

Finding meaning in times of crisis

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*Unprecedented times require marketers and brands to make difficult decisions and to plan with caution yet act with speed. How can we walk the tightrope of money-making and genuine empathy in this maelstrom, asks **Emma Odendaal**, Digital Director at [John Brown South Africa](#).*



Covid-19 has ushered in a monumental shift in consumer behaviour. People are spending more time online than ever before, craving new content and new experiences from their couches. They are searching for recipe inspiration and exercise videos (Google Trends, March 2020), and are less tolerant of flashy celebrity endorsements. They're shopping less often, but with a larger basket size, and are more likely to experiment with a new brand when their trusty faithful is out of stock at their local.

People are isolated, fearful, and many are lonely. Yet data insights consultancy firm Kantar's Covid-19 Barometer shows that 88% of South Africans believe brands should talk about how they can be helpful in this new way of life. Consumers are asking brands to provide solutions and relief from their unique challenges, to engage, to help them connect with others and to remind them of better times.

In Pick n Pay's case, it meant returning to its customer-centric brand purpose, helping its customers live better, every day, even in lockdown, via a special Fresh Living Lockdown edition website that provides users with recipes, strategies, help and support to get them through this time – with their sanity and health intact. Built by the John Brown team in under a week – converting the print magazine into online content that is updated daily and amplified across social channels – it arms Pick n Pay shoppers with useful information and the tools to feed their families while under pressure.

Capitec, on the other hand, gives its audience virtual 'high fives' every week with inspiration, information and instruction, in the context of the pandemic, to reassure via its Instagram channel. All falling within the theme of how Capitec can help you to 'Live Better' through the current crisis, it highlights local businesses and everyday heroes in the community who are making a difference in the local fight against Covid-19.

Above all, consider your brand's role in the 'new normal' and how it can alleviate the worry in your customers' lives. We don't know how long the virus will be with us, but one thing is certain: its impact will remain in our psyches long after a vaccine is found.

The following will remain defining characteristics of the 2020 consumer landscape:

1. Higher global anxiety

Consumers are fearful, in terms of their health, but most are even more fearful about financial uncertainty, according to McKinsey & Company. Brands must create a sense of security, wellbeing and calm amid the fear. While it's okay to be optimistic, your brand tone has to be tuned for clarity and action. It's great to be human and encouraging in trying times, but the bar for sincerity and authenticity is higher than it has ever been.

2. Shifting value equilibrium

Many consumers will reconsider values around consumption and discretionary spending and focus on greater good over displays of wealth. Brands have to come up with ways to re-engage the consumer in the things that they may have taken for granted. That means budgets should shift from basic price promotions to building trust, telling stories that associate the right kind of attributes with the brand.

As fear for the future continues to grow, consumers will look to businesses and brands that take a meaningful perspective on consumption. Products they choose will reflect their personal values. Communicating brand purpose therefore becomes key. Brands must deliver on immediate needs in creative ways. Focus on using your digital offering to provide useful solutions or find ways to minimise interaction while still offering product. As a brand, what can you legitimately speak about with authority? And does this resonate with your customers' new value system, with its focus on optimisation of self, family and community?

3. Accelerated digitisation

Digital commerce is the clear winner out of the Covid-19 crisis. Omnichannel strategies will remain important, but the offline component is likely to be less important than before as preference for e-commerce continues to accelerate. A seamless offline-online experience is crucial. This includes a mobile-responsive website with seamless UX, as well as an effective SEO strategy to ensure that your brand is findable through authoritative content and expertise.

Whether your brand is ripe for providing much-needed entertainment for escapism, building a like-minded community or exploring one of the rising interests, such as online learning or podcasts, you can be the customer's doorway to manifold experiences and compelling stories that address the realities of the coronavirus and the human condition.

As many of us sit in isolation, our need for connection has never been greater. We suspect this need will continue long after lockdown as we enter into a 'new normal'. Great content changes minds and lifts hearts, and forges lifelong affinities, passions and conversations. Continue having conversations with your customers by telling stories with meaning and empathy, which will drive a stronger affinity with your brand long after lockdown.

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