

MARKETING

Empathy, understanding essential for brands reaching post-COVID consumers

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Consumer behavior has shifted during the pandemic. Image credit: Neiman Marcus

By SARAH RAMIREZ

During the coronavirus pandemic, people's experiences and perceptions have varied widely creating a challenge for brands hoping to build and maintain connections with consumers during this uncertain time.

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To help businesses navigate a post-pandemic market, **Burke Inc.** and **Seed Strategy** has identified eight consumer segments that have emerged during the pandemic. Brands should showcase their charitable efforts and demonstrate understanding in their messaging to better connect with consumers.

"People in many, if not all, of the consumer segments we uncovered have lost something of importance to them: confidence in their future, job security, assurance that they're healthy enough to move freely in society, closeness to people they love, daily freedom to live the way they want to live," said Jamie L. Baker-Prewitt, Ph.D and chief research officer at Burke, Inc.

"As a result, these American consumer segments have varying degrees of anguish and anxiety," she said. "Brand managers and marketers must adjust their products, services, and messaging to reflect sensitivity to this reality or risk appearing tone deaf."

The report, "The Refracting Nature of COVID-19," is based on an online survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults in July 2020. Researchers also conducted 30 in-depth video interviews in late August and September 2020.

Changing consumers

The eight segments were categorized based on consumers' personal characteristics and demographics, psychographics, behaviors and COVID-19 impacts and mindsets.

Many younger consumers fall into the "way finders" category and fear missing out on their future goals because of the persistent uncertainty. Mental health is a concern, as job opportunities remain limited during the pandemic along with mounting debt and civil unrest.

The "determined" segment features young consumers who may be more established in their careers and personal lives. They want to maintain their lifestyles despite the current climate, even accumulating debt.



Consumers have varying perceptions of health and financial risks during the pandemic. Image credit: Unsplash

"Frazzled" consumers are balancing home, work and childcare all in one place. Many will bend COVID-19 precautions in an attempt to maintain normalcy.

Consumers in the "protective" segment are among the most cautious and taking the coronavirus and quarantines seriously. This group has embraced expanded delivery options as they remain at home as often as possible.

"Empathetic" consumers are community-oriented and view it as their responsibility to follow advice about the pandemic. Previous career success allows this segment to better manage financial concerns.

"The highest earning consumer segment in our COVID-19 research is the empathetic," Dr. Baker-Prewitt said. "This group's financial stability and general healthiness protects it from the most damaging elements of the pandemic."

The "bold" consumers are more concerned about the economic risks than the health risks brought on by the pandemic. They tend to be older and want businesses to return to "normal" to avoid further unemployment and income losses.

Financially secure older adults may fall into the "enlightened" category, and prioritize following restrictions to protect their health.

Finally, "isolated" seniors remain strictly quarantined and rely on their medical communities for protection and access to the outside world.



The pandemic has left many consumers feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Image credit: Knight Frank

Despite the differences, each of these consumer segments still has needs that businesses can fulfill. This also influences how brands can better communicate with prospective customers.

Way finders want products that feel special and uplifting, and opt for services that offer a sense of accomplishment. Frazzled consumers prefer direct communication from brands and will pay for services that simplify their lives.

Protective consumers are looking for products and services that are safely accessible, with reassurance from communications. Bold consumers prioritize products that support the U.S. economy and want brand communication to echo those sentiments.

Brand support

Empathy and service have been central to brands' offerings and marketing this year.

For instance, as consumer confidence wanes and coronavirus cases climb in the U.S., high-end retailers have begun emphasizing joy in their holiday campaigns. To strike the right tone in their marketing, retailers are celebrating comfort instead of extravagance and highlighting safety measures to draw shoppers to stores ([see story](#)).

At the onset of the pandemic, many luxury brands found ways to support coronavirus relief efforts, including pivoting to making face masks and hand sanitizer.

In one proactive effort, French Cognac brand Hennessy launched a program dedicated to providing immediate relief and long-term support to minority small business owners across the U.S.

Black, Asian and Latinx business owners have had to overcome great obstacles in their paths to success and in the era of COVID-19, these individuals are fighting harder than ever against a range of inequalities that stand in their way. Through the Unfinished Business initiative, these businesses have the opportunity to receive urgent funding and access to vital resources ([see story](#)).

"Brand managers and marketers have many ways to appeal to these segments now and beyond the pandemic," Dr. Baker-Prewitt said. "Well after this pandemic is over, consumers in all segments will have long memories about which brands and companies were authentic, supportive, and transparent during this crisis, and it will have lasting effects on their brands' equity."

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