIR WAY TO YOU AND ENGAGING WITH YOU, MAYBE SOME OF THE STATS THAT HISTORICALLY WE WOULD HAVE SAID WEREN'T AS IMPORTANT, COULD ARGUABLY BE IMPORTANT IN THIS CURRENT CLIMATE. YET THE TIMELINE AND THE DEFINITION AS TO WHAT THAT MEANS TO THE SALESPERSON LIKELY NEEDS TO CHANGE."

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

Here are our experts' top tips for augmenting long-term recovery in the next phase of this unprecedented time:

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT BEFORE TAKING DRASTIC ACTION

Tessa urges sales and marketing teams to not panic or rush:



TAKE THE TIME TO RESET, EVEN IF JUST FOR A WEEK. I THINK THAT IT GOES A LONG WAY TOWARD BEING READY FOR WHAT'S NEXT, AND I HIGHLY ENCOURAGE AN AUDIT AND REASSESSMENT. MAKE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES NOW SO THAT YOU CAN START TO EXECUTE SOONER."

LOOK AHEAD AND INVEST IN THE LONG-TERM

For Rashmi, remaining open-minded and investing in a long-term future is key:



THINK CREATIVELY, THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX AND CONSIDER NEW WAYS THAT PEOPLE, PROCESSES AND SOLUTIONS CAN HELP YOU – BECAUSE IT DOESN'T HAVE TO GO BACK TO BUSINESS AS USUAL. THERE ARE WAYS THAT YOU CAN ADAPT TO THIS NEW NORMAL."

STRENGTHEN FOUNDATIONS AT A HUMAN LEVEL

David's top tip is to nurture the most strategic accounts and partners at a personal level, despite this not being particularly scalable:



THE DEEPER AN INROAD YOU HAVE IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A VENDOR IN A DIFFICULT TIME WILL BE REMEMBERED, AND IT MOST CERTAINLY WILL BE RECIPROCATED. IT'S TO GIVE THEM CONFIDENCE THAT YOU'RE THE RIGHT THING FOR THEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE."