



INTERIM IMPERATIVES E-BOOK

PIONEERING THE
FORESEEABLE FUTURE

Customers: A New Standard for Differentiation

NORTH HIGHLAND

COVID-19 HAS LEFT A PERMANENT STAMP ON THE WORLD. UNCERTAINTY IS EVERYWHERE, STRENGTHENING THE CALL FOR ADAPTATION.

We're approaching a monumental stepping stone on our path to the post-pandemic world. Following the immediacy of COVID-19 response, this next phase will force you to forge distinctions between the provisional realities of the next 12 to 18 months and your three or five-year strategy. The unique conditions of the foreseeable future introduce a host of unknowns that you must thoughtfully and intentionally explore while you advance towards a durable and adaptive recovery.

In approaching the path forward, we believe clarity of perspective comes when considering implications and critical considerations across customers, the workforce, and operations. It's impossible to know what the months and years ahead will look like, but we can start to place bets based on what we're seeing in the continuously changing environment around us. In this e-book, we explore the customer-related trends shaping the foreseeable future.

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A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT


The realities of COVID-19 have shaken up our rituals and sense of normalcy—leaving a lasting mark on customer behavior, expectations, and demands. The choices that businesses make impacting customers and community stakeholders will define the future of brand loyalty and organizational performance. In every instance, customer matters reach far beyond the domain of the CX leader or CMO, forcing leaders across functions to rethink their workforce strategies and operational models. For example, customers—armed with visibility to organizations' COVID-19 response online and

through social media—will continue to seek purpose, transparency, and empathy in their interactions with organizations. They'll apply the same level of scrutiny to the employee engagement, wellness, and care strategies as a determining factor in their loyalty decisions. Amid the shake-up in customer and employee expectations, operations leaders must also widen their purview. Moving to a new supplier in a country that's stabilized disease spread may cost more and seem unfavorable from a purely financial perspective. Yet, the move could pay dividends for customer experience and workforce well-being.

Ultimately, today's climate underscores the need for a redefined social contract grounded in mutual accountability for a safer world—a responsibility shared by businesses, public institutions, customers, and employees. In this landscape, safety is a driving force behind customers' evolved values and expectations. This shift introduces new opportunities to differentiate on safety, wellness, and cleanliness. For example, Airbnb has developed new sanitation protocols for hosts, so customers can assure the cleanliness of a property before securing a rental.¹ Similarly, Hertz

has introduced a Hertz Gold Standard Clean Seal on all vehicles. Customers who break the seal can be confident that they're the first to do so post-vehicle sanitization.² Sustaining cleanliness as a differentiator requires a holistic look at the role of the workforce and operations. You'll need to redesign stores, workspaces, materials, and distribution and delivery models (e.g., less carpeting, more secure packaging, spartan environments) in support of a safer customer and employee experience. Customers will intuitively look to these "proof of clean" signals as table stakes for trust and loyalty.

Contactless delivery, no-touch payments, and voice interfaces have quickly become part of customers' baseline expectations.

An abstract, artistic splash of vibrant blue ink or paint against a stark white background. The splash originates from the top left and flows downwards and to the right, creating intricate, swirling patterns and bubbles. The color is a deep, saturated blue, and the texture appears fluid and dynamic.

To support the sustained bump in customer demand for alternative distribution channels like contactless delivery, virtual appointments, or “buy online, pick-up in store” options, your organization may need to retrain and redeploy portions of its workforce to activate these new models. You can also consider other technology-based solutions to enable contactless operations. The companies that differentiate on health and safety will perfect contactless experiences—creating interactions so seamless that they no longer feel like “safety measures” in the eyes of customers. Over the past several years, there’s been simmering competitive pressure to implement voice and virtual interfaces—with technology, training, infrastructure, and trust hurdles stalling widespread adoption. Through COVID-19, these capabilities have quickly become baseline capabilities for customer interaction.

Virtual health offers one timely example. Healthcare organizations have historically perceived virtual health as sub-optimal due to technology requirements, reimbursement obstacles, and experience limitations. Amid COVID-19, virtual health surged in prominence as an alternative channel to help mitigate hospital capacity challenges and reinforce social distancing behaviors.³ Looking ahead, many patients will likely opt for the ease of on-demand virtual care over the cumbersome process of having to call, schedule, drive, and wait for an appointment. In the months ahead, healthcare providers should anticipate a continued bump in customer demand for virtual health. Building on the foundation set during COVID-19, they’ll need to strengthen their systems to improve scalability and support for both customers and employees. Approaching the future, companies in and outside of healthcare must overcome their inertia and readily adopt these capabilities on a meaningful scale—or risk fading into irrelevance.

TOP TRENDS

Explore the top trends that will impact the way that organizations think about the future of customers in both B2B and B2C contexts:



**Click around the wheel
to learn more about each**

The next e-book in our series, *Reimagining the World of Work*, explores trends and considerations for the workforce.

And in the final e-book of our series, *Crafting a Design-Led Strategy*, we'll explore how Rapid Innovation arms you with a living construct to evaluate the impact of future trends in the context of your strategic aspirations. It can help you place informed bets on where to focus as the near-term future comes into view—enabling you to adapt as you learn more each day.





SERVICES SPOTLIGHT

ABOUT RAPID INNOVATION

In approaching an unknowable future, a design thinking mindset allows you to plan for critical uncertainties. It can help you place informed bets on where to focus as the near-term future comes into view—enabling you to adapt as you learn more each day. An intentional approach to Rapid Innovation helps you understand the drivers of change and identify and prioritize new opportunities. It enables you to shape a transformation strategy and lay the structural foundation for execution.

ABOUT CHANGE ECONOMICS

Maximizing the value of transformation calls for agility in response to uncertain conditions. It requires a common framework for prioritizing new initiatives as your focus evolves from immediate viability towards long-term durability and adaptability. In the absence of a shared vision for transformation that encompasses a holistic understanding of value, organizations miss opportunities to prioritize incremental improvement for increased and accelerated returns. Change EconomicsSM delivers a 360-degree view of the value drivers of change and transformation, enabling the smarter evaluation and prioritization of new initiatives.

¹ "Airbnb's Enhanced Cleaning Initiative for the Future of Travel," Airbnb, Apr. 27, 2020.

² "Your Hertz Gold Standard Clean Vehicle Awaits," Hertz.

³ "Op-Ed: As a Doctor, I Use Telemedicine. With the Coronavirus Threat, it Could Revolutionize Healthcare," Los Angeles Times, Mar. 17, 2020.

ABOUT NORTH HIGHLAND

North Highland makes change happen, helping businesses transform by placing people at the heart of every decision. It's how lasting progress is made. With our blend of workforce, customer and operational expertise, we're the world's leading transformation consultancy. We break new ground today, so tomorrow is easier to navigate.

Founded in 1992, North Highland is an employee-owned firm - regularly named one of the best places to work. We have more than 5,000 consultants worldwide and 65+ offices around the globe. Meanwhile, we're a proud member of Cordence Worldwide (www.cordence.com), an international consulting alliance.

For more information, visit www.northhighland.com or connect with us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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Rob has over 20 years of customer strategy and customer-driven transformation expertise. He has led hundreds of successful customer and employee-centered engagements for B2B and B2C clients across industries. Rob and his teams specialize in helping our clients expand their market presence via experience-based differentiation. He has helped global organizations across the telecommunications, healthcare, transportation, hospitality, financial services, energy, and utilities industries transform to become more customer-centric, adaptive, and responsive.



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Kelly is a leader in North Highland's customer experience practice. She brings over 20 years of experience leading customer insights and helping companies transform by understanding and improving their customers' experiences. Her expertise in uncovering insights and enabling CX-optimized organizations has delivered real, sustainable results for Fortune 500 companies.



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Heather is a Senior Director in North Highland's Experience Design capability. She is a dynamic leader with the ability to motivate and inspire teams to deliver customer-centric programs that drive brand equity and sales. Heather has over 20 years of experience in marketing strategy, advertising, and experience design across a variety of leading consumer and B2B brands.