

NEWSFLASH

Your Customers Know There's a Pandemic Happening

In these unprecedented times, we understand how difficult it can be to...

Sound familiar? Sigh. Let's try that again.

COVID-19 has created a tricky messaging puzzle for marketers. At the outset, addressing the pandemic seemed straightforward enough: lend a simple message of hope and support. But as we approach week 11 of lockdown, what once seemed simple now presents some more complex decisions.

What tone should you take? Are we entrenched in the pandemic, or about to come out of it? What should your messaging assume that customers think and know about the situation? Does offering specials come off as sincere or exploitative? Are COVID-19 messages too trite to even bother with anymore?

Of course, the right messaging strategy will differ from brand to brand. However, a few simple guidelines can help any brand avoid some common pitfalls that already have started to emerge.



Choose resoluteness over rehashing

About 20 minutes and three COVID-19 PSAs into the NFL Draft broadcast in late April, social media blew up with sarcasm.

"Wait. There's a pandemic going on?"

"I came here to get AWAY from COVID-19, NFL."

"Oh. My. Gosh. WE KNOW, NFL. We. Know."

Since then, sentiments such as these have only become more widespread. The truth is, consumers have not only lived through COVID-19 for months, they've heard about it in every news story, article, and advertisement they've come across during that time span.

This isn't to say that marketers should completely avoid the topic in their messaging. But they do need to recognize how they're presenting it. Rather than re-stating the magnitude of the issue's severity with forced sentiment, smart marketers will match the resolute tonality that most consumers have adopted at this stage of the pandemic. Recognizing people's readiness to move on is just as important as recognizing their initial need for comfort.



Talk like a neighbor, not like an ad

“Let’s come together by staying apart...”

“Thanks to all the frontline workers...”

“In these unprecedented times...”

By now, you’ve heard these phrases ad nauseum, and probably wouldn’t mind it if you never heard them again. To be fair, there was nothing inherently wrong with them when most COVID-19-themed ads were released—at the time, they struck the right tone and message. But like a hit song that’s been overplayed on the radio, people are starting to tune out.

While major brands rush to create content, oversaturation of similar messages is making them feel more plastic than poignant. In fact, some of the most refreshing and sincere ads of late have come from low-budget, off-the-cuff local business people who stand in front of an iPhone, let people know what’s changing as a result of the pandemic, and close with a brief message that they’re looking forward to seeing people in their shops.

Messages delivered with plain matter-of-factness and a positive emphasis on the future carry an air of calm and secureness that sounds more authentic than most ad copy because it feels like the business is in it with you—not talking at you.



Make sure your altruism doesn’t feel like opportunism

Countless brands have come forward with tangible actions to help their customers during COVID-19. However, with so many people facing significant medical and financial challenges, even the most well-intended act of kindness may draw skeptical eyes. For this reason, marketers need to be deliberate with their offers and how they make them.

Making changes such as switching up hours, offering delivery, following social distancing protocols, and adjusting pricing have worked well, even if they’re just as much about bolstering business as they are about accommodating customers. And that’s okay—people want to help businesses right now. The trick is to position any new policy or discount not as a heroic act or an urgent buying opportunity, but as a necessary adjustment in the face of a tough situation. Framed that way, the message feels positive, constructive, and collaborative rather than exploitative.

You may also consider donating to a COVID-19 related cause. While it’s difficult to imagine anyone disapproving of a truly altruistic act, it’s important to make sure your act of kindness comes off correctly.

To do this, detach any and all strings. Normally, it’s appropriate to solicit either purchases or donations as a condition of your contribution, but stipulating anything right now will feel out of touch. Instead, err on the side of sensitivity by making your donation completely unconditional—and if you ask for any outside participation, match the contributions of those willing to give.

Stay healthy and stay safe. #btdoingourpart