



# How to Survive and Thrive in the New Economy

*by Mark LeVell, CEO of 4Thought Marketing*

As a digital marketing professional and an [Oracle Eloqua](#) advocate for many years, I'm always looking for indicators of where global markets are heading. And between COVID and significant economic fluctuations, there's lots to consider.

## VUCA and Abraham Maslow

When the Cold War ended in the 1980s, the world entered a new era of re-alignment. In military circles, this is known as VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. This perfectly describes the period that we're in right now.

Our customers' needs are changing. Getting the latest products at the best prices, collecting loyalty points, and socializing are giving way to safety and security as the guiding principles for many. We've slipped down Abraham Maslow's [Hierarchy of Needs](#) faster than a kid on a scooter.

And all this has massive implications for Customer Experience professionals and, specifically, marketing leaders.



# Five Lessons from History

Whenever I feel like I'm experiencing VUCA, the first thing I tend to do is retreat into history to see what lessons we can learn from those who have gone before us. I came up with five specific lessons that all marketers should consider carefully.

## 1. Re-Segment & Re-Target

In a down economy, there are always some sectors that continue to spend. Some of these sectors are obvious (Biotech and Healthcare are obvious choices during Covid-19). As a marketing professional, you should target them immediately to gain some early wins.

However, many sustaining or growing sectors are not obvious, and identifying these micro-sectors in a sea of data is critical. Dig into your [Eloqua](#) and CRM data. Look carefully at *who is buying*, and to catch these micro-segments even earlier at *who is responding*.

Then, invest your time and energy into figuring out why these [segments](#) are doing well. For many, once you see who is responding, WHY they are doing well and responding becomes obvious... and this leads directly to the all-important messaging.

For others, you may have to dig deeper. I'll assume you know the apparent marketing tactics, including using our visual segmentation solution [4Segments](#).

Another easy and effective approach is to *talk to your customers*. It's easy to do, but I've always found marketers hesitant to pick up the phone and call their customers. Why? I think at some subconscious level they feel it's sales' job.

Ultimately, it's marketing's job to figure out messaging. To do this, and you need to know what your customers are thinking. Pick up that phone!

## **2. Focus on Customers**

Now is the time that you should focus on your existing customer base. It costs roughly five times more to sell to new customers versus your current customers. And the last thing you want right now is extra-hungry, aggressive competitors stealing away your customers. To continue growing in a down economy, focus on your precious customer base.

## **3. Innovation Supported by Integration is Your Greatest Weapon.**

When stress levels are high, creativity suffers. I've discovered this both personally and professionally across my career. Yet innovation can be a crucial customer attraction engine in the age of VUCA. Marketers are famous for innovation and creativity, so is the problem solved? It's a bit more complicated than that.

Start with innovation. Identify gaps in your processes, data, or systems. Next, identify the business value you could achieve by finding a solution. Then quantify the benefit and prioritize your list.

Next, explore how to integrate your solution. You may want to focus first on existing capabilities. If you cannot achieve the desired results for your highest priority issues, look to new integrations and custom solutions to help achieve your goals.

Therefore, the second lesson is to choose your marketing automation apps carefully and select strategic partners who can handle any integration or functional extensions you may need.

## 4. Be a Challenger

Challengers are the people who deliver valuable insight to their customers, look at their customers' problems through a different lens (re-framing), tailor their messaging to match, address their needs and take control of the sales cycle. For marketers, this has significant implications. Re-examine your content strategy and ensure it delivers real, unique insight at a deeper personalization level. This should be easily customizable for your sales teams.

In the last economic downturn following the global financial crisis of 2008, some salespeople (in the complex enterprise B2B area) continued to be highly successful.

One small research company – CEB (now part of Gartner) – set out to find why. What was it about this cohort of sales professionals that made them succeed where many others – even in the same company – failed abysmally?

In their book, [The Challenger Sales](#), they detailed the most successful salespeople's behaviors. They named the most successful persona "The Challenger." No longer were the relationship builders, the problem solvers, the hard workers, and the ubiquitous mavericks the best sellers – the challengers stood head and shoulders above all others.

## 5. Frugal Innovation Rules

Most organizations use around 20% of the horsepower of their existing systems. In my experience, the same is valid for marketing automation solutions. By unlocking more functionality from your current apps, you can leverage [frugal innovation](#) to stay one step ahead of your competitors, even with slashed marketing budgets.

By conducting system audits (from those who deeply understand these apps) and implementing effectiveness studies, you can quickly understand your existing solutions' full, untapped capabilities. It

might be as simple as investing in more training for your current staff or asking your Martech partners to create a simple add-on to unlock this latent value.



## Insulating Your Organization

As a digital marketing professional, how should you insulate yourself from an economic downturn? Here are three things you should do immediately:

1. **Invest in world-class CX.** Make sure you maximize the value of your existing customer base. Start with a 'frugal innovation' strategy and then see where your gaps in capability are. With Oracle CX Marketing / Eloqua, you're already in good shape. You can extract even more value by partnering smartly with an organization to ensure you get the maximum value from your investment. Focus on both innovation and integration.
2. **Build elasticity into your marketing model.** To ride the waves of an undulating economic outlook, ensure you can both expand and contract your business to smooth out the waves. We're now living in the age of "everything as a service." Choose the right strategic partners and solution providers. Build a tight organizational core and an agile operating strategy that can elegantly expand and contract to enable you to surf the VACU we're all living through successfully.
3. **Invest in your people.** Ensure the key staff in your operational 'core' have the right skills and competencies to excel in the age of VUCA. Develop hard skills to unlock your technology's value, plus the softer skills of psychological resilience and ability to support their fellow workmates through the tough times. To deliver a great customer experience, you first need to nail the employee experience.

# Conclusion

To survive and thrive in the new economy, you need to make some fast decisions and adopt a different marketing-department posture.

- **Adopt a survive and thrive mindset** so that you're continually learning from your successes and your failures. Don't descend into a blaming culture. You will succeed or fail as a team.
- **Transform your business** into being agile by design, applying it to your people, processes, and technology. Each has a part to play in delivering an excellent customer experience
- **Build a scalable operating model** to ride the economic uncertainty waves, including both upward and downward scalability.
- **Assemble an ecosystem of strategic partners** who can share the workload. Focus on your organization's core value, the things your customers care about. Consider outsourcing the rest!

In good times even mediocre organizations can perform well and make money. When a downturn hits, you find out which ones have a robust and sustainable operating model. Or, in the words of the investment guru, Warren Buffett, "Only when the tide goes out, do you discover who's been swimming naked."

*About Mark LeVell*

Mark LeVell has over 25 years of experience in Silicon Valley, including the founding of three start-ups, along with other marketing and sales executive positions at a variety of software companies. He has been at the forefront of both the CRM and Marketing Automation revolutions, starting with building one of the first sales automation software companies, TeLeVell Inc, over 20 years ago. More recently, he was Vice President at Market2Lead and Director of the Market First Group at CDC Software. Mark has helped hundreds of companies find and implement solutions to their marketing and sales needs.