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As featured in **The Sunday Times** writes Sandra O'Connell

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Rather than tie yourself in knots, find opportunities to reach out to customers and explore new angles

Focus on your existing customer base

"Start each day with a purpose," said Jo Collins, of Sales Performance, a sales and training consultant. "Write down five things you want to achieve." Focus on your existing customer base. "Now, more than ever, you need to pick up the phone and start talking to people," said Collins. "Before this, you couldn't do it because everyone was so busy. Now you'll find they are not only answering the phone, but are also happy to talk." Let clients know you are "just checking in with them to see how they are", she suggested. Then ask if there is any way you can help. Each day, identify 10 customers with whom you want to have a conversation, then call them. Next, create for yourself a calendar for sharing content online. "Every business is sitting on a wealth of information. Have a look and see what knowledge you have that could be of value to customers. Make it relevant and strategic; it's a great way of staying top of mind."

Spread some cheer

"If you have had an experience with another small business, and that experience has been positive, now is the time to give it a little boost by posting a Google review or a LinkedIn recommendation. It will be really valuable when we come out of this."

Forward Planning

Use the enforced downtime for forward planning. "You can choose how you are going to respond to this crisis," said Collins. "You can decide you are going to be proactive about it. You can spend the time working on the business rather than in it. It's what we are all supposed to do, but we never have the time. Now we have the time." She advises business-owners to profile all their customers to see what each buys from them. Then they should identify products or services they sell, and which they believe would suit customers who are not currently buying them. Mark this as an opportunity for future growth. "In my own business, I'm doing heaps of stuff I always wanted to do but never had the time, such as introducing a subscriber feature to my website," said Collins. "I'm going to create content showing people all the resources I use and share them with subscribers."

Create content

She is also creating video content, "something I always hated the idea of and had avoided doing". Collins is using an app called Screencast-O-Matic which adds video of her "in a little corner at the bottom of the screen talking to viewers and explaining slides". No matter which sector you are in, or how small your business, nurture your customer base. "If I'm a hairdresser, I'm going to be sending out tips by text about how to manage your hair on your own," said Collins. "If I run a garden centre, I'm going to be offering tips about things we could be doing in the garden. "More than anything, just send people a message to let them know you're thinking about them. You can't close your shutters now and think you can just roll them up in the future and carry on. You need to communicate with your customers. Remember, when you do talk to them, be aware of your frame of mind. Be upbeat and remain a positive influence for them, a voice of cautious optimism."

Upskill

Use the downtime to upskill. "Jump on a webinar — the Small Firms Association is running some — or sign up for LinkedIn Learning. Decide to do something to keep your focus," said Collins.