



The Influence XXI Toolkit

Strategic Insights and Tools for Brand Success in
the 21st Century

COVID-19 Edition

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Nearly each of the 171 billion brain cells (20 billion of which make up our neo-cortex) are optimized to ensure human survival, facilitate collaboration with others and motivate each individual to improve their current condition. COVID-19 is threatening our individual and collective ability to meet these fundamental needs, which is causing anxiety and trauma at an unprecedented scale.

This has far-reaching implications for brands, be they individual, corporate, or national. Curfews and stay-at-home directives, significant changes in demand for certain types of products, disruptions in distribution channels, and supply chain challenges for certain companies have caused disruptions in behaviors and required customers to consume products in new ways.

Such a development should be on the radar for brands, particularly market leaders in their categories, because humans react to brands based on mental classifications that act as psychological “shortcuts” that guide our judgments and decisions. These classifications are fast changing, as new product and consumption preferences are forming, replacing incumbent habits and giving smaller and mid-sized companies an unprecedented opportunity to compete against their more established rivals for exposure, mindshare, product trials, and market share with a new and broader base of potential customers. This then strongly implies that brands which fail to evolve their value proposition and embrace agility and understand their communities risk losing traction and even market share.

As such, this document tackles the implications involved and provides pathways that vision-bearing leaders can adopt in order to evolve their brands and adapt them to current and upcoming realities. Highlighting the intersection between historical realities, the current context, neuroscience and brand strategy implications and social media integration for COVID-19 crisis communication

The Neuroscience of COVID-19 Messaging in Understanding Consumer Behavior

According to Marketing Brainology and Brain Scientific Inc neuroscience study on how brains are reacting to COVID-19 messaging, brains typically navigate new information emotionally by connecting it to past experiences, but COVID-19 is leaving people confused. The aim of this neuroscience study was to understand consumer behavior by measuring the impact of a variety of content related to COVID-19. According to the research:

Inspirational messages evoked the highest emotional engagement vs. alarming messages.

Messages from celebrities encouraging people to stay home were not as relevant to most, especially if they did not know that particular celebrity.

People connected with a more medically-based message.

Consumers engaged most with hopeful and encouraging messaging about COVID-19.

Empathy differed significantly as a driving emotion with people who watched news stories by those with COVID-19 and the medical community delivering care. This was apparent in participants' level of emotional engagement during specific content, while others were able to disengage from the same messaging.

Younger respondents were the most likely to disengage quickly when watching a traditional COVID-19 news segment. Many admitted they don't watch the news and these stories were too long and negative for them to continue to engage.

The Evolving Nature of Content Consumption During COVID-19

Influential Domain Experts

Expert content and medical professionals are now increasingly overtaking mainstream commercial influencers. From a global perspective, the kind of influencers people want to listen to in this COVID-19 pandemic are those who have authority and expertise on the subject and are able to provide credible information they can trust.



These kinds of influencers are 'domain experts'. Domain experts share insights, share original opinions on a subject, and contribute to knowledge within the community. Their goal is to educate audiences, and their involvement is usually long-term. Mainstream commercial influencers, on the other hand, might reinforce existing ideas and opinions around COVID-19, and their goal may be to generate engagement. Their impact on existing conversations around the virus is low, and their involvement is short-term.



Increase in User-generated content (UGC)

People's positive sentiment is highest when a message is being delivered by influencers compared to brands owned and operated channels. More specifically, 80 percent positive comments are generated from influencer campaigns vs. 20 percent brands owned and operated channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

Brands are looking to connect with people in authentic ways. Given the increase in digital consumption, paid and organic tactics are ideal. Paid tactics being any external marketing efforts that involve a paid placement, (i.e., Display, Broadcast, Facebook).



Changing Attitudes in Advertising Strategies

There are studies on how consumers' content consumption habits and trust levels towards media have changed during the COVID crisis. Reading the News and browsing Social Media becomes the new prime time as consumers look for advice and entertainment during these trouble times.

One key takeaway is that 9 out of 10 markets trust social media much less than. Baby boomers from the UK showed the highest levels of trust of News publishers at just over 90%. The study goes on to ask consumers how they think brands should shape their advertising strategy in this period and discovers that 9 in 10 consumers in almost all markets want brands to continue advertising.



The Rise of eCommerce

Online shopping has steadily been on the rise, becoming an essential for many in their daily routines. With stay-at-home orders in effect across nations, consumers have drastically shifted their shopping behavior option to purchase what they need from the comfort of their homes.



Online Content Streaming

Since the virtual workforce is growing, the usage of connected devices to stream live information is experiencing an upward trajectory. Advertisers are now refocusing their budget from OOH (out-of-home) spending to OTT (over-the-top) on connected TV placements to ensure their placements shift in tandem with streaming trends.



Shift in Mainstream Media

Routines have been adjusted, new norms are being created, and behaviors surrounding the way we consume media have shifted. With millions of people being confined to their homes due to stay-at-home orders, many have found new ways to stay connected and informed. Brand communication will have to be radically different in 2021. Consumers are looking for meaning, so advertising will have to adapt to reassure.

Most radio stations broadcast news updates at the top of each hour, unlike social media and TV where news is relayed on a real-time basis as “breaking news”, which leaves radio news updates behind the curve for the most up-to-date news sources available.



The Expanding Global Village

As people stay physically apart, they're discovering new connections and nurturing relationships virtually.

Some examples of this from Google's data:

- By April 2020, Google Meet hosts 3 billion minutes of video meetings and close to 3 million new users every day.
- “Virtual happy hour” has gained traction especially in the US,
- On YouTube, there has been a rise in “with me” videos, where people film themselves going about ordinary tasks like cleaning, shopping, or cooking.



Digital Visits Have Increased Across Specific Categories

With COVID-19 being the number one topic people are searching for online, it is no surprise that news sites have seen a jump in traffic. According to Comscore, the average minutes spent on news sites increased by 46%, compared to the same period last year. As updates about the virus vary by nations, local news sites have seen the highest jump in visits, increasing 89% from February to March 2020.

However, the biggest jump in site visits has been seen across government and health sites like the CDC and WHO. Combined, the three government sites saw an increase of 299% from February to March. This jump in traffic can be attributed to increased interest about the Coronavirus.

With kids staying home from school, parents are finding ways to keep them occupied. Site visits to family and youth category sites also saw an increase, with a jump of 115% from February to March.



Significant Increase in the Consumption of Regional Content

The need for regional content is becoming more real at this time. There is a demand and it is growing exponentially. People are more interested in receiving local news. The urge to know what is happening in their communities is emerging faster. The urban and the suburban residents, or the people belonging to smaller towns and rural communities, are widely relying on online platforms for information.



Digital Disruption & Reverse Migration

Despite the type of content being consumed, a clear observation can be made that every generation is highly dependent on digital platforms/channels to keep themselves distracted or informed during the lockdown.

While we see that a lot of time is being spent on digital platforms, this creates a humongous opportunity for marketers who cater to both B2B and B2C segments of the industry to tap and engage with potential customers.

Brands are making the most of OTT players, social media, and gaming platforms as an advertisement platform since people are getting habitual of these platforms. Further, there is a likely scenario where people of all generations – Gen X, Gen Z and the millennials – will thrive on digital consumption, making it the new normal.



Media Incidence

Online users are spending in excess of 3 hours daily across online platforms.

- Print - Possibly slowed by reduced mobility of potential buyers, fear of infection from surface contact and de-prioritization of spend on newspapers, magazines.
- Electronic & digital media - is therefore the key point of focus to most media consumers.
- Content on Demand - Pay platforms such as Viusasa have attracted a 1/5th of the Kenyan adult population, in addition to high consumption of free Youtube videos.



Audio and Podcast Space Boom

90 percent of current remote workers use audio streaming means. It is estimated that audio consumption is projected to rise with platforms like Spotify and Acast are experiencing high demand for podcast advertising. More people are now also streaming audio for educational and entertainment purposes.



The current scenario is quite comforting for brands across all domains, as they have been able to communicate and engage with their target audience meaningfully, creating long-lasting relationships."



The Rise of Webinars

B2B Brands have leveraged on webinars to sustain consumer interactions on platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Google Meet. Webinars will continue to be on the rise especially now that this has become a new normal with experts sharing insights at the comfort of their own homes.



The Role of Social Media Communication During The COVID-19 Crisis

If there's one thing brands cannot afford to ignore, it is the current conversations taking place on social media. Social media has influenced public perceptions of the coronavirus pandemic since it began and shaped how a majority of audiences view the crisis. This is why a brand's business success strategy should involve tailoring a comprehensive social media plan into their overall crisis plan to stay ahead of the competition, retain as well as attract new consumers.



Integrated Social Media Communication Plan

- Report rapid, direct communication of the virus updates and trends to your audience
- Support for people who need help or information
- Social listening to learn more broadly about what's happening as far as COVID-19 is concerned and how your brand is positioned to mitigate the effects.



Best Social Media Practices for Brand Success Amidst Covid-19

Research indicated that audiences are overwhelmed with COVID-19 messaging, updates and posts. So how does your brand stand out and offer helpful, tasteful content?

- Get a pulse check and innovate new ideas for content
- Lead with empathy, and pay it forward. Life has changed, and people are grieving. It's more important than ever to show up with empathy and vulnerability in your business communications and marketing. Providing helpful resources is a great way to do that.
- Share positive “vibes” (uplifting content) and facts from trusted sources.
- Don't try to capitalize on the crisis. This is applicable to any crisis or tragedy, but it is especially important to remember in the existing climate, while it's a good idea to keep people informed about how the crisis is affecting you, don't spread panic or become an alarmist.



The New Normal in Ensuring Business Continuity and Team Motivation

Working from home has normalized for a majority of the working class with companies revising their policies to accommodate this unprecedented change. Companies have adopted techniques leveraging social media and video conferencing apps to remain in business, maintain brand visibility and keep your staff engaged in spite of the social distancing through some of these activities:



Virtual Team Building Activities

Working from home can be difficult, especially as we adapt to a number of other changes as a result of COVID-19. These online team activities work effectively given the circumstances to keep everyone aligned and engaged.



Video Conferencing

When the idea of video conferencing first began as a way of maintaining communication, many were apprehensive. However, months down the line there has been a surge in business that now capitalize on apps like Zoom, Skype, Google Meet among others to create a form of oneness and team spirit.



Online Book Clubs

Reading and discussing the same books can help coworkers find common ground - whether it's an audiobook, eBook, or printed book. The book club can primarily meet via Skype or Zoom where coworkers can take turns leading the discussion about key insights from the book and how one can apply the concepts personally or professionally especially in coping mechanisms during COVID-19.



Virtual Movie Nights, Online Games and Classes

While coworkers no longer see each other in the office, they can stay connected through virtual movie nights and other activities such online games and online classes. If these ideas don't fit your company culture, consider sharing photos of your work-from-home “coworkers” (pets or kids) instead. For colleagues used to eating together in a cafeteria or break room, a Zoom lunch could simulate that experience.



A Tool for Effective Social Media Communication During COVID-19

Social Media had unquestionably become a leading avenue of instant communication and information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. While research suggests that COVID-19 coverage on social media borders on negativity, it has created a critical understanding of the virus through a myriad of public discourse and in essence influenced the public perceptions of the disease. Leveraging on the endless possibilities of uptake of intensive social media campaigns to sustain brand visibility during this pandemic is achievable through the following laid out tools:



1. Review and Restructure Your Social Media Content and Calendar

Context shifts rapidly in a crisis and brands are right to wonder what would be appropriate to say in the midst of a global pandemic. At best, you might seem tone-deaf, at worst, inappropriate messaging could endanger lives. The existing company social media plan cannot be re-used as it is for such a crisis. For a brand to upscale its success during COVID-19, it is imperative that their social media strategy is tailor-made specifically for the pandemic.

2. Enforce a Strong Social Media Policy Specific to the Pandemic

Your organization's official social media policy is your best asset in responding as rapidly and effectively as possible in this pandemic. A good policy will provide a solid, yet flexible, response process, as well as compile all the crucial internal information the company brand needs to succeed.

The social media policy should include the following:

- An up-to-date emergency contact list: not just your social media team, but legal advisers and executive decision-makers, too.
- Guidance on accessing social account credentials (i.e., where that information is, and how to go about getting it, if need be.)
- Guidelines for identifying the scope of the COVID-19 crisis.
- An internal communication plan for employees.
- An approval process for your response strategy.

3. Set up a Competent Crisis Communication Team

Information sharing during COVID-19 should be centralized in efforts to have uniformity and credibility. Having information come from one source will mitigate the risks of brand misrepresentation or misleading information. Identify the people who are best suited to work on the crisis team, and delineate their responsibilities

- Posting regular COVID-19 updates with messages leaning more towards resilience and preventive guidelines.
- Answering questions and handling customer support
- Monitoring the wider conversation, and flagging important developments
- Fact-checking information, and/or correcting rumors
- Strategizing for post-pandemic business continuity
- Coordinating/communicating with other teams, external stakeholders, and/or the rest of the organization

4. Regular Internal Communication

Keeping your employees informed will help them remain loyal to your brand. For instance, if you're announcing relief efforts, donations, or other campaigns for COVID-19 relief efforts, proud employees can help spread the word. This is also a good time to remind them of your organization's social media guidelines for employees (including any crisis-specific amendments).

5. Honest, Open, and Compassionate Communication

The brands that will attain success during this pandemic are those which build trust by maintaining transparency in how they are handling the virus with regards to its impact on business.

6. Citing Credible Sources

Resisting the spread of misinformation on the virus on social media has been a vital issue for brands since the disease became a global outbreak. While social platforms themselves may implement broader protective policies during this crisis, it's absolutely necessary to have a fact-checking protocol in place before you share specious claims with your audience.

7. Sustained Social Media Monitoring

During this pandemic, having a strong optimized social media monitoring strategy can help you manage your audience sentiments regarding your brand, as well as track what's happening with your competitors and industry at large. How are other, similar organizations responding to the pandemic? And how are their customers responding to their response?

8. Steer Clear of Profit-Driven Agendas

In the efforts to remain relevant as a successful brand, don't attempt to “spin” the COVID-19 crisis to fit a profit-oriented goal. Even though the opportunities to increase revenue in business are there despite the economic crunch and uncertainty, using this crisis to make your brand look good may end up having more negative than positive consequences.

9. Leave Room for Questions

Currently, a lot of Kenyans have questions, some of which have no clarity in response because the future is unknown. As a brand, allow your audience to ask you deep penetrating issues and be prepared to tackle with efficacy the deluge of panicked customer service inquiries. Take time to engage with your audience, answer their questions, and provide reassurance.

10. Get Involved

During these times, every brand needs to take responsibility for what they can during COVID-19. Set up a relief donation on your website, engage in a CSR activity or simply look for innovative ways to remember those who are loyal to your brand.

Summary

If COVID-19 has proven anything, it's that brand success is fairly relative. Even though every business in the world today has experienced some form of impact from this global pandemic, implementation of the right strategy will determine how well your brand recovers. Through using the right strategy, some brands are actually benefiting during this crisis.

In conclusion the following 3-step action during COVID-19 will enable your brand to survive and thrive:

- Where there's a crisis there's opportunity; With the appropriate strategy, your brand can gain competitive advantage during and in a post-pandemic world. It all begins with identifying the opportunity for growth in your industry and restructuring your company policy to fit new innovations that drive business success.
- Understanding your consumer behavior determines business longevity; consumer messaging, behavior and attitudes have significantly changed with research supporting the theory that this trend is likely to go on post-pandemic. Digital content consumption has increased among consumers who have found new ways of remaining connected during isolation and a growing virtual workforce that enjoys working from home. How well your brand creates targeted content to match these consumer behaviors is instrumental in cementing a business' longevity. After all, it is your consumers that keep you in business.
- Your media strategy matters; Be it traditional or digital means, a brand's media strategy must change or adopt to gain competitive advantage. Media choices today are changing. It is estimated that good quality content with the right messaging and emotional connection during this crisis accounts for 50%. The biggest challenge for brands right now is not where they can reach consumers but rather what they say and how they say it.

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