



Chaos Thinking™
**Brands and Businesses
in the Age of Coronavirus**

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‘We’ve always done
marketing a certain way.’

That way’s going to change — fast.

Introduction

It is still too early to fully assess how coronavirus will affect brands and the wider business world. The political and human shockwaves of the pandemic will be immense; the global recession will be punishing; the consequences of the crisis are far from clear.

But this document is, tentatively, an attempt to answer two specific questions. What can brands begin to learn from what is happening? And what should successful brands do in the months and years ahead? We have tried to answer these in 20 points.

We look at four areas: business strategy, brand strategy, people and brand communications.

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1 Business Strategy

‘Our business?
It’s looking OK.’

But could it look better?

Embrace adaptability

PRADA

This will become crucial in the months and years ahead. For example, Prada has gone from being a luxury goods manufacturer to one making medical face masks, free of charge. Right now, considerations about brand image or purpose take second place to humanitarian needs.

At the moment we're seeing this adaptability as *tactical* not-for-profit thinking; in time, it will become *strategic* and profitable thinking. To survive these kind of events, businesses will not just have contingency plans but, very possibly, contingency *businesses*. This will create numerous virtual and digital businesses, in particular.

In one sentence?

“Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.”
(Stephen Hawking)

Embrace speed



Speed is, if you like, the twin brother to adaptability. Given the pace of the pandemic decisions have had to be made very fast.

An example: in some Italian hospitals, due to a faulty part, ventilators started failing. Realising the urgency of this, Isinnova, a 3D-printer company in Brescia, started making replacement parts.

For businesses this means that not just are contingency plans important, but contingency *schedules* are equally important: the faster, the better.

In one sentence?

Acting quickly is as important as thinking clearly.

You've got more stakeholders now



Once upon a time, stakeholders might have meant customers, suppliers, shareholders and the media.

Moving forward, they might well include medical authorities and public government/authorities: working together with them is crucial.

This means the communications have to be thought about far more carefully. Who is the audience? What is our relationship with them? What are their fundamental needs?

It means that belief in the so-called 'invisible hand of the market' seems increasingly irrelevant. When the British government bails out businesses to the tune of £350bn, the game has changed.

In one sentence?

Speak clearly to your expanded audiences.

Look out for mergers and collaborations



In a tough economic climate, businesses will fail. To prevent this, it's very likely that some new, and unusual, mergers and collaborations will come about.

Some will be due to economic necessity; others will be due to new needs in the pandemic and in its aftermath.

Moreover, the smarter businesses won't just be using a co-brand to get more reach and increase sales (though that will be key). Strategically, they will also be exploring new business models that will be able to withstand future situations of this kind.

In one sentence?

Businesses will investigate how they can work together more closely.

Data collection is getting more creative



Accurate data is crucial to modern businesses and the investment community. But one of the features of the crisis has been flawed data from some official sources. China obfuscated in the early days of the outbreak; in Iran, it is feared the number of cases has been far more than the authorities suggested.

Astute businesses have got a sense of the crisis from other sources. For example, when Malaysia claimed it had only 129 cases, an Australian tech analyst noticed the country's internet slowing by 5% in one day. He argued, rightly, that people were doing a self-initiated lockdown, so suggesting the problem was far more severe. This kind of thinking — looking also at areas such as flight patterns, traffic density and pollution — is set to grow.

In one sentence?

Smart businesses are increasingly looking to multiple, 'alternative' sources of data.

2 Brand Strategy

‘Amazing products, loyal customers. Our brand’s in good health.’

You might like to think again.

Your personas have vanished



Persona-building is one of the key elements of marketing. Now? They've vanished. Think about it: "Globe-trotter, 30, loves going out, seeing his friends." None of that is relevant now.

The smarter brands will already be constructing new personas.

They will realise that, in the short term at least, we live remarkably domestic lives, but very stressed ones too. They will also realise that, in time, we will have to accommodate a new way of living: in terms of travel, hygiene, communal spaces and medical care (among many others), we are moving into a very different world.

In one sentence?

The person[a] you thought you were selling to might have changed forever.

More than ever, purpose matters

MSE

MoneySavingExpert.com

Increasingly over the past few years, brands have boasted about how they don't just sell crisps (for example) but fulfil a grander social and moral purpose. It feels warm and cuddly, very possibly because it's a distraction from the mundane goal of any business: making money.

But moral purpose *really* matters now, so brands that demonstrate it *really* stand out. For example, Martin Lewis, the man behind Money Saving Expert, recently donated £1m to small charities to help with coronavirus food banks.

Bill Bernbach famously said, "A principle is not a principle until it costs you money." Wise words.

In one sentence?

If you've boasted about the moral purpose of your brand, now's your chance to walk the talk.

Embrace recession strategies



We're in a recession. How deep it will be, and how long it will last, we don't yet know. But we can learn from previous ones. Key strategies include:

- Maintain marketing spending: customers need the reassurance of known brands.
- Research your customer: find out how they define value and respond to it.
- Adjust pricing tactics: this doesn't necessarily mean cutting your prices, but definitely analyse your pricing strategies.
- Ignore gimmicks or wackiness, in what you create and how you communicate. Reliability, durability and performance matter more.

In one sentence?

Seek to reassure and add value.

Rediscover relevance



Relevance goes back to the fundamental question behind all marketing: “will this product/service help me to solve my problem or enhance my life?” If it doesn’t do either, the brand is irrelevant.

Over the months ahead, the stronger brands will find where and how they’re relevant and communicate this. They will be ‘enabler[s] of resourcefulness’, as a recent Kantar webinar on the pandemic put it.

A hypothetical example? A sports and activity brand such as Garmin might move into the health and well-being space. The stronger brands will be aware of the huge cultural and social shifts caused by coronavirus, and then adapt accordingly.

In one sentence?

Find your relevance then tell people about it.

Rediscover values



Take the BBC. Up until recently, it's been regularly bullied by the government with the constant threat of the licence fee being taken away.

But with coronavirus, it came out fighting. It's positioned itself as the prime source of information, guidance and comfort in this period. It's unveiled educational programmes, exercise programmes, regular coronavirus updates as well as re-introducing a raft of old favourite shows on iPlayer. It was widely applauded for its actions.

A brand doesn't have to be a public service broadcaster to do this. At times like these, values shine through.

In one sentence?

Find your values then tell people about them.

3 People

‘Our people are
our greatest asset.’

Now’s your time to walk the talk.

Mistreat people at your peril



In the immediate wake of the crisis, Richard Branson — worth a cool £4 billion — asked his airline staff to take eight weeks' unpaid leave.

He was ridiculed in the media and on social. And Virgin — which many consider a strong and healthy brand, one that has taken decades to build up — lost massive amounts of goodwill and, simultaneously, brand equity.

The human dimension of this crisis cannot be overstated. The pandemic has humbled us: it has, and does, remind us of our common humanity. It makes actions such as Branson's look, at best, clumsy; at worst, callous.

In one sentence?

How you treat your people should be a reflection of how you treat your customers: with decency.

Look at remote working differently



It's new, it's different and it takes a bit of getting used to.

But for those millions of employees who are currently doing it, they might find it eye-opening. Think about it: no time wasted commuting, cheaper house prices, and avoiding the pollution of a big city.

Admittedly, there are certain drawbacks to it. But think of it as an experiment for businesses around the world. And don't be surprised when employees ask if they can work remotely in the years to come.

In one sentence?

Look at remote working in a new light: it could become the new norm.

Look at work and leisure differently



Up until February 2020, there were reasonably sound distinctions between work and leisure. Now, for the next few months at least, these just won't apply.

Some people are working from home, some people are doing a mixture of work and leisure. But many, *many* people are juggling jobs, chores and children. The distinction is blurred.

What does this mean? If you're an employer, it means you'll see whole new working habits emerge. If you're a marketer, it means your customers will be always on: Media spends can run at any time, and the rules about when people are online have been transformed.

In one sentence?

Work and leisure have blurred completely.

Look at office working differently



Right now, employees working from home are overwhelmingly using Zoom for video meetings. For the free basic plan, which some businesses are using, it times out after 40 minutes.

But here's the thing: on social, many people are saying they really like that. Meetings have long been accused of being counter-productive: they get people together, sure, but they can be overlong and notoriously ineffective.

More broadly, we might learn huge lessons from working from home. In this example, when we go back to our offices some companies might limit meetings to 40 minutes. And, by doing so, become far happier and more productive.

In one sentence?

Working from home might help us to work better when we're back in the office.

Prepare for traumatised staff



One day, all being well, the crisis will be over.

But at that point, overly positive ‘let’s all get back to work, folks’ messages might fall on deaf ears. This is because many people will have lost loved ones, and many, *many* people will have gone through immense financial and emotional anxiety.

HR departments that assume that it’s all a case of ‘business as usual’ might well need to think again: cases of PTSD — whether diagnosed or undiagnosed — will surely increase. Suicide rates will very probably increase, as they did after the SARS epidemic. Companies that offer counselling and support will be seen as far more attractive — and their people will be far happier.

In one sentence?

Your staff’s mental health matters: protect it.

4 Brand Communications

‘When we talk,
our customers listen.’

But are they listening now?

It's about actions, not words



One of the best-known phrases in the English language — ‘Actions speak louder than words’ — is too often forgotten by marketers.

To illustrate this, look at the images opposite. The upper one, from McDonald’s UK, is an act of generosity. It’s kind. It shows they care, so we do.

The lower image suggests that our current need for social distancing can be epitomised in the rejigged McDonald’s logo. It’s self-regarding. Who cares?

Bizarrely, these communications belong to the same brand. But the greater point is that the first one is an action. Furthermore, this doesn’t just apply to product brands — service brands need to find new, creative ways to do this.

In one sentence?

Actions speak louder than words.

Perfect is boring now



What do we feel right now? We're living in a strange world, cooped up, loving our families but sometimes frankly irritated by them, and having to deal with the breakfast dishes before jumping on a Zoom call. And when we go outside, it can all feel a bit scary.

It's not perfect.

Smart brands will reflect this — they'll reject the neat, manicured and polished to depict our lives as they truly are: compromised and abnormal, with an added helping of absurdity. In this way the better brands will become more human and, hopefully, more endearing.

In one sentence?

Look at our reality now: if marketing communications don't reflect this, in some shape or form, they've failed.

Channels are in flux



A central truism of brand communications is to choose channels wisely. Right now, the channels people typically choose are changing — just think of how many millions of people have had to learn the rudiments of Zoom or Microsoft Teams over the past few weeks.

There are opportunities here, if brands look closely. We already were moving firmly in the direction of e-commerce and this will surely continue. But in the absence of face-to-face communications, other channels might make a noticeable comeback; new ones might well emerge.

In one sentence?

Channels are very much in flux: see which ones your customers are gravitating towards.

Coronavirus will be a subtext for years



Think of the words that we've been reading/speaking/thinking about over the past few weeks: *isolation, hoarding, panic, distancing, quarantine*. They have become common parlance. And we've been aware of them 24/7.

Now think of their opposites: *community, generosity, calm, nearness, freedom*.

Brands that use these 'opposites' will be, even sub-consciously, echoing a lot of what people currently crave. So it pays to think about what aspects of the brand — and its products — might evoke these words. They resonate — and that matters.

In one sentence?

Having identified current anxieties, seek to describe the opposite in your communications.

Fake empathy doesn't work



As the pandemic grew in strength, brand after brand jumped on the email bandwagon. They asked their customers how they were doing, they told their customers what they stood for, they reminded that customers could buy from them in the normal ways. Finally, a heartfelt sign-off to wish them safety.

There was a huge backlash on social. As one marketer wryly put it, “I honestly had no idea there were this many companies that are here for me at this difficult time.”

Instead, be useful and/or interesting — ideally both. Then say it in a compelling way. This is at the essence of marketing communications.

In one sentence?

Be useful and/or interesting —
then communicate this.

5 Key Takeaways

‘Nothing’s going to
really change.’

Change is everywhere now.

Key Takeaways

Business Strategy

1. Embrace change — it will be a constant in the months and years ahead
2. Embrace speed — change that happens slowly will not work in our new reality
3. You've got more stakeholders now — that means potentially more customers, but also more people to be accountable to
4. Look out for mergers and collaborations — there will be plenty of them in the months and years ahead
5. Data collection is getting creative — smart businesses are looking in unlikely sources for key insights

Key Takeaways

Brand Strategy

1. Research your new personas — because that ‘globe-trotting, party-going thirtysomething’ no longer exists
2. Purpose matters — if you have a moral brand purpose, now’s the chance to walk the talk
3. Embrace recession strategies — we’re in a new world, but we’ve had recessions before: learn from them
4. Rediscover your relevance — how can you be relevant to your customers during, and after, coronavirus?
5. Rediscover your values — they can be calming in a time of panic, and reassuring in recessions

Key Takeaways

People

1. Don't mistreat them — the human dimension of this pandemic cannot be overstated
2. Reassess remote working — and don't be surprised if it becomes far more normal in years to come
3. Reassess work and leisure — because workers world-over are having to do so
4. Reassess office work — what could we learn from remote working that will help us when we return?
5. Prepare for traumatised staff — breezy 'let's get back to work folks!' attitudes might be tone-deaf

Key Takeaways

Brand Communications

1. Actions speak louder than words — an old saying, but true. It's especially true now
2. Perfect is boring now — brands that don't reflect the new reality will be seen as crass
3. Channels are in flux — people are diversifying, using new and different channels. What are they?
4. Coronavirus will be a subtext for years — think of the words we're using, then find their opposites
5. Fake empathy doesn't work — in fact, it never has done. But especially not in our current situation

Opportunities

E-commerce / Social commerce / E-learning / Virtual reality / Business mergers / Brand collaborations / New channels / Rediscovered channels / New personas / Brands that are truly relevant / Values that are truly lived

Challenges

Face-to-face / Events / Travel / Remote working / Out-of-home advertising / Reshaping strategy / “That’s the way we’ve always done it” / Showing actions, not words / Re-thinking the very nature of work, business and brands

‘It’ll be business
as usual in no time.’

Not now. The game’s changed.

UNSAME YOUR BRAND™

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