

The Marketing Uncertainty Playbook: What to Avoid, What to Do Now, and What to Build for the Future

Uncertainty is no longer an occasional disruption; it is a permanent feature of today's business environment. From geopolitical shocks and economic volatility to technological disruption and societal shifts, firms face continuous turbulence that demands agility, foresight, and resilience.

While finance and operations often dominate crisis responses, research from leading marketing journals, including the Journal of Marketing, Marketing Science, and the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, shows that marketing is equally critical to navigating uncertainty. Marketing is not just about communications; it manages the firm's most valuable risk buffers: brand equity, customer loyalty, stakeholder trust, and corporate reputation.

Drawing on this research, this playbook provides an evidence-based framework for marketing's role in navigating uncertainty, organized around four key imperatives:

- **What Not to Do:** Avoid common mistakes like slashing marketing budgets, blanket price cuts, and transactional loyalty tactics, which erode long-term competitiveness and trust.
- **What to Do Now:** Take immediate actions to stabilize customer relationships, protect brand equity, and seize emerging opportunities. Join MSI to get access.
- **What Metrics and Models to Build:** Upgrade marketing's decision-making toolkit to track marketing's impact on firm value under uncertainty. Join MSI to get access.

- **What to Build for the Future:** Invest in long-term capabilities that make marketing a core driver of organizational resilience and agility. Join MSI to get access.

Firms that ignore marketing's role in uncertainty risk slower recovery, eroded brand equity, and weakened stakeholder loyalty. Those that elevate marketing as a cross-functional risk and resilience capability can protect critical assets, accelerate recovery, and turn uncertainty into a platform for growth.

WHAT NOT TO DO: COMMON SHORT-TERM MISTAKES TO AVOID DURING UNCERTAINTY

Indiscriminate Cuts to Marketing Budgets

Firms often respond to crises by slashing marketing budgets indiscriminately—a move that can lead to long-term erosion of brand equity and customer loyalty, ultimately slowing post-crisis recovery (Hanssens, 2018; Dekimpe & Deleersnyder, 2018). Those that instead maintain or strategically reallocate marketing spend during downturns are more likely to preserve customer relationships, defend market share, and position themselves to capture greater gains during recovery phases (Pauwels & Hanssens, 2007).

Blanket Price Reductions and Commoditization of Customer Relationships

Blanket price cuts may seem like a quick fix during periods of uncertainty, but they often backfire by commoditizing customer relationships, weakening pricing power, and diminishing brand value. This approach is especially risky when customers are seeking brands that offer reassurance and reduce perceived

risk. Undermining that trust through indiscriminate discounting not only damages long-term loyalty but also makes margin recovery more difficult (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Transactional Approaches to Loyalty

Relying solely on transactional tactics like discounts to retain customers during uncertainty can erode genuine loyalty and weaken long-term relationships (Kumar & Shah, 2009). In contrast, firms that invest in personalized, targeted, and relationship-driven loyalty programs are far better positioned to maintain strong customer ties and protect margins, especially when stability and trust matter most.

WHAT TO DO NOW: SHORT-TERM MARKETING ACTIONS TO MANAGE RISK AND SEIZE OPPORTUNITY

In moments when turbulence clouds the path forward, decisive marketing action can mean the difference between erosion and resilience. This section offers a research-driven glimpse into how firms can immediately respond to uncertainty—not by retreating, but by strengthening the very capabilities that customers value most. For marketers and leaders seeking credible, evidence-backed strategies to stay connected, trusted, and ahead of the curve, the insights within are both timely and transformative.

A detailed exploration of specific short-term marketing actions to manage risk and seize opportunity is available in the full report.

WHAT METRICS AND MODELS TO BUILD: OPTIMIZING MEASUREMENT, FORECASTING, AND GOVERNANCE TO MANAGE UNCERTAINTY MORE PRECISELY

As uncertainty reshapes the rules of engagement, how marketers measure impact and guide decisions becomes more consequential than ever. This section explores the evolving role of marketing metrics, not just as performance trackers, but as strategic tools for navigating ambiguity with greater confidence. The insights here offer a powerful lens for rethinking how value is understood, defended, and communicated in volatile times. It's a compelling reminder of marketing's critical place at the decision-making table, and the competitive advantage of staying ahead of the curve.

A detailed exploration of specific metrics and models to optimize measurement, forecasting, and governance is available in the full report.

WHAT TO BUILD FOR THE FUTURE: LONG-TERM MARKETING CAPABILITIES TO BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE

Preparing for what comes next requires more than agility, it calls for intention. This section looks beyond the immediate to explore how organizations can lay the groundwork for lasting resilience. It gestures toward the kinds of capabilities that will matter most in navigating a shifting landscape, while underscoring the long-term value of strategic foresight. It offers a forward-looking advantage and a powerful case for building strength before it's tested.

A detailed exploration of what to build for the future to ensure organizational resilience is available in the full report.

CONCLUSION: MARKETING AS A SYSTEM OF RESILIENCE AND VALUE CREATION

In a world where disruption is no longer the exception but the norm, marketing's role is being redefined. No longer confined to its traditional boundaries, it is emerging as a strategic force—one uniquely positioned to help organizations navigate complexity with clarity and purpose. This playbook challenges leaders to see marketing not just as a function, but as a capability with the potential to shape outcomes in uncertain times. For MSI members, it offers not only insight, but inspiration—to lead with confidence when it matters most.

Join MSI for access to the full report, and to directly engage with other companies and academic experts offering perspectives on navigating uncertainty.