

Post COVID-19 Success: "Think Different"

By [Brenda Fields](#) Founder, Fields & Company | June 27, 2021



For those who grew up only knowing all things "Apple", it may be surprising to learn that there was a time in Apple Inc's history, that its image was lackluster, and in many circles, subject to ridicule. Sales were down. Stock prices had plummeted and the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Steve Jobs, who had been ousted 12 years before, agreed to return to Apple in 1997 to restart the ailing company.

With the help of the legacy advertising agency, TWBA/Chiat Day, a campaign was born, called "Think Different". The language was precise with "different"

used as a noun. Its look, feel, and message were impactful because of its own representation of "thinking different". It featured iconic personalities such as Jimi Hendrix, Jackie Robinson, and Amelia Earhart. It's indomitable message and powerful imagery were instrumental in inspiring public opinion and turning a failing business into one of the most successful companies in the world. Start with a great, innovative and reliable product, add genius marketing, and the rest is history.

This is not to suggest that a hotel launches a massive advertising campaign. It is a much more subtle mode of working. Success will come from applying fresh thinking to every aspect of how your individual business has changed. There is no "new normal" as that implies it is set in stone. If anything, the "new normal" is a moving target based on where we are in the cycle of the pandemic; how it impacts business; and what is learned in moving forward.

We understand that daily hands-on operations had to change to accommodate the containment of this virus. And going forward, it is anticipated that there will be continued improvements with cleanliness and guest security in key areas such as check-in, housekeeping, restaurants, and room service.

In planning how to do this, hoteliers can take a lesson from Steve Job's playbook in launching the "Think Different" advertising campaign. The innovative concept was brilliantly conceived and executed to drive the point of the power of a different perspective.

Have a Fresh Plan

Dusting off the 2019 Marketing Plan and putting it back into action may be the equivalent of putting a square peg in a round hole. It's just not going to work. Nothing is the same. Business cycles and markets have significantly changed. For example, hotels that had relied on college graduation gatherings, concerts, and weddings to fill specific time periods do not have to be told that that business has disappeared. And globally, travel has come to a halt. Working remotely has also changed the travel landscape.

We can anticipate that corporate transient business and corporate meetings will come out of the pandemic with reduced volume and altered travel trends. Perhaps, a Sunday arrival will replace the Tuesday arrival pattern post COVID-19 for personal safety reasons. And there could be a greater demand for using guest rooms for small business meetings instead of meeting in the hotel bar. There is no definitive answer as to how all of this will play out. But what is known is that business is not what it used to be.

Smart marketing is based on this level of detail. Take the time to think through this exercise. Research. Stay abreast of travel restrictions, closings, openings, and government restrictions. A well-founded thought process will allow nimble reactions as the business environment changes with openings and closings and travel policy changes.

Identify your (Past, Present, and Future) Guest/Customer

Take a hard look at the marketplace and determine who to target. Evaluate your property compared to its competitive set and perform an objective analysis of its strengths and weaknesses in satisfying that targeted audience. Examine all potential markets and break it down into minute detail. For example, within the business and leisure travel segments, take it further apart by looking at domestic and international opportunities. And drill that down further into specific states/cities/provinces, domestically and specific countries/cities, internationally. As COVID-19 is the driving force in an unpredictable marketplace, stay up to date with government policies in order to determine opportunities.

Upon reopening, reevaluate your particular situation. Until we are further along in the public's confidence to travel whether for business or pleasure, there may be opportunities that did not exist before. Remote hotels in drive-to destinations now have greater demand from guests needing a break from the pressures of COVID-19 with a minimum risk in traveling. And for urban hotels, without the benefit of a business and tourist travelers, there may be opportunities to reach out to and reconnect with past customers in meaningful ways to generate interest.

Innovate Pricing

Smart marketing is more than a singular revenue management strategy. In these unusual times, why not consider a different approach to pricing? Was your previous strategy based on discounting to generate demand? Did you automatically offer a discount when "retargeting" a potential customer who left the reservation page on your website? It is important to rethink those tactics. Consider bundling meetings/packages for future stays in conjunction with current stays, as an example. There are lots of opportunities to "think different" on pricing other than discounting. It requires a combination of business acumen and creativity.

Generate Business

Inexperienced marketers may think that casting a wide net will result in more business. But the idea of being "all things to all people" is one that will lead to messaging that lacks "oomph" in speaking to customers. It's more cost-effective to "fish where the fish are". Therefore, marketing and selling to specific segments will provide a greater ROI.

The Direct Sales slogan for a starting point to develop business is to look in your "own back yard". To take that a step further, start with both past or present guests and accounts.

- Begin with the obvious. Work your database of existing guests and accounts and reach out directly with personalized messages. That has proven to be effective to keep your property top of mind when that person or that account is ready to travel. As an example, retail clothing business has also plummeted during the pandemic. Who wears clothes other than sweatpants anymore? But from personal experience, frequent messages and constant reminders from two retail giants such as Saks Fifth Avenue and

Bloomingdales, have resulted in purchasing gifts for graduations and birthdays from them that would have been purchased through the "go-to" Amazon site. Customized messages and frequent contact, work.

- OTAs and third-party distribution channels have also experienced dramatic changes to their businesses. Hoteliers can now pick and choose. Take the time to evaluate each distribution channel. Having an in-depth knowledge of each channel will lead to effective decision-making in choosing partners and in getting the best results.
- Digital Marketing: This area, if strategized and executed well, is probably the most effective in reaching a target market. Understanding and anticipating needs is an important component in crafting messages and content for social media channels, distribution channels, websites, and all other marketing communications. Advertising online is complex and ever-evolving, and can be costly. To achieve the true potential of digital marketing, marketers need to remain nimble by staying abreast of the intricate cross-channel world, thereby discovering strategies that make an impact. It starts at the top to craft standards to ensure consistency in messaging. Technical expertise is easily cultivated, but a top-level oversight comes from expertise based on experience.

Create the Power of Responsiveness and Personalization

Probably the easiest and least expensive tactic is to just respond to customers and guests, both promptly and with authenticity. How many times have you taken the time to rate a product by giving thoughtful feedback? Was that feedback acknowledged? Was the acknowledgment specific to your comments or was it an automatic computer-generated message? If you received customized feedback, you more than likely felt a greater sense of trust and loyalty to that brand.

Rethink Hiring

We know that the hospitality and travel industries have been the hardest hit in the pandemic. Per the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the leisure and hospitality sector has shed nearly a quarter of its workforce since February 2020. Hospitality alone has represented 49% of the entire unemployed population, offering employers a wide range of potential employees.

Experience matters, now more than ever. Starting at a zero base to relaunch hotels, employers not only have the opportunity, but have a need to fill positions with qualified and experienced staff. With such a large pool of available staff, there is ample opportunity to hire an overqualified person who can train and be a role model for inexperienced staff.

But how many human resources personnel are still using the previous criteria and methods in hiring? The online job application process offers the benefit of prescreening, but what may be overlooked is a potentially stellar applicant whose online application does not hit the right boxes. Take the time to think through job responsibilities and revise job descriptions incorporating new criteria based on changes created by the pandemic. Allow for thinking outside the box in the hiring process. Great hiring results in great business in both the short term as well as long term.

There is no question that Steve Jobs et al changed the world. It may be assumed that he did it with an idea and then continued to build on that idea. He leveraged his passion and ideas to develop products that consumers did not even know they needed and now cannot live without. (Try getting a vaccination appointment in the US without a smartphone or computer! A prime example of NOT "thinking different"!)

Over time, we will look back to marvel at what came out of the pandemic and how hoteliers developed a better way of doing business. Leadership not only has the opportunity, but also the responsibility, to "think different". Take the time. Do the hard work. There is no roadmap. But understanding the fundamentals and building on that by "thinking different" will not only lead to financial success, but will create excitement and lasting change.



Ms. Fields

Brenda Fields is an industry leader, named by HSMIA (Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International) as a "Top 25 Extraordinary Mind in Sales & Marketing" and is a member of the exclusive International Society of Hospitality Consultants (ISHC), a by-invitation only, 200-member professional society. Ms. Fields served in senior marketing positions before establishing her successful consulting practice. Her clients comprise a wide range of hotels, resorts, and hotel companies around the world, including five-star, luxury boutique properties, 2,000 room hotels and conference centers, as well as some of the largest real estate development companies in the U.S. At the onset of her career, Ms. Fields joined the then, hospitality industry visionary, Dunfey Hotels at the renowned Ambassador East in Chicago, IL and moved up the ladder quickly. The systems Dunfey Hotels had pioneered provided a basis on which any problem can be resolved regardless of market conditions or product type. Please visit <http://www.fieldsandcompany.net> for more information.

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