



8 Keys to Distribution Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World **Emphasizing Human Connection**

It's more important than ever for distribution companies to not only pivot in an increasingly digital world, but also maintain the human connections that ultimately drive business success. The Master of Industrial Distribution at Texas A&M University incorporated into its Customer Experience course a unit on best practices as it pertains to distribution in a post-pandemic world.

The resounding result of information gathered across the 70 MID students, all working full-time in various functional areas and across multiple distribution channels, is the need to fortify both internal and external practices within the organization to be a successful leader.

Strengthen Internally

Keeping your team strong in remote working situations where there is no water cooler requires creativity. Leadership is not just about knowing where your business falls in the landscape of competition; it also demands the constant internal work of strengthening teams and processes.

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Dr. Malini Natarajarathinam, Associate Professor for Texas A&M's Industrial Distribution program and professor for the Distribution Customer Experience course, says: "It's important to know the fine details of internal best practices within an organization in order to project those outward to be competitive."

- 1. Communicate Well** – People listen to those who can present a logical argument not only face-to-face, but also in internal written communications. Putting effort and

preparation into excellent communication cannot be understated, especially in a pandemic and post-pandemic climate. The consistent, clear messaging you invest in your own organization will dispense outward from employees to customers.

- 2. Prioritize Diversity** – Thriving in today's ever-changing landscape doesn't just mean transferring traditional processes to digital, but rather making concerted efforts toward diverse voices in the workplace. Future-focused leadership knows how to adapt both outwardly and inwardly; creating a user-friendly online inventory is necessary, but building an inclusive company culture that brings people together sets the stage for sustainability and growth.
- 3. Listen** – Just like salespeople know how to actively listen instead of intimidating or pestering customers, listening must be practiced among teammates. People think leadership is all about making their voice heard, but great leaders make great efforts to bring groups together around common goals by listening to the feedback of the team.
- 4. Analyze Your Customers** – Stratification is vital to the health of internal company processes. For instance, if 15 out of 100 customers generate 90% of the business, that information should inform the deployment of resources. Consider how much time to invest in various customers by deeply analyzing your productive clients. Develop coaching programs and mentorship trainings to learn how to wisely spend company time and resources.

Craig Conrad, industry professor for Texas A&M's Master of Industrial Distribution department and professor for the Distribution Customer Experience course says: "You can't wake up every morning and decide to sell everything to everybody."



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Strengthen Externally

Gone are the days when technical sales consultants are spending long hours alongside their clients. Keep a competitive advantage with fresh perspectives on service and relationships. For many smaller distributors, losing even one client could cost up to 20% of the business. Refocus on your customers and garner more business by utilizing these practices:

- 1. Get Creative** – Salespeople who are best at staying engaged with their customers during this time are thinking outside the box. Not only are they on Zoom calls with their clients, but some are offering special virtual trainings for their customers on their own time. Others are out delivering food to customers or increasing their availability. Successful professionals are identifying the value of human connection in client relationships and finding ways to nourish it, even if it's not in person.
- 2. Take Initiative** – What data already exists within your organization? Get curious about how to apply it to improve your customers' experience with your company. Despite pay cuts and other challenges posed by the pandemic,

good leaders are still motivated to find new tools like personalizing customer packages and service to grow more business within their companies. Be slow to assume an outside consultant is needed and experiment with existing resources.

- 3. Engage Confidently** – Believe in what you're selling. Trust your own expertise and speak to the value of your products and services. Conrad says: "Business ethics, honesty, and developing trust with people is critical." A sell, sell, sell attitude only goes so far. Instead, cultivate intentional interactions with customers that considers their specific business, helping them solve problems and offering sophisticated solutions.
- 4. Speak to the Bottom Line** – Learn to speak the language of money for your customers and your coworkers. Dr. Natarajarathinam says: "If you're a business, your goal is to make money. Proposing new projects and improvements require speaking the language of money to show how your ideas fit the bottom line. This is what gets the attention of the C-suite executives."

Especially in economic downturns such as this one, clearly demonstrate how improved processes and methods can adapt to improve the bottom line.

Things are not "business as usual" for distributors or their customers. Ultimately, recentering positive human interaction is one of the most important tools for strengthening both outward and inward distribution practices. When professionals get creative to understand more about other teams within their organization and use their resources to better understand their customers, they can not only affect financial benefits, but also grow within their organization into greater leadership.

This information is taught and gathered in a unit within the MID's Distribution Customer Experience course.

About Texas A&M's Master of Industrial Distribution

Texas A&M's Master of Industrial Distribution (MID) is a 4-semester, part-time, mobile learning graduation program designed for working professionals. By incorporating both academic professors and industry leaders who co-teach each course, students not only learn theories, but applicable supply chain management, logistics, and profitability of distributors and manufacturers in industrial channels.

Request more information about the program and learn more.