

Customer  
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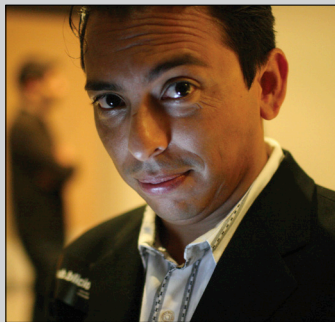


## Digital Darwinism

An Interview with Brian Solis, Global Innovation Evangelist, Salesforce

### Brian Solis:

Brian Solis is the Global Innovation Evangelist for Salesforce and a Renowned Digital Prophet and Author.



When the pandemic first struck, most businesses were stunned by the severity of the impact. Seeing people storm online for essential goods made them take stock of their digital readiness. Alarmed by how unprepared they were, they fast-tracked their digital transformation plans.

Up until that moment, those digitization efforts had plodded slowly along, mainly concerned with finding quick wins by increasing efficiency and productivity. Improving the customer experience was often a more distant goal, modest in ambition, meant to fix the broken parts. If a business was imaginative enough to dream up bolder ideas, those plans invariably got pushed into the future, since there was no pressing urgency.

Now those same businesses are scrambling madly to catch up to their customers, compressing their digital roadmaps from years into months, worried about losing ground to challenger brands or more agile competitors. Already the pandemic has mowed

down many bricks and mortar retailers who were slow to adapt to an omnichannel world. Other sectors too have been caught flatfooted – travel, hospitality, apparel makers, out-of-home entertainment, just to name the worst hit. The businesses that have managed to pivot quickly are the ones with the foresight to have invested intelligently in digital transformation, and were ready to absorb the sudden surge in ecommerce traffic.

Even with a vaccine in sight, businesses are likely facing a slow recovery and a populace whose habits and attitudes have been deeply affected by months of internment. Just how enduring those changes are likely to be is on every marketer's mind right now.

Of course, digital prophets like Brian Solis have been warning about this moment of reckoning for years. As the bestselling author of such books as “Business As Usual Is Not an Option”, and the prescient “What’s the Future of Business”, he has been a leading voice for holistic digital transformation. He has long argued that society and technology have been evolving much faster than businesses’ ability to adapt, leading to what he calls “digital Darwinism”: the speed at which companies evolve to survive and thrive in a digital economy.

At the start of this year, even before the pandemic hit, Brian wrote that “digital transformation will start to become synonymous with business modernization and innovation”. Competing for the customer of the future, he predicted, will become “mission-critical”. Clearly, we’ve now reached that inflection point, much faster than even he might have thought possible. Facing the biggest disruption in living memory, we’re entering a “novel economy”, as he calls it, meaning the old playbooks are of no use anymore.

SS

**Stephen Shaw (SS):** Who in organizations should take the lead in reimagining the customer experience?

BS

**Brian Solis (BS):** Customer experience has never really been owned by any one group. Even if you have a Chief Customer Officer, that person's mandate doesn't necessarily cover the entire experience. We have to rethink the entire model of what it means to invest in customer experience. We need to humanize the conversation – see what the experience is from the eyes of the customer – switch our thinking from how do we do this, to why are we doing this? Approaching it the way we do today, as yet another cost of doing business, just leads to silos, budgets, and constraints. An experience is simply an emotional and intellectual reaction to any moment. How did someone feel? How did someone react? What is the memory that someone takes away from that moment, and how do those moments add up over time? With that knowledge we can reconstruct the entire brand relationship. From there, anyone who cares about human beings can lead the charge for bringing together the organization in a much more cross-functional way, that's productive, that's optimized, that's customer-centered, that's joyful even, and then we can start fixing the broken things and start innovating in the areas that we're not investing in today. So, it's complex, but it's possible – we just have to shift perspective.

SS

This global crisis has awakened a sense of urgency amongst businesses that change is required. Does business simply accelerate digital transformation, or is a total reset required?

BS

Adapting to what I call the “novel economy” involves passing through three phases. Phase One is just about surviving: How do we adapt to what's happening right now? Customers have been emotionally affected, psychologically affected - they're spending differently, or they've reduced their spending, what they're buying is different – all of that has changed radically since we've been hit with this pandemic. Phase Two is an “interim normal”, after we've got past the post-apocalyptic scenes we see everywhere today – like plexiglass, and masks, and horrible news headlines every single day. At that point we can start to rethink the customer experience – how we can deliver joy, how we can deliver “wow moments”? And then we build the muscles, build the expertise, build the intellect to set the stage for Phase Three, which is to thrive. So, once we start to come out of this, once

we start to think about the world in a post-COVID way, there's no going back to normal. Today a lot of companies are just looking at ways to cut costs, to save resources, to coast through these tough times, when in fact history shows us that any time of major disruption - health-related, or economic-related – is the best time to innovate.

SS

You're suggesting that this crisis is something not to waste – that businesses need to use this time to catch up to where customers are. But coming out of this crisis, aren't customers going to change even more? What will force businesses to make the deep changes they've been very resistant to making in the past?

BS

Well, there's that famous saying, never waste a good crisis. The problem with change is that it's hard. Oftentimes change is limited by the vision of those who are making the decisions, those in charge of the organization. So, if they don't see the world changing or evolving or being disrupted, it's very difficult for them to create a sense of urgency and drive change. If you've ever watched that show “Undercover Boss”, every executive who's walked in the shoes of their employees and their customers leaves a more informed and enlightened person, a more driven and inspired person, and everything changes after that. So COVID, for better or worse, has given every executive that “undercover boss moment”. Now the question is, what are they going to do about it? And this is where true competitive advantage is forged.

SS

What do they do about it?

BS

What executives need to do is take advantage of the fact that customers have now become digital-first. And that's due to about a decade or so of customers with smartphones, on social media, using their favorite apps. We've now seen ten years of ecommerce evolution happen in a matter of weeks. Most companies were unprepared for it. So, it's an incredible opportunity for executives. What they have to do is say, “Let's ditch everything we knew about the customer - or what we thought we knew about the customer - and start over.” What are customers doing? What's important to them? What are the questions they're asking? Let's focus on the touchpoints that are broken. Let's focus on the touchpoints that are missing. And let's also focus on how we talk, how we brand, how we market - everything can now become much more empathetic, and empathetic in a true sense, not

in the buzzword, marketing sense: truly understanding who that person is and what they're doing. This is our chance to learn from them.

SS

Beyond the faster adoption of ecommerce by people - the realization that we can get whatever we want shipped overnight - beyond that change in habit, will there also be a permanent shift in people's attitudes toward business, toward social interaction, toward life in general?

BS

Steve, these are great questions. People have already started to change, and this is one of the reasons why I became, in the '90s, a digital anthropologist because you could see how the internet at the time was starting to give people experiences that they just didn't have before. And once you had these new and incredible experiences, it makes everything else before that seem obsolete or outdated. So you crave the convenience, the personalization - all of the attributes that set the standard for what a great experience should be.

So now, it's not just that people have become digital-first, it's also they've become emotionally affected by these times, whether they know it or not. And when you look at it from not just an anthropology perspective but also one of psychology, you see that this is very much a somatic marker that has united the entire world around this great stressor of the pandemic. We are now are much more anxious, stressed, we're worried about our health and the health of our loved ones, we're worried about the economy, we're worried about our own safety and our own income, our own stability - add to that, especially for those in the United States, this incredible politicization of the disease. People are angry, and worried, and scared, and so those are factors that go into the behaviours that play out, partly in consumerism, and partly just in humanity itself. Understanding that is what empathy is really all about.

The customer is also becoming much more informed - and equally misinformed. Now is the time for a brand, a marketer, a CX strategist, to reimagine how to be the light in this world of chaos. It's going to be like this for at least 18 months, even after we get a vaccine, because it's going to take time to establish herd immunity. And then we also need concerted leadership, whether that comes from brands or politicians or anybody, really, to start to calm people so that they can

feel better, and be more focused on creating not only a better world but a better self.

SS

I love that expression, "a better self". I wonder whether people will revert back to traditional consumerism, or whether they'll realize that you're not what you buy. And that is a heretical notion for marketers, who've spent half a century convincing people to buy stuff. It's just so hard to imagine marketers taking a reformist position when those principles aren't close to their heart. Effectively, you're calling for a new generation of marketers to come onto the scene.

BS

I am calling for it - *I have been calling for it* - simply because the behaviours that you're seeing now, Steve, are accelerated behaviours. They're not new behaviours. Digital life has always been a gateway to a new world of possibilities, a new world of aspirations. So, yes, you're beginning to see a much more conscious consumer. You don't buy to define who you are - you buy who you are. It's a total reset of the brand-consumer relationship.

This pandemic is actually a CTRL-ALT-DEL for life. This is a real opportunity to recentre who you are and who you want to be. And brands are going to have to contend with that, in how they want to build relationships moving forward. There was a great article in BuzzFeed ("[I Don't Feel Like Buying Stuff Anymore](#)") which talks about that change of heart. You also have concern over sustainability, which was already a factor. And not getting a lot of attention is this idea of minimalism where the Marie Kondos of the world are getting us to rethink our relationship with stuff and what we need to sustain happiness in our life. So, all of these things are just being accelerated.

SS

There is a darker side to this, and you alluded to it - a pervasive mistrust that exists. Truth and trust go hand in hand - it's a precondition for a genuine customer relationship. How do brands prove their integrity and not be simply seen as poseurs? What do brands do to become more relatable?

BS

When you're trying to relate to people you think to yourself, "How do I get this person to like me?". But the other way to ask the question is, "What's important to this person?" And can what's important to this person inspire me to align with

their values, beliefs and aspirations? Brands have to be human in these times. And you can see the inhumanity when at the start of this pandemic every commercial, every ad, sounded and looked the same: “We’re all in this together, in these uncertain times”. I get it. Brands have to sell their stuff, but they can do better.

SS

What new consumer attitudes are you seeing that will fundamentally change the character of the brand relationship?

BS

We’ve already seen a massive shift in what people want. For example, 84% of customers said – according to a Salesforce report that just came out recently – that they’re going to value brands more for the experience they deliver rather than their product or service. That’s huge! Then you look at another study, from Accenture, that said customers are judging brands by how well they’ve treated employees during this pandemic. So, to your question earlier, we are absolutely talking about a new dawn of brand and marketing.

SS

So how does marketing take the lead? You’re not going to get leadership from operations, or from finance, or from any logistical end of the business. It’s got to come from marketing. Yet in most enterprises marketing does not have a strong strategic influence.

BS

We have to think about it the way a start-up would: What is the market opportunity? And what does our investment in that opportunity yield us in the short term and in the longer term? And what is the opportunity cost of not doing these things? We need to make the case that investing in relationships is a competitive advantage. We need to build a culture that puts the customer first across all facets of the organization. We know that companies with a strong culture of customer-centricity do better financially, they have greater margins, the CEOs make more money, and are more famous and liked by the public and also by the media. And the shareholders get greater returns. So the ROI is there. Leadership has to embrace the idea of having better customer relationships with “Generation N” - for novel. It should recharge leadership. But if leadership doesn’t want to embrace this idea, if they’re stuck in the panic and the chaos, then you’re not going to be able to make the changes required. But if you look at ways to deliver light to the customer, you will find a way one step at a time.

SS

Where do you start?

BS

I always believe that pilots are a great way to start. Right now, the focus has to be on ecommerce and also on customer support: those are two Achilles heels right now in the pandemic. You can find what’s broken just by looking at the data, listening and talking to customers, capturing a “before state” and capturing an “after state”, say in a matter of weeks. You could show quick progress and then expand that exact thinking across the whole customer journey until it becomes a way of being.

SS

We’re going to be dealing with a new wave of technology in a few years which will change the way we interact, not just with each other, but with business. Is that going to be the true transformative force, not the pandemic, but this coming wave of technological change?

BS

Oh, man. There is no quick answer to this. But this is where we got into trouble twenty years ago: The consumerization of technology. We tend to lean on the technology first as an enabler for scale and efficiency and cost savings and not for the experience that it can deliver. So if you take everything that we talked about - if you had insights, if you had empathy, if you knew what was going to matter to people - and then you apply technology to that, then you’ve got what I call multimodal digital transformation. You have digital business model innovation that’s relevant and modern and awesome for customers, and also employees, and then you have it all connected through human-centered design. That’s the path to true transformation.



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