

MARKETING

Connecting with customers where they are during challenging times

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After coronavirus concerns swept the globe but before "temperature checks" became a universally understood business term, my advertising agency sent clients an anonymous survey to gauge how they were faring with their marketing efforts in confronting the pandemic. It was our version of a health-inspired temperature check.

The responses varied.

One client leaned completely in, avoided negativity, and sought to propose a collective solution to the broad problem at hand.

Another client stepped back and contemplated the response, looked at the different paths forward, and took a 180-degree turn from what it had planned to deploy.

Creatively, both approaches were right.

Pick your personality

When the lockdowns began in March, the changes or lack thereof in the way brands continued to market to consumers seemingly emerged almost overnight.

Many brands quickly unveiled new campaigns to address the situation, tending to adopt one of these "personality types" to shape their messaging:

- **The Good Samaritan:**We are in this situation together, and we are here to help in this difficult time.
- **The Assistant Coach:**Here is how to stay healthy by following hygiene and social distancing guidelines.
- **The Cheerleader:**We salute and support the frontline heroes who are putting themselves at risk.
- **The Community Philanthropist:**We partner with and donate to worthy causes that help your community.
- **The Right Partner:**Our products and services are perfect for surviving and thriving in the current situation.

Other brands did not develop new campaigns but made subtler changes to the work already in market.

For one of our clients, we took inventory of the imagery we used in display and native advertising, and we replaced images that did not appear to encourage social distancing or that portrayed scenes that felt out of place in a lockdown situation for example, team sports and indoor restaurants. It served the client's need to address the situation while they assessed their crisis response in terms of marketing.

Most surprising was that many brands maintained their status quo in market and chose not to make any adjustments. Cringe-worthy images remained in marketing materials, and some brands remained silent when consumers needed increased transparency and communication frequency.

Various factors other than insensitivity or unresponsiveness, such as financial concerns due to the crisis, could play into this choice, but it certainly felt like these brands were oblivious, especially compared with the brands that addressed the pandemic and related societal fears head-on.

Walking a fine line

One responsive approach was from a brand that came to market extremely quickly with a completely new campaign, using the "Right Partner for Right Now" personality.

This brand was in a rare position, preparing to launch a suite of products that happened to have a uniquely relevant value proposition given the overnight shift to remote work and communication.

The company pushed up the product's launch and in just days went to market with a powerful campaign.

The creative acknowledged the change we are all faced with collectively not simply working remotely, but how we now interact and communicate with friends, family, and more and clearly addressed the purpose and value of the brand.

Unlike many communications that begin with "in these uncertain times," this creative focused on what is happening rather than why it is happening. Its effectiveness lies in directing an emotional response away from fear and anxiety, toward confidence and courage. It highlighted the ongoing collective human need for safe, secure communication and how this brand could help.

It is a fine line to walk as COVID-19 fatigue settles in.

You need to acknowledge the crisis or risk seeming insensitive, but how much is enough, and what is too much?

The work created for this brand strikes the right balance. It acknowledges the situation in a way that focuses on the need for the product, and it provides a clear, emotive look at the benefits the brand offers. It is an effective use of the one-to-many collective marketing mindset.

AS WE MEASURE the results of recently deployed campaigns, we will know more about what successful work will look like moving forward.

Ultimately, the successes and failures we have already seen point to a marketing landscape that strives to meet consumers where they currently are more than ever before.

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