

MARKETING

Will brands need to reposition post-pandemic?

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French fashion and leather goods giant Hermes has consistently positioned itself as a purveyor of high-quality goods, maintaining an all-weather brand persona. Image credit: Hermes

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Somber piano music, empty streets, Zoom socializing: there have been so many near identical brand commercials that a [compilation](#) emerged.

No surprise there: how brands behave right now will either be a wind in their sails, or it is going to haunt them for a really long time, and some of them, such as Everlane and fashion influencer Arielle Charnas, learned that early on and the hard way.

Buying into vs. buying from

Brands trade in aspiration, and aspiration is a narrative: it is the stories we buy into and the products and experience we buy to be part of these stories.

Not so long ago, modern culture symbolized individualism, independence and freedom through iconography of FOMO fear of missing out: constant travel, outfit changes, and festival and fashion circuits.

But the script flipped overnight.

FOMO has gone, and consumers lean more towards the narrative of redemption by restraint.

[Journalists](#), [public intellectuals](#) and New Jersey senator [Cory Booker](#) claim that a better world will come out of our hardship.

Famed trend forecaster Li Edelkoort even went as far as to announce that we should be "[very grateful for the virus because it might be the reason we survive as a species.](#)"

Brands discovered two things.

First, they need a more coordinated and less siloed approach to their marketing.

Severe marketing budget cuts are at odds with the imperative of maintaining a relationship with their customers.

One way to keep it going is through inter-departmental collaboration and reliance on each other's strengths. This is a more resilient brand model, where marketing works in sync with operations, logistics, finance, customer service, and internal and external communications.

Second, brands need to adjust their narratives.

As a culture and a society, we were unprepared for this crisis because our national heroes are soldiers and warriors.

Our social heroes are nuclear scientists and tech inventors.

Our cultural heroes are influencers and celebrities.

But, en masse, brands now started to put forward stories of collective capacity for action and **duty to care**.

Radical individualism is out, social connection is in.

Brand focus is not on the end customer, but on the communities to which they belong.

Pre-crisis consumer-centric brand strategy is now society-centric strategy.

"At this moment, we don't need things, we just need people," **noted** Valentino's Pierpaolo Piccoli. "We need embraces, we need emotions.

"This is a dark moment and we have to rebalance a lot of things and values, and probably now we have to go back to those values with humans at the center of the process," he said.

For now, smaller brands and **Marc Jacobs** lead the way. They have already proven to be more nimble and creative than their legacy counterparts: they activated their communities, started live-streaming home exercise and cooking lessons, partnered up with other small brands to lighten up their customers' lives, and showered their customers with compassion, recipes and tunes of chanting monks.

There are five repositioning imperatives for brands:

More local. There is a big push towards localization across the brands' entire value chain. It starts from moving supply and production locally "on-shoring" to localizing distribution, sales and communication.

In China, even post-lockdown, consumers gravitate towards local brands. The shift in local distribution and manufacturing is spurred by growth of nano warehousing.

Nano or micro warehousing refers to small fulfillment centers dispersed throughout urban neighborhoods. It helps retailers route orders quickly through local facilities and provide the handy last-mile solution that ensures speedy delivery and cheaper and faster fulfillment.

Nano warehousing is expected to expand beyond the grocery sector and into beauty, apparel, fashion and luxury retail.

On the demand side, there is also a move towards micro environments.

For example, Nordstrom Local "stores" do not sell anything, but offer convenience in the form of returns, online order pick ups, style consulting, and alterations and tailoring services.

More social. Consumers turned their attention away from brands and influencers promoting consumption and themselves towards those that are promoting socially responsible behavior and inspiring social responsibility, care and compassion.

There has been a shift from "I" to "we," a trend that will likely continue, with brands being forced to assume a role more respectful of people and the environment.

Brands will be even more evaluated based on the social good they create in their communities and how responsible they are in their supply, manufacturing and production.

Brand storytelling will, for the time being, veer towards more generous, responsible and compassionate social scripts.

While we should not necessarily hold our breath for more enlightened consumers and brands long-term the muscle memory of consumerism and individualism is too strong we can all work towards a subtle and persistent positive shift in both our corporate and personal behavior.

More personalized. Personalization is a proven lucrative brand and business strategy.

Brands that have successfully leaned into it, such as Amazon, Nike or Sephora, are seeing more engaged and satisfied customers and higher sales conversion rates.

Going forward, personalization will help brands survive as customers will gravitate towards those brands that provide exceptional customer and retail experience, white-glove service, and invest in building an ongoing relationship.

Data plays a critical role in this process, and brands that have already invested in gathering and analysis of their customer data and who have in-house data analytics teams will get further ahead.

In the customer touch points scenario, with a slow and cautious re-opening of physical stores, there will be a lot of drive-through and by-appointment-only shopping scenarios.

Brands such as Deciem and Kiehl's have already repurposed their store associates as online personal beauty consultants. A combination of personal online and offline service will be a lifeline for brands for the time being.

More quality. "We are not luxury," claims revered leather goods house Herms. "We are high quality."

Among all high-end brands, Herms has done exceedingly well in China, with **\$2.7 million in a single-day sales** in its Shanghai flagship store.

More brands need to reposition themselves towards messages, social scripts and cues of quality now that consumers are likely to spend more prudently and carefully, and are looking for items that will last them a long time.

There is also a strong component of consumers wanting to support independent craftsmen, stores and labels, who had it the hardest during the lockdown.

More familiar. After a period of prolonged distress, people gravitate towards the known and the familiar. Their consumption habits reflect this: familiar looks, colors, shapes and references perform better than wild and innovative concepts that are in danger of being perceived as threatening and scary at least for the time being.

This is a good time for riffing on known and beloved looks. Brands that already put forward season-less looks, such as The Row or Rick Owens, fare the best, at the moment. They not only do not have to offload their excess seasonal merchandise, but are likely to attract consumers who want investment pieces.

Brands are likely to produce fewer, classic, smaller collections and items that can be worn throughout the year. This may be a good thing: it will not only move the fashion and luxury business overall away from seasonal trends, but also force brands to re-examine their purpose and brand identity, and how they are reflected in the products they put forward.



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