

# How to market your business in the Covid-19 era





“The world is upside down,  
it's going to take a lot of hands  
to turn it right side up.”

*Leymah Gbowee*

# Covid-19 is causing the biggest economic disruption since the second world war.

Consumer behaviour is being radically reshaped right now. Covid-19 is disrupting communities, cities, careers, lifestyles and people's sense of wellbeing. As despondent as we're all feeling, we can't just give up hope. Good marketing matters now more than ever. But how can we market responsibly during such turbulent times?

This guide is a compilation of some of the most successful crisis marketing strategies from marketing thought leaders around the world and my 30 years experience working with over 200 brands throughout Australasia. I sincerely hope you find valuable marketing tips that you can apply to your business.

## **Don't freeze. Keep moving your brand forward.**

In times of chaos, our natural inclination is often to freeze and wait it out. However, while it might feel counterintuitive, if you invest positively into your marketing programme when everyone else has stopped spending, you can gain 'mind share' in your category. You will also position your brand for take-off when the Covid-19 crisis is over, and the market turns.

## **Connect with customers in new and creative ways.**

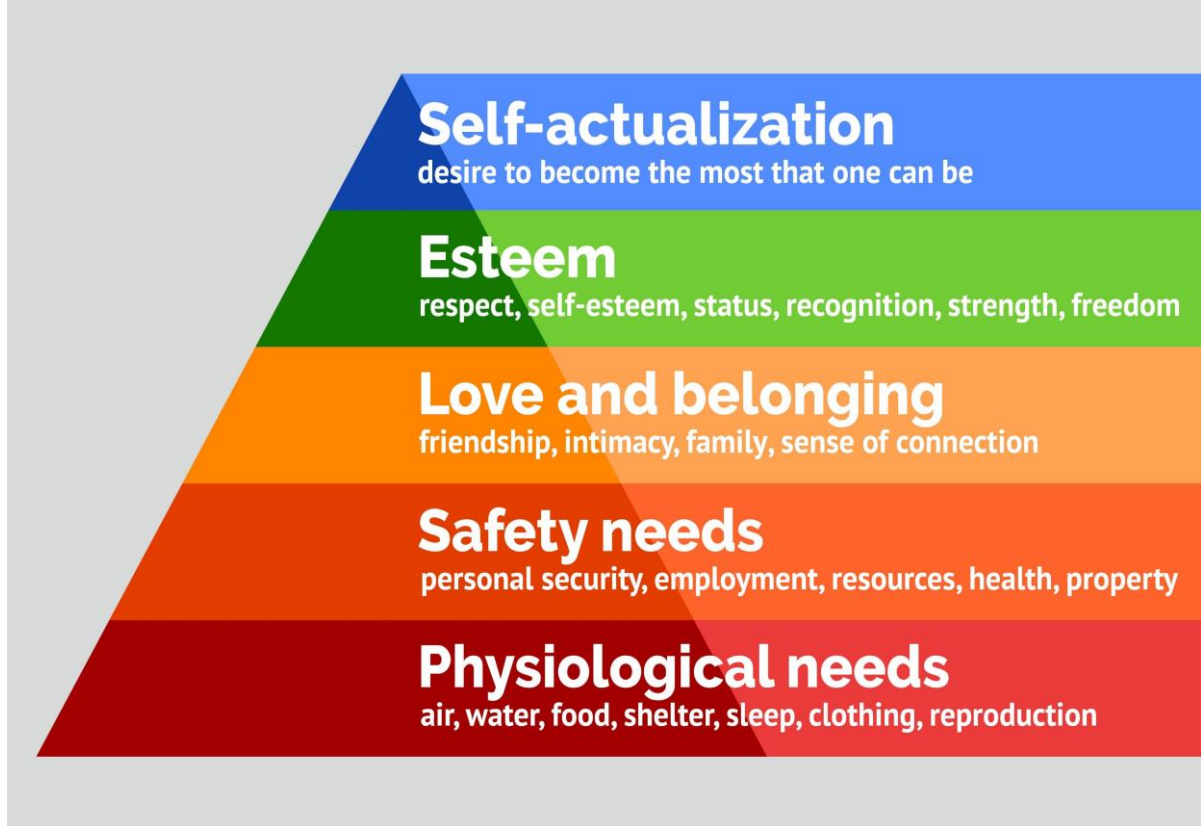
Moving forward, we need to sync with the big shifts in consumer behaviour that are occurring right now and adjust our marketing strategies.

The challenge: How to take who you are and what you do and apply it more meaningfully to where your customers are at right now.

**I hope you find this guide useful and wish you all the best for these difficult times.**

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## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model is now more relevant than ever before.

**Back in 1943, Abraham Maslow placed his knowledge of human behaviour and motivations into a user-friendly pyramid form.**

His hierarchy said that our lower-level needs such as food, shelter and safety must be met before moving up to the next level of needs such as belonging, accomplishment and self-esteem. Since its introduction in 1943 it has been the pre-eminent model used by social scientists around the world to make sense of what's going on in society.

Today, many scholars see these levels as continuously overlapping each other, and lower levels can take precedence over higher levels at any point in time - and that's what is happening right now as Covid-19 ravages the world.

Over the last 10 years of economic prosperity the world has collectively been moving up the pyramid from basic essential needs to fulfilling more aspirational needs. This is evidenced by the strong growth of luxury brands such as Prada and Gucci. However, the global Covid-19 pandemic suddenly changed our basic psychological needs. Now, we're reverting to seeking safety, food and shelter, and a sense of belonging.

### **What does this mean for marketing?**

Business owners must focus their marketing content on the needs at the bottom of the pyramid. Safety, security and family will speak to your audience more than aspirational messages at this time.





## Focus first on message clarity.

Already congested media channels are flooded with Covid-19 comms. There is so much noise that your message is easily lost. How does your messaging measure up? Is it crystal clear and quickly understood? Is it solving a problem for consumers? Is it compassionate?

Narratives will need to get sharper. As the crisis evolves, consumers will make decisions about what they see as essential and expendable. If your messaging is not immediately obvious you run the risk of being seen as irrelevant.

*Now is a good time to review your brand story and messaging strategy for clarity and relevance. This will create more powerful communications.*

Return to your Brand Heart – your purpose, vision, mission and values – to remind yourself of what your brand stands for, what problems you solve, how you do business, why you care (your purpose) and what that all means in the context of Covid-19. Think about how you can position your brand as a mentor to help guide your customers through the crisis.

### **Customers will not walk into fog.**

If they are confused about what you do and what you stand for, they won't act. People generally move away from situations in which they are confused to ones that they understand and feel in control of. So be super clear.

**Take the time to give your brand story and marketing messaging a clarity cleanse and tune-up. If you need help, get in touch and [book a free brand story clarity session with us.](#)**



## Communicate with empathy.

Although it might seem less of a novelty factor now, keep up with the moments of random kindness and acts of empathy. Remember the community in Italy, singing together from their balconies? Keep up the social distancing exercising together. Younger people, keep shopping for the elderly. Musicians and artists, share your songs with us on social media.

### **These moments touch our hearts.**

The tone of our most affected States, and much of the world, is somber and frustrated as everyone is suffering loss in some way – their jobs, their investments and their social life. Think about what your customer is experiencing right now. No cashflow. Cabin fever. Distraction. Fear. Bored kids. Everything on hold. As marketers we need to be incredibly sensitive to the needs of others now, because the structure of all our lives has changed so swiftly and dramatically.

### **Right now, ‘tone of voice’ is just as important as substance.**

Soften your marketing messages to match the current mood of the nation. Be tactful, empathetic and mindful. Show compassion and build relationships based on being helpful and authentic rather than the transactional sales relationships of times past. Being genuinely empathetic and reassuring customers in a “we’re going to get through this together” manner is a vital ingredient of successful marketing during this crisis.

# Tune-up your online presence

Over the last 18 months, the whole world has suddenly and dramatically moved online, and many businesses have been caught short with digital and social media experiences that are simply not fit for purpose.

With social distancing the name of the game, digital communication allows us to stay apart yet remain connected, and now more than ever your online presence needs to be seamless.

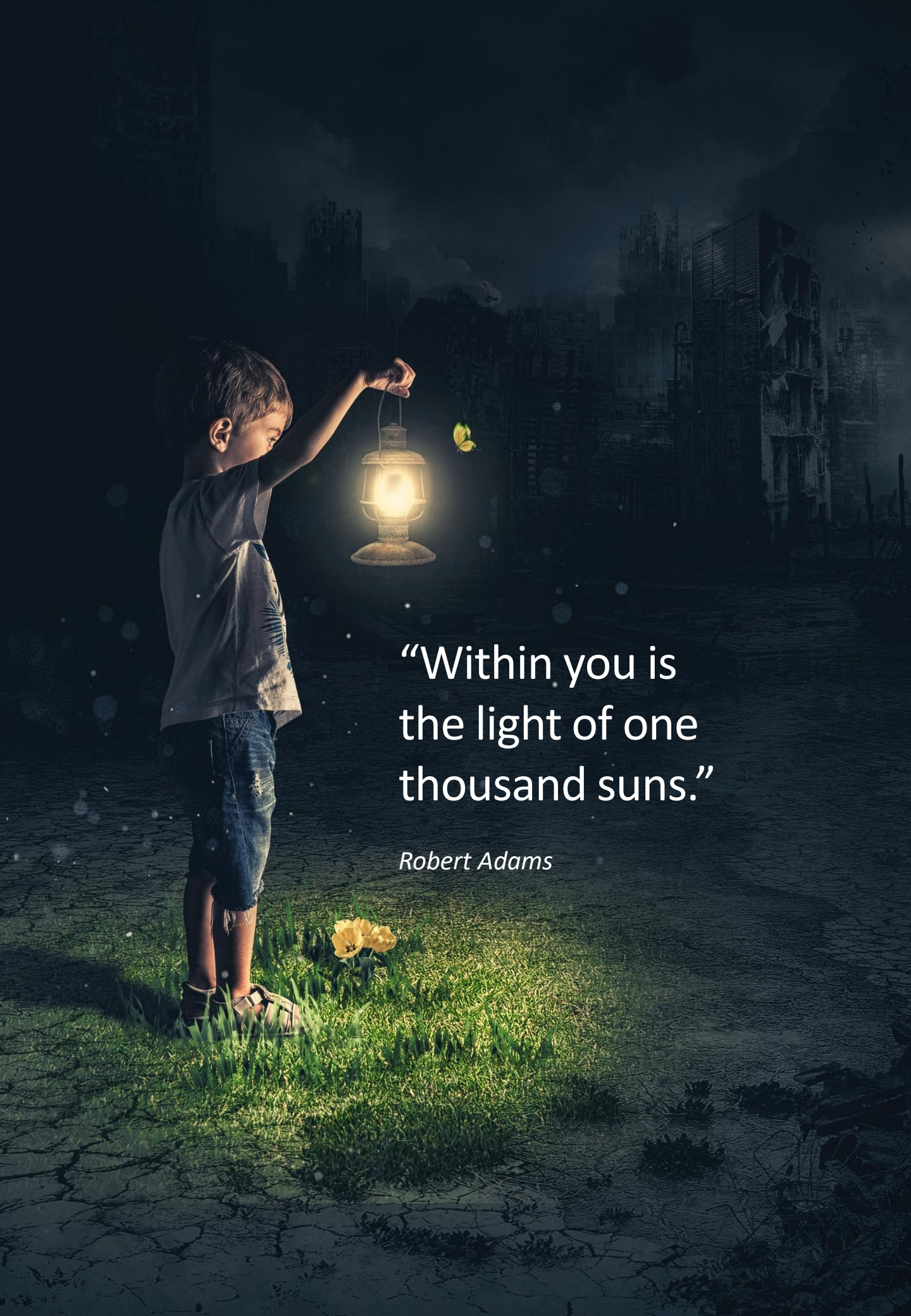
Online shopping is now the norm for almost everyone, and as sales calls and trade shows disappear, platforms like Zoom and social media have become key channels for businesses looking to connect with new and existing customers.

## 9 things you can do to optimise your online presence:

1. Polish up your website. Make sure it communicates clearly, is user-friendly, looks impressive, loads quickly and is optimised for Google Search.
2. Update your Google My Business page with the most accurate, up-to-date information about how your business is operating in the crisis.
3. If you don't have a company page on Facebook and LinkedIn, build one quickly and start posting helpful content every week.
4. Start using Facebook Messenger and Facebook Live. Facebook Messenger usage has more than doubled for business use since the start of the crisis.
5. Explore new digital advertising opportunities. Google AdWords and re-targeting is a must, but also look at paid social media ads – particularly on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.
6. Create more engaging email marketing campaigns. Make sure your tone is empathetic. Share positive stories about customers and staff.
7. Use your work email signature creatively to talk about initiatives you are introducing and change it out regularly.
8. Make use of creative and engaging video marketing to stand out in your customers crowded newsfeeds.
9. Simply publish more content – whether it's blogs, videos, images newsletters or infographics.

**We've put together a special package to help you tune up your online presence and upgrade your website. This includes a FREE homepage design makeover.**  
**[Contact us today to start.](#)**





“Within you is  
the light of one  
thousand suns.”

*Robert Adams*





## Track & measure everything

To survive during any economic interruption, you must know precisely what each marketing investment is returning and why. If you don't measure, you can't manage. And if you're not managing, you could be pouring money down the drain – advertising in channels that are generating poor returns.

### **Measuring means accountability.**

It's time to take an objective look at the areas of highest ROI and redirect more investment there. The simplest way to do this is to focus on your digital marketing (your most important communication channel). Digital is easily tracked and measured and can be finely targeted.

Google Analytics combined with a call tracking program and someone to interpret the data (alongside your sales data) will identify the best-performing areas to invest in, and which areas can be trimmed back or stopped immediately.

You should be measuring against your success criteria. You may want to measure sales, number of leads generated, upsells, or referrals. Now is the time to ensure you have defined your key performance indicators well.



## Shift from selling to helping.

Living in the uncertainty of a crisis heightens our emotions. We need to feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. While we're helping each other in innovative ways we want to see brands helping our fellow humans as well.

Whether it's through donations, filling a need in the community or making sure their employees are well looked after, brands need to show consumers they're stepping up by doing good and providing value in some way.

### **Communicate your unique value.**

Does your product help people do things without face-to-face interaction? Does it give them things to do at home? Share your brand's unique value.

### **Create useful content.**

Even if your product or service doesn't directly help people dealing with isolation, your brand can still provide value. Can you educate, entertain, inspire? Can you teach new skills and share your expertise?

### **Create value-added free services.**

Get creative. What do people need, and how can you provide it? You might offer free advice, information guides, or add on a delivery service.

### **Share how you're helping your staff.**

People like to see companies looking after their staff. It passes on the feeling that by supporting your business, they're helping support those people as well.

### **Be generous.**

It's time to share, give and grow together. Give your knowledge, your time, your skills. Small gestures have a ripple effect. Generosity sticks in people's minds, creates goodwill and builds long-lasting relationships.

# Position your business as a painkiller, not a vitamin.

“It is essential, especially when the basic assumption of the organisation’s position is changing, that it is positioned as a painkiller - not a vitamin. When there is disorientation in the market, “nice to have” offerings disappear, but painkillers become more valuable.

The more problems there are, and the more uncertainty is created, the more customers desire solutions.

If a company can position itself as an effective remedy for an immediate pain, crisis becomes a powerful growth opportunity.”

*Ed Lynes - Woden*







# Inspire your customers with positive, authentic stories

You can spread fear, or you can spread hope. There's enough negativity overwhelming us already. Move from commercial messages to messages of inspiration and positivity. And remember, you can inspire your customers by either doing good or making them feel good.

## What stories should you tell?

Tell stories about the good things you are doing in your local community – local charities you support and events that you're involved with.

Share your company back story and your personal back story. Share all the highs and lows along your journey. People love stories about characters overcoming tough obstacles.

Share stories about your customers who have achieved great things or just simply done some cool stuff with your product or service.

Your company purpose story - why you do what you do, beyond simply making money. Having a clearly articulated, meaningful purpose is becoming more important especially in times of crisis where consumers look to brands for moral leadership.

Inspiring stories from history. One of the best ways to do this is to tell stories about great leaders and how they overcame adversity. Leaders like Churchill and Mandela are always rich sources of inspiring anecdotes.

Funny memes, inspiring quotes and uplifting videos you've found online.

**We can help you build a bank of positive stories to use in your marketing campaigns.**

**[Contact us today](#) to book a free story strategy session to get started.**



# Well crafted stories are extremely powerful.

Stories are memory magnets. They are over 20 times more memorable than facts alone. When we immerse ourselves in a great story our brains actively engage in an immersive experience, flooding our body with chemicals.

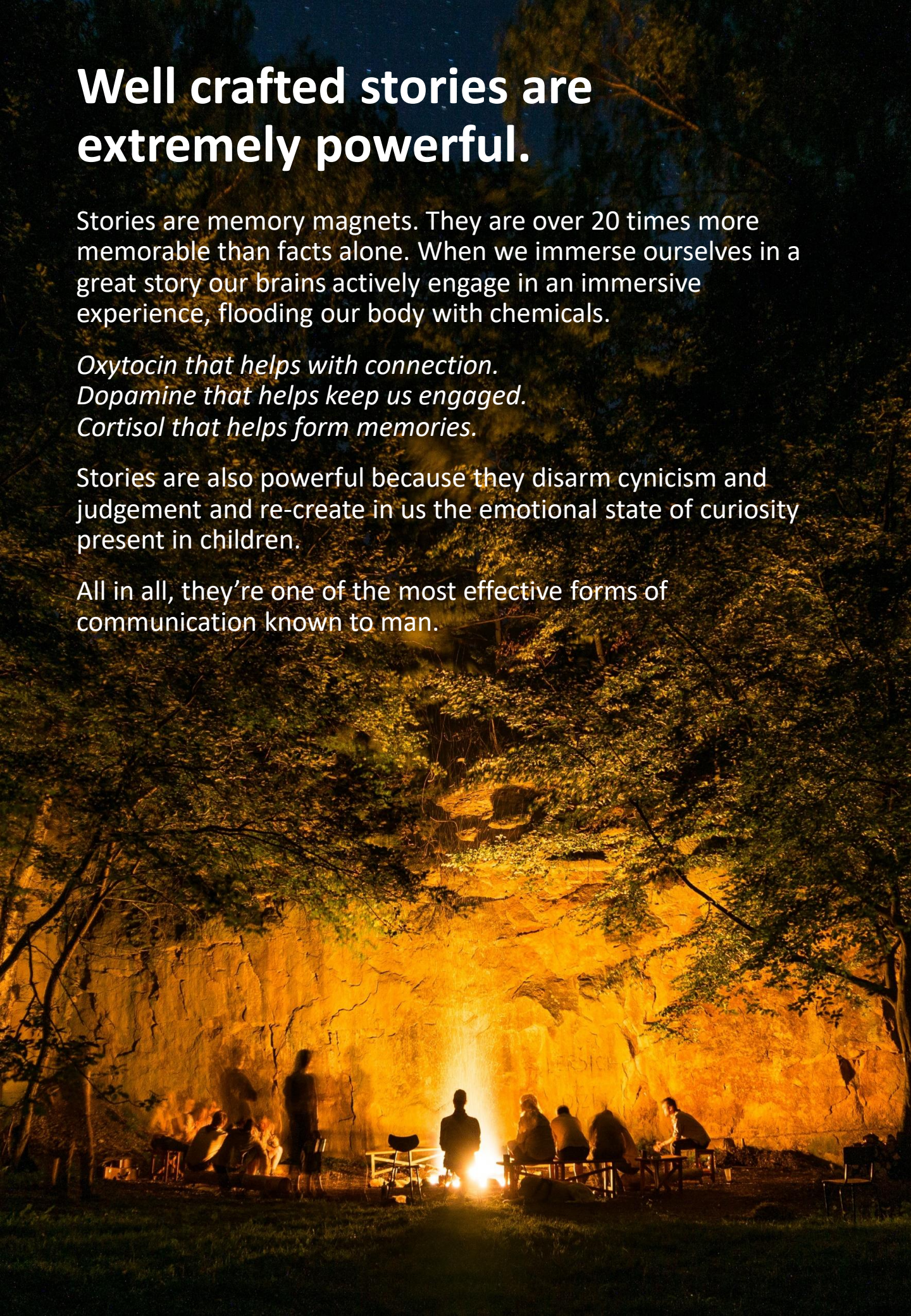
*Oxytocin that helps with connection.*

*Dopamine that helps keep us engaged.*

*Cortisol that helps form memories.*

Stories are also powerful because they disarm cynicism and judgement and re-create in us the emotional state of curiosity present in children.

All in all, they're one of the most effective forms of communication known to man.







# Focus on your valuable customers

Countless studies have proven that it is more profitable to retain your existing customers than to acquire new ones. This is especially true in times of economic difficulty. If you look after your most valuable, loyal customers and reward their loyalty, they'll repay you 10 times over in sales, referrals and positive reviews.

Think carefully about what extra value and emotional support you can bring to your most valued customers during this difficult time.

## **What can you do for your best customers?**

Take the opportunity to thank them for their business and ongoing support. This can be done on the phone, by email or through video.

We're loyal to brands that share the same values as we do. In your communications to your customers, show them that you share their beliefs and values. Talk about your brand purpose and why you do what you do.

Prioritise marketing campaigns that stimulate repeat purchases and upsells / cross-sells across your most critical and valuable product lines.

Use analytics and data to show how you're benefitting them during these rough times. This can then be communicated to them through stories, infographics and images.

Get on the phone and project a confident, comfortable tone, create empathy and build trust and that all-important human connection.

Instigate "surprise and delight" campaigns that wow your customer, such as unexpected discounts or free products and services.





## Don't cut your marketing budget

When a crisis hits, it's natural to want to stop spending any money on marketing. The more sensible option is to trim your budget carefully, re-focus spending and maintain a steady, reassuring presence in your most important media channels through the crisis.


*In Field and Binet's 2008 study on marketing effectiveness, industry experts found that cutting your marketing budget in a recession might help protect short-term profits, but it will be at the cost of a weaker and less profitable brand when the recession is over.*

Dramatically reducing your marketing budget cuts off valuable connections with the very audiences that can help you weather the storm. It can also have a negative impact on staff morale and the culture within your business.

*As counterintuitive as it may seem, it's much easier to increase your market share in tough times than in boom times.*

Companies with a strong brand presence (who keep investing in their brand), generally come out on top and can win market share from competitors who retract. That's because there's not as much "marketing noise," so you don't need to shout as loud for your message to be heard.

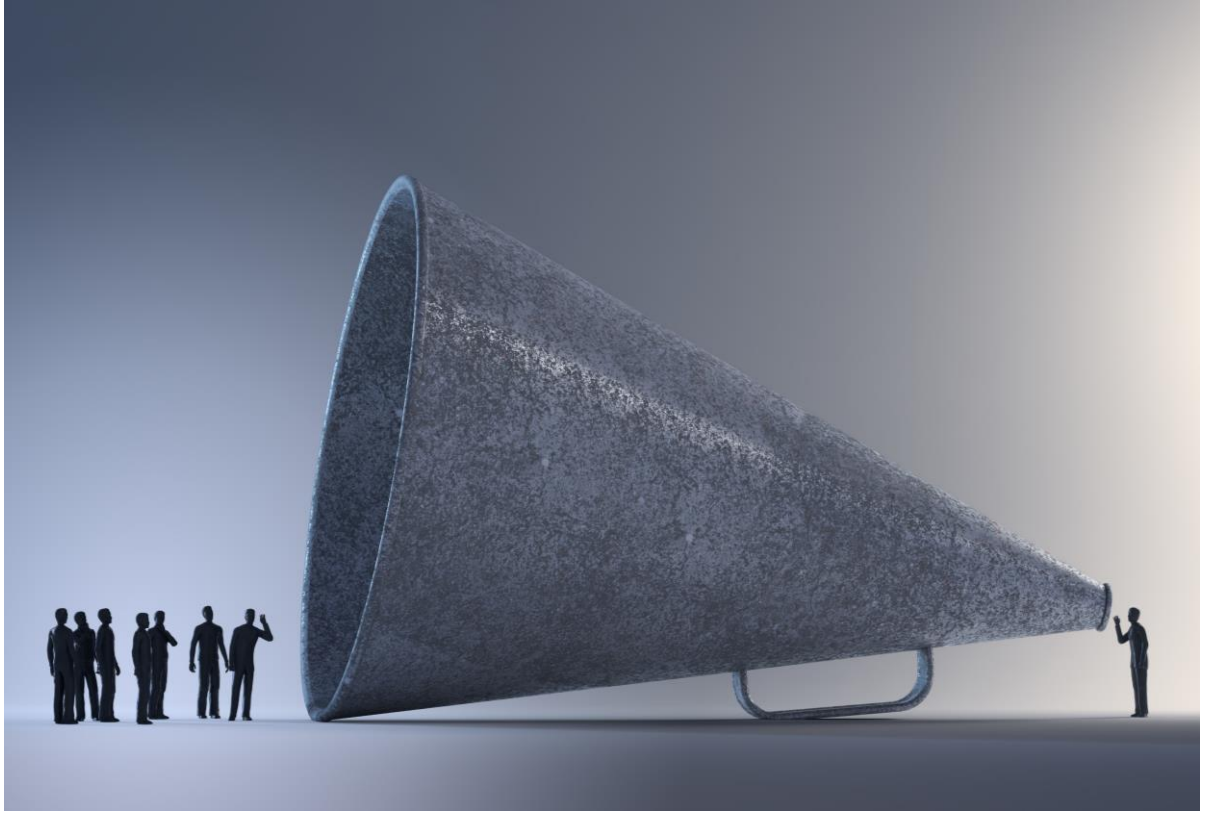
Another reason to maintain a high profile in the market during the Covid-19 era is the perception of strength. Your continued presence during tough financial times will be interpreted by your clients and prospects as a sign of stability, showing you are strong enough to survive.

A dramatic photograph of two mountaineers in red gear climbing a dark, craggy rock face. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow and lens flare effects. The sky is filled with soft, orange-hued clouds. The climbers are positioned on a narrow ledge, with one slightly higher than the other, both focused on their ascent.

“Tell the story  
of the mountain  
you climbed.  
Your words could  
become a page  
in someone  
else’s survival  
guide.”

*Margan Nichols*





# Review your media strategy

As you focus your marketing on digital communication and establish where you're getting the best results, it's a good time to assess, review and optimise your media strategy.

## Where should you start?

Decide on what should be paused immediately. What channels can you dial up and dial down? The nuances change with major events like this one so have a look at what you're putting out there and stop anything that could come across as inappropriate or insensitive.

People are tuning into news content in all forms. Look for opportunities to advertise on radio, TV news programs and news websites.

As other businesses cancel their media there will be opportunities to buy distressed space at the last minute. Free up some of your budget to be able to take advantage of last-minute deals.

Think digital first - Google AdWords, social media, messenger apps, email marketing, YouTube and digital display advertising.

## Optimise, optimise, optimise.

With digital marketing you can continually collect performance data and conduct A/B tests. Measure, assess the results and continually adjust strategies to get the best results.

**If you need help to review your media strategy, we can help.**  
[Contact us today](#) to book a free digital media planning session.





## Review your brand imagery and copy

Use this time to evaluate the imagery and copy you have been using in your existing brand communications. Make sure you use imagery and copy that feels relevant to your audience at this difficult time.

All decisions (but particularly those in a crisis) are driven by strong emotions. Use imagery that makes an emotional connection with viewers and tells an engaging story. National Geographic is an inspiring example to follow.

Use copy that is direct, warm, conversational and reassuring. Don't beat around the bush – communicate with crystal clarity and urgency.

Avoid images of crowds or people touching. Instead of showing lifestyle photos of people at the beach, show them in their backyards. Instead of people in meeting rooms, share images of them working at home.

Similarly, re-consider using any tactile phrases such as “please get in touch,” “get closer,” or “working hand in hand.” Be mindful of the fact that people are being required to practice social distancing.

While people look for comfort and familiarity, use images to reflect that. Think cosy family scenes of people at home and visuals of people helping each other, rather than images that suggest adventure and individualism.

Also, using nostalgic, retro style imagery always works well in uncertain times.



## Make people feel at home

Ever been sick while you've been away from home? All you want to do is get back home to the safety and comfort of your own bed. Our homes are psychological havens from all the bad stuff that's happening out in the world.

In times of crisis, we turn to what's familiar and comforting. We get fearful because we can't control what's happening in the world. The big picture becomes too scary, so we make our world a little smaller while we ride it out.

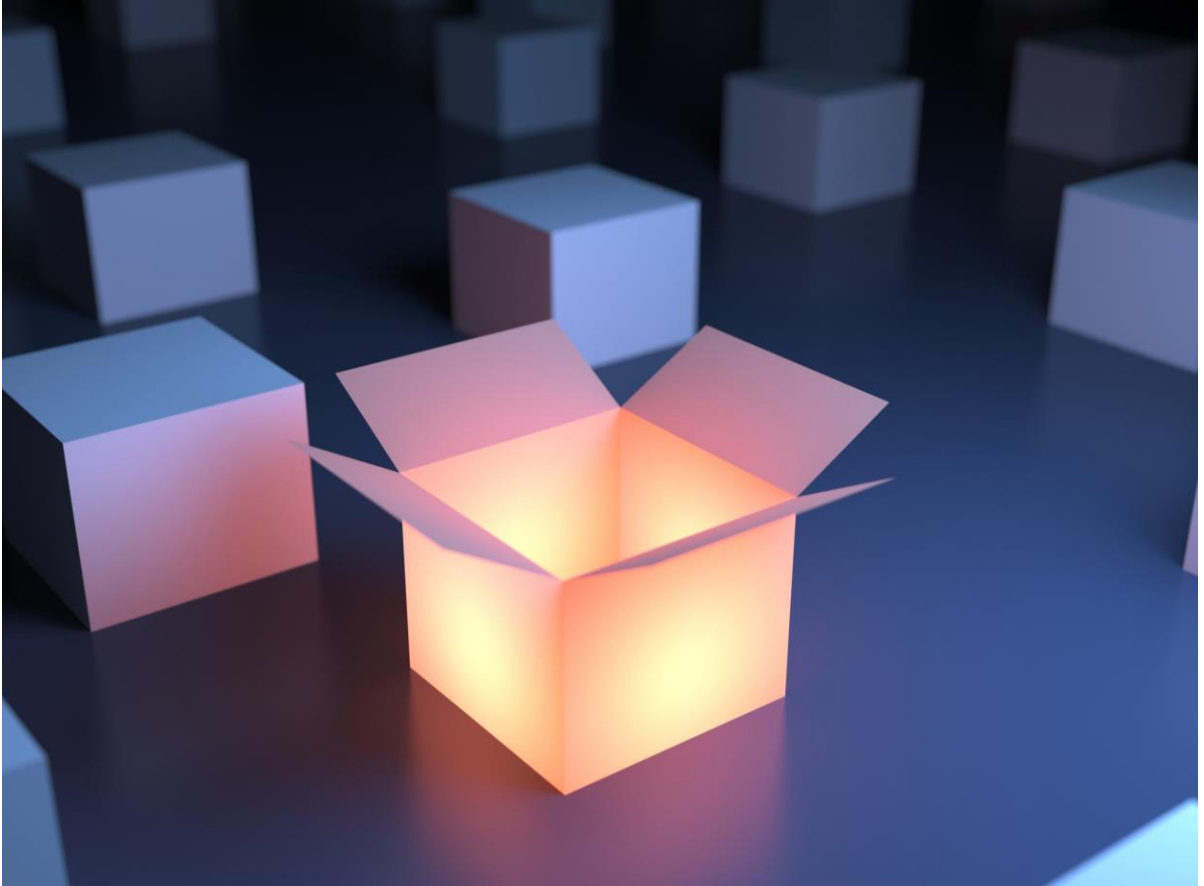
*Our homes, local communities and social groups become more important than ever as we focus inwardly on our family, friends and our health.*

It's vitally important that your brand really empathises with and communicates to consumers' desires to be safely nestled into their homes and local networks. One of the best ways to do this is by actively participating in community-focused social media groups.

These are critical networks for consumers. In the UK, 300 support groups started up in the first two months after the Covid-19 crisis broke.

In the midst of a scary global pandemic, feeling at home in your local community has never been more important.

**If you need help with your social media strategy, we can help.**  
[Contact us today](#) to book a free social strategy session.



## Deliver great value for money

In challenging economic times consumers will be more aware of price and driven less by loyalty. They will be shopping around. You don't have to slash prices ruthlessly, but you might have to adjust pricing tactics.

Consider generous pricing models, deferred payment plans, quantity discounts, extending credit to loyal customers and free or reduced delivery costs.

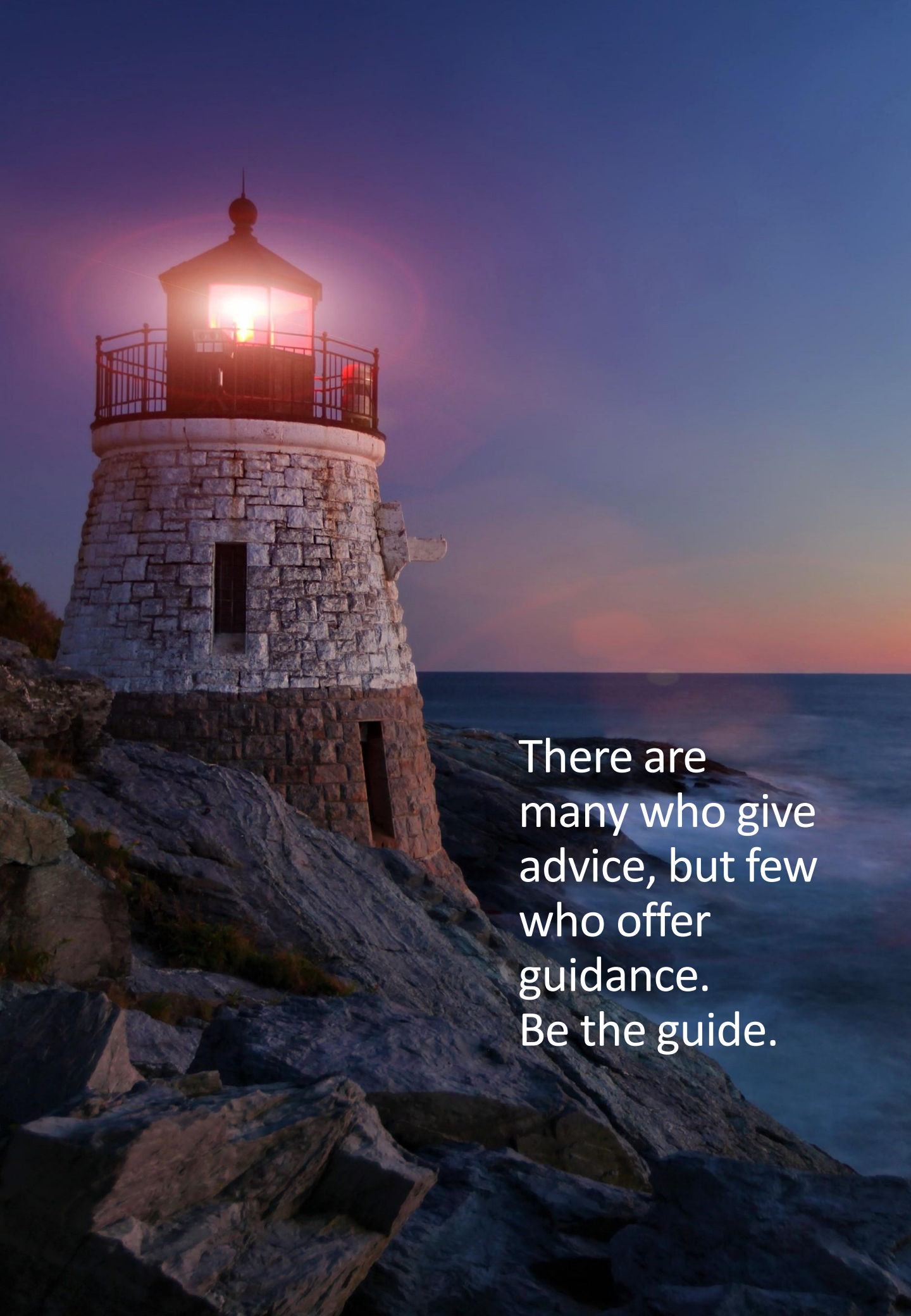
Look for other ways that you can add value too (other than price). Can you give away additional products or services with your core offering? Can you add value with free, useful information such as eBooks and guides?

If your customers can't buy what you typically provide right now, is there a smaller subset that they can buy? For example, if you run a consulting and training business, can you pivot your offering to provide cost-effective online webinars? If you're a gym or yoga centre, what about virtual classes you can participate in from the comfort of your home?

*Look at your main value and see how it can be re-packaged into something tangible that can be used in the current low-commitment, price-conscious environment.*

Only focusing on slashing prices for short term gains can really damage your brand in the long run. Show you're managing a crisis in a responsible way by giving customers more value, without selling yourself short.





There are  
many who give  
advice, but few  
who offer  
guidance.  
Be the guide.

# Don't capitalise on the crisis.

Be careful not to come across as taking advantage of people's feeling of insecurity. It's common sense in any tragedy or crisis and bears reminding now. Don't use tactless messaging that refers to "Covid-19 sales" or similar.

Don't add to the panic with alarmist language.

*Avoid any messaging that appears like you are exploiting the current economic crisis for commercial gain.*

Communicate responsibly about the proactive measures you are taking, whether you are open or not, and any policy updates.

Being informative and helpful adds value to your customer relationships and reassures you have their best interests at heart.

Season everything your brand says with humility and empathy. People are fearful, frustrated and anxious. Be patient. Be compassionate.

## **Start planning for the long term.**

We will get through this. It's overwhelming right now, but we must take a long-term view.

We need to plan and invest for after the crisis. Be ready to hit the ground running once the economic storm has passed.

The business landscape will be different, but with careful planning you can come out the other side in good shape.

## **Need help marketing your business?**

**If you need help putting any of the ideas in this guide into action, book a 60-minute coaching session with me. I'll help you apply the principles most relevant to your specific business in a personal, intensive, 60-minute coaching session via Zoom.**

**I normally charge \$450 for these coaching sessions but to show goodwill in this crisis, it's just \$200.**

**You don't even need to pay upfront. In fact, if you don't find the coaching valuable, I won't charge you. Here's where you can [book your session](#).**

**Steve Ballantyne**  
**Story IQ**





Story IQ is a brand strategy consultancy in Auckland, New Zealand that works with companies throughout Australasia. In a hyper-competitive and disrupted marketplace, we help business owners create a clear, unique brand strategy that grabs attention, garners trust, and grows their business.



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