

“WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”: BRAND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19

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On March 22nd, 2020, a new element in Times Square caught the attention of the crowd that was there, however smaller than usual: a big red Coca-Cola billboard showed the brand's classic script logo, normally written in tightly connected Spencerian-style typography, with wide space between its letters. Below that image was the message “Staying apart is the best way to stay united”.

This was one of the ways the company decided to respond to the COVID-19 crisis that is affecting customers worldwide. By showing the spaced logo along with the hopeful message, the brand encourages citizens to follow one of the basic measures taken up by most governments regarding the spread of the virus: social distancing.

Coca-Cola's example is just one of the many that can be retrieved from all around the world. Companies are worried about how this pandemic affects their business in many dimensions (financially, productivity, distribution channels), and communication is one key aspect of these issues. Addressing customer concerns and changing needs, values and behavior patterns through communication tools is something that brands simply cannot

ignore; especially during times of crisis.

This crisis poses new challenges for citizens, governments, and brands, and communication is at the core of everybody's attention. Citizens seek information and reassurance, institutions need to manage this information as well as its meaning (Coombs, 2015), and companies need to maintain and articulate corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the best of their abilities, as well as engagement with audiences.

One way of doing this is by adjusting production activities and resources. The company BrewDog started producing hand sanitizer amid shortages in the United Kingdom (driven by coronavirus fears). In fact, many other alcohol brands have shifted from distilleries into manufacturing hand sanitizer, as part of a global response (Morgan, 2020).

Another quite popular example of how business are acting on CSR during these times is by using production pipelines to manufacture facemasks and other protective equipment supplies for citizens and health workers, an approach in which clothing companies such as Nike, Gap, and Inditex are focusing on.

One of the main restrictions that citizens are currently facing is being in lockdown, which implies a stay-at-home or safer-at-home order, with government policies that affect mobility and a wide range of activities (and industries). There have been brands that have shown concern about customers' wellbeing during this period, as well as adapting their services to this new lockdown situation, assuming most customers

will be at home and this will affect their everyday habits such as going to the gym.

Social media and digital resources are one of the preferred forms of communication since they allow for effective (and even synchronous) engagement with audiences. The restaurant chain Chipotle, for instance, has hosted virtual lunches through their “Chipotle Together” sessions, which allows people to connect with the brand through the videoconferencing site Zoom. Each session features celebrity appearances or hosts, corporate presentation and promotional events, such as the chance to win voucher codes for online deliveries (since going to the physical restaurant is no longer a possibility).

As to helping towards everyday life and the new routines that come with lockdown restrictions, sportswear companies and gyms are also doing their bit. Reebok, as other brands and gyms across the world, is supporting the fitness community by offering virtual at-home classes. These classes are usually live to accentuate the feeling of being part of a community and are delivered through social media platforms such as YouTube or Instagram.

Another key player within the sportswear industry is Nike. Nike’s marketing is one of the most popular and referenced communication strategies by both scholars and industry professionals. Besides contributing to the manufacturing and distribution of facemasks, as aforementioned, the company has launched their ‘Play for the World’ campaign. The brand also offers at-home workouts, tips and advice for

fitness enthusiasts, besides encouraging people to download their app and access premium Nike Training Club features for free.

Through this campaign, besides offering a wide range of resources for customers, Nike is trying to reinforce its values with a strong message that is in line with the brand’s popular slogan (Just Do It): “Play for the World”. Rather than focusing on the limitations that working out at home entails, the brand sends the message of this crisis being an opportunity to “play for the world” safely from home, following live online events and creating shareable content.

On another note, many brands have altered their logos to promote social distancing (McDonald’s, Volkswagen, Audi) or created advertisements to support prevention measures. Nando’s took it to Twitter to address the health crisis while (subtly?) throwing shade at one of its competitors, KFC, by sharing the message “Turns out finger licking isn’t good. Rather, reach for the soap,” referencing KFC’s slogan while promoting hand hygiene. In the case of Ikea, the company has shared an image in the style of its assembly instructions guides; its title being “STAY HÖME” and showing a key, a lock, and a toilet paper (x100) icon, along with a closed door as the correct option and an open one as a mistake.

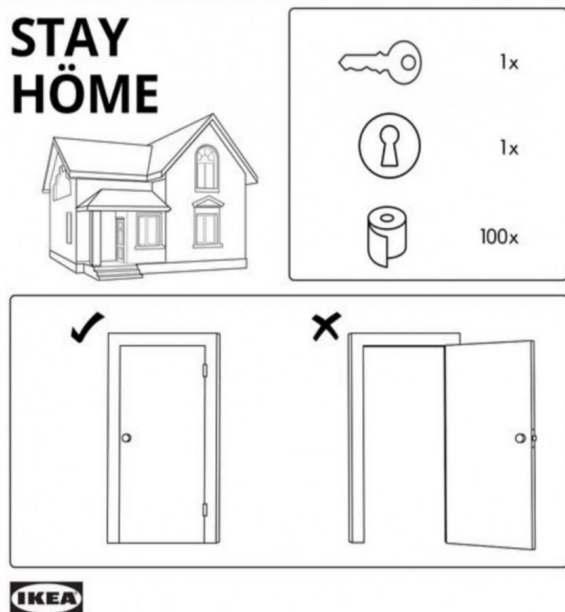


Image 1: IKEA ad encouraging people to stay at home (Source: IKEA)

Whether brands decide to contribute to improving this situation by sending out positive messages, offering content or services for free, special promotions, or adapting their production pipelines, there are some key elements that companies seem to agree on in terms of communication.

First of all, brands are aware of the need of acknowledging and addressing the current situation.

People are constantly receiving and searching for information about the COVID-19, statistics, or new measures that they need to take into consideration; and the impact that it has in their everyday lives affects them in every dimension, also as customers and their consumption patterns, which ultimately affects companies.

Another commonplace attitude that brands are showing regarding this crisis is emphasizing CSR through actions and communication. The size of the gesture inevitably depends on

several factors intrinsic to each business, especially those that are usually considered for assessing a firm's survival in times of crisis: its market orientation, its competitive advantage, and its ability for innovation (Naidoo, 2010). Nevertheless, however big or small the contribution, brands want to show that they care.

Finally, the third aspect in which companies seem to coincide is that of resonating with audiences through advertising or communication. Independent from what their approach might be, or what particular information they are trying to send out, brands are sending messages of corporate responsibility, humanity, encouragement and collectivity. Brands and customers are all in this together, and they are part of the same team; which sends the message that this affects us all.

Ultimately, brands will also be judged on how much they did or did not do, all limitations considered. While being well aware that the impact of this crisis will affect brands to a greater or lesser extent depending on factors such as the aforementioned ones, basic communication strategies of brands seem to follow a fairly similar line of thought, telling audiences "we are aware of the situation, we are trying to do good (to the best of our abilities), and we are facing this together".

Although it is still quite soon to determine which communication strategies are the most effective ones, what can be drawn as a general conclusion for now is that one of the key principles of branding still prevails (or even is emphasized)

during times of crisis: corporate communication is inevitable; whether companies decide to continue with existing campaigns and not address the crisis or, on the contrary, handle its communication resources in order to adapt to changing social concerns, they will be subject of judgement. Hence, the most sensible approach for brands to follow is to manage and adjust the way they engage and communicate with stakeholders and customers using a proper tone.

Whereas the usual recommendation for companies is to follow a strategy of denial when facing a crisis that they are not responsible for, it is also true that communication efforts should be designed to improve the situation and reassure customers (Coombs, 2015). In the current situation, an approach of denial is not mainstream because it would not make any sense since, although companies are not responsible for this crisis, it is affecting society as a whole, and for brands to simply ignore reality would mean an immediate detachment from customers.

This crisis has affected every aspect of modern societies and will most probably have a great impact for brands, short term and long term. Customer behavior is effectively changing, along with priorities, needs and consumption patterns. Corporate social responsibility has been established as a common practice among industries, which has been proved these last few weeks, also in terms of communication. As unusual and novel as this situation is, an action as familiar as effectively communicating and resonating with customers shows to be indispensable.

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