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At times like this, it would be easy to think that winning new customers is the quickest route to business growth. Selling a big creative idea to prospects can seem much sexier than contacting the same old people on your database.

We all know that acquisition is the most expensive part of the customer relationship, yet somehow, for many businesses, plugging leaks in the database is not the priority it should be. Perhaps the good times of the last few years explain why CRM started to go out of fashion.

But that's all changing as the economic tide goes out. Many businesses see winning new customers as progressively difficult, with less disposable income around and fewer risks being taken by consumers. So using increasingly limited marketing budgets to shore up existing relationships is becoming the norm. The focus is upon highlighting long-term customer interest rather than countering new offers delivered by competitors.

A quick review of the acquisition versus retention equation is due. We need to establish the propensities of customers to leave, and determine what it would be worth spending on retaining them for a couple of years - in short, what it is that makes them brand 'sticky'. It's time to focus on mutually beneficial relationships: making it worthwhile for consumers to stay, at a price that secures the business while uncertain times remain. After all, these are the people who've already bought into your brand.

The answer to this marketing dilemma lies in customer-focused strategies. If the identities of your best customers escapes you, along with details of likely quitters, and frequency and type of communications sent to each individual, then you don't have the basic tools with which to construct a 'sticky CRM' strategy.

So if you lack this knowledge, get to know your data assets now. Organise your customer data insights and use them to develop a suitable CRM strategy. It may not be sexy, but it could make the difference between your brand surviving the downturn or going to the wall.

