



Ten Points Roadmap: Marketing & Branding during & Beyond COVID Times

In a crisis there is always a seed of an opportunity, and the attempt here is to find the possible opportunities

Black Swan moments don't just break but also make brands

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We are in unforeseen times and no person alive on this planet has personally faced this situation unleashed by the COVID19 pandemic and the lockdowns announced globally thereafter. Hence, the response with regards to understanding consumer behaviour and responding with right marketing and branding strategies also have to be novel, experimental and nimble, changing as per the evolving situation. There also have to be different approaches for the immediate fluid situation of the pandemic, the next phase of recovery say, over the next 3 to 6 months, and then over the next two years which can be called the New Normal.

In a crisis there is always a seed of an opportunity, and the attempt here is to find the possible opportunities. We must always remember that 'Black Swan' moments may break a brand, but can also make it. There will be post COVID world too, but it might be qualitatively a different place, with a New Normal. The key is in being prepared, managing all diversity in the market-place, and having a continuously evolving strategy without being stuck up with pre COVID experiences.

Communicate the most urgent: Social & Physical Distancing, in action and in demonstration

For the immediate during-pandemic response, the brands need to think like a customer and try to assess the emotional upside they may be experiencing in these turbulent times. Also, they need to communicate the most important messages of the moment. McDonald has separated the two arches and Pidilite (Fevicol) has distanced its two elephants in the logo, both signalling the importance of social or physical distancing today.

Brands should craft messages that are laden with value-oriented and compassionate themes. For instance, brands like Volkswagon are glorifying Corona warriors by

highlighting their stories. Taj, Oberoi hotels and Oyo Rooms in Delhi have opened up their doors for the doctors and health-workers to stay during the health emergency when hospitality industry also slumped.

A recent research by Ogilvy suggests that brands that come up with right marketing and branding strategies and newer products and services during crisis times are able to garner up to three times more market share through a downturn. For example, Emami forays into hand sanitizer segment with an opportunity to experiment, Byju's and Zoom are communicating with newer services at a breakneck pace, etc.

In this acute pandemic phase, brands must sustain short term sales by re-allocating spend behind the most topically relevant segments; and spend smarter with more for less being the goal. They must leverage data analytics for full funnel optimization & fix weak links. optimise drive-to web, drive-to-commerce, make online visibility and transaction easier. Brands also need to explore possibilities to reach those who are beyond the digital divide as well, especially for essential products, and that is a tough mandate indeed.

Today, as the pandemic unfolds, brands like those in health, food delivery, supplying essentials etc strongly need to convey how they are serving without spreading virus. Brand actions to matter right now will be those which create meaningful action and support for public health and safety. Unilever utilised livestream to connect with scientists and medical professionals to educate consumers on key points of daily protection. In doing so the company shifted focus to a 'public service' messaging strategy on the most relevant brands in its portfolio. Baidu map upgraded it's real-time "epidemic area" in more than 200 cities, helping protect public health and safety. The app pops up a geo- tagged "surrounding epidemic reminder", showing real-time information such as the number of affected places across the whole city. Recognising that customers were concerned about receiving goods from China, Lazada provided access to infectious disease specialists. Using its in-app livestreaming technology, over 21,000 viewers were connected to raise questions pertaining to the virus from the safety of their homes.

Go digital, update the brand's digital portfolio, assets and touch-points

Kantar.com study shows that the consumers in middle to upper classes are now engaged during the lockdown period in activities like consuming long video, short video, sleep, linear TV, mobile/online games, online chat with friends/relatives, online education, cooking/baking at home, offline learning/reading, online entertainment, working out at home, parenting, supervising kids' study, working from home, live video/livestream, leisure at home, nurture skin and pet time, and the frequency of these being in this order. As we can see most of these are online and digitally driven.

Hence, brands need to resort to social listening, building scenarios as per the changing situation, and having flexi strategy accordingly. Focus has to be on survival and protection

of current businesses rather than expansion of operations or higher profits (except a few). Brands can explore opportunities even in times of adversity by strengthening their social media presence. Making an intelligent use of data and analytics would help marketers take evidence-based decisions in the realm of consumer behaviour. Digital persona of the brands becomes a new need, updating Google My Business page, updating the website/portal of the organization, being on social media platforms with engaging content and updating regularly, creating branded content and making them viral digitally, and moving on to eCRM or upgrading the intensity of eCRM resorted to in earlier times.

Understandably, Digital Divide is going to be the major challenge and Digital Access is going to hold the primary key. It is a blessing in disguise as 28 percent of the region's population is younger than 15 years old. As such, millions of young people of present generation are becoming more and more tech-savvy and they very soon would become the consumers, entrepreneurs, and technicians of tomorrow.

Also, leveraging and unleashing the full potential of e-commerce in the South Asian countries like ours is unarguably going to hold the key to make it a game changing phenomenon. The Covid-19 certainly intensified adoption of digital platforms in every possible aspect of transactions from placing demands, delivery of goods and services and clearing payments. One clear indication of this is the rise in number and volume of transactions on across all e-commerce platforms during last one month.

In the emergent context, the digital marketing apparently has increased potential to track and unearth the psyche of the consumers by leveraging the power of data analytics. Most consumers today are glued to TV, active on social media, and tend to view long videos online. Any data, statistics, and analytics related to consumer home-bound activities, which is Digital Consumer Intelligence (DCI), would provide insights into their changed consumption habits for effective targeting. Let brands use this free time to come up with interactive portals and responsive websites. Social Listening is the larger part of DCI. More personalized content is the need. Consumers frustrated with impersonalized website experiences.

Further, new CRM practices being the way forward, brands like India's biggest cake brand Monginis coming to every housing society with whatsapp notification with their products are exploring new sales strategies.

Branded content marketing upholding acts will draw consumer attention in crisis recovery phase

For quite some time clutter of ads on electronic and social media has decreased their efficiency. Now, acts not ads will do the work in brand communication during and immediately after the crisis, like supermarkets are giving health care professionals a

dedicated shopping time, furniture brand IKEA making masks and sanitizers and voluntarily closing all of its 50 stores across US to ensure distancing.

Videos going viral in social media and on whatsapp is another good route to branding. Short films with branded content keeping consumers apprised of the changes, policies, delays and setting expectations is a good step. Leverage content marketing and just moment marketers. Good examples are of Marriott- Masters of Marriot- Distanced Yet together; OYO Rooms coming out with films promoting social distancing, celebrating Corona Warrior heroes. Cadbury's heart-warming video for thanking people for staying at home and promoting connectedness (Every home has a sweet story campaign) or Sunrise Masale in India talking about which spices to put in food to boost immunity.

Brands can also explore how to use influencers in social media marketing. They are key opinion leaders. For example, one can use TikTok or Instagram leaders with followers to give out social message, which also can be used as ads in OTT programs which are now being consumed more than ever before. Netflix increasing its viewership more than twice in India in April proves the point.

Uphold transparency, compassion and value for stakeholders

The Ogilvy study prescribes to engage all audiences and stakeholders. Beyond customers /consumers focused communications, brands must carry out stakeholder mapping to consider the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, internal, external, individual and institutional, and leverage social channels for open & real-time response and communication. They must identify opportunities to create 'shared value' programs, mobilising and connecting all parties for common benefit.

Thinking of the internal customers, brands need to reassign their KRAs towards more marketing, and utilize the opportunity to realign skill sets, particularly in digital marketing and eCRM, in times of lockdown and physical distancing.

Compassionate marketing has to be the hallmark of brands' initiatives today. Catastrophes like these throw open opportunities to corporates to create a positive/favourable corporate image through an altogether different kind of CSR initiatives and other affirmative actions that are socially relevant and beneficial. For example, Bill Gates Foundation has committed an additional \$150 million funding with an undertaking to leverage the resources of the foundation for societal welfare and people's well-being for COVID. Azim Premji, founder of WIPRO India, is the third largest contributor to funds to fight the pandemic.

Even the events and experiential marketing industry, completely devastated now, is preparing for PhyGital (Physical + Digital) experiences going beyond the pandemic, and resorting to digital experiences now to remain relevant and bring value free of cost to their usual patrons.

Restaurants are hit hard too in times of physical distancing and they are reinventing themselves. Already big players like Dominos and McDonald's have introduced contactless delivery systems. The advertisement by Dominos 'Great Taste. Delivered safe', clearly displays their brand-oriented thinking.

Restaurant Brands International, the parent company of Popeyes, Burger King and Tim Hortons have offered bonuses to employees who work in April, despite the outbreak. These restaurant chains are planning to use thermometers to take employees temperatures on a daily basis to make sure they are healthy. The same information can be displayed inside the restaurant premises on a standee, leaflet, table top or through a recorded video to be played in the TV. The premises itself should clearly convey to the consumer that some serious efforts have been undertaken to make it free of virus.

Reiterate the brand values and promises

Ogilvy further suggests to activate the brand purpose of values and do more, but say less. Activate brand purpose to support hygiene and virus containment efforts, and keep life (and livelihoods) going - add 'brand-aligned' value to people, the community, and broader nation. Not every brand needs to turn 'caregiver': support across all needs and emotional need-states, in line with brand benefit and persona.

Alibaba announced 20 measures to help businesses and merchants in China, which included: reducing operational cost on Alibaba platforms, providing financial support by waiving or lowering interest rates, subsidising delivery personnel and ensuring higher logistics efficiency, providing flexible job opportunities to ensure income, more tools for enterprises to accelerate their digitisation, and remote working management for enterprises.

Bytedance offered all enterprises and organisations in China access to its Feishu remote collaboration platform free of charge. Deliveroo announced a 15-20% discount in commission fees to restaurants to support them as the number of dine-in customers fall, and a delayed commission payment. NetEase Youdao provides Free Online Lecture Service for primary and middle school students who can't go to school. Under Armour realised remaining healthy in difficult times is important. They shared exercise tips on their official account. Audible.com from Amazon is given free to the children during the lockdown period. Adobe opened up its Adobe Creative Cloud to users free.

KFC introduced special safety measures for instore dining, take-out and delivery services to help keep their customers and staff safe. And to show their appreciation of staff who remained in their posts in critically hit areas, personal stories were shared on social platforms. IKEA leveraged its brand promise of 'bringing joy into the home', DIY philosophy and creative cheeky persona, to bring light relief to all those forced to spend Valentine's day quarantined at home, or even worse, in isolation.

Go Aggressive for essential goods and services, back seat for non-essentials

While brands in education, edu-tech, health-tech, food-tech, food items and groceries, and similar other essential ones should go aggressive in marketing spends, though with compassionate messaging, others can go slow focusing more on reaching out and CSR. It is important to creatively and digitally communicate the essential products and services, while others can still communicate less championing causes.

Crisis marketing is going to pose its own set of challenges. While doing nothing or not getting aggressive may sound logical, but companies may risk the chance to rebound after the crisis is over. Customers should feel that companies exist in some form and cares for them. Crisis also provides way for new service models. Crisis provides a real chance to showcase how brands can differentiate themselves.

There are some good international examples of how KFC offered free meals to medical caregivers. Likewise, Ford started some philanthropic activities such as providing money to support food programs for children no longer in school. Another example is of Walgreens promoting pharmacy chats.

H3C donated more than 4M \$US of equipment for new hospitals in Wuhan as soon as the crisis started. They also provided digital services for existing hospitals and clients in many provinces outside Hubei and round-the-clock technological support. They are helping to fight the virus with tech. Philips donated over 2M \$US of vital medical equipment to Wuhan and helped install the first CT scan in a newly built emergency field hospital (Leishenshan). Gojek Singapore has launched a new initiative called GoHeroes in light of COVID-19. It's an initiative to support frontline healthcare workers and medical professionals with help also coming from their driver partners.

Brands, alongside its communication, must also protect current marketing channels, supply chain, and alongside create the alternative digital, and for future blended, marketing channels & supply chain.

De-risk your business, leverage well strategized shifts

The cardinal principles and fundamental rules of branding and marketing may not outlive their utility in the New Normal, but the domain does definitely assume a new facade, medium, and tone as a key priority. While de-risking one's business by focussing on the essentials of the consumers and hiving out many functions of the business to outside resources is one need, the other is to leverage well strategized shifts in branding and marketing.

To fuel brand saliency, one needs to sustain spend and earned exposure / talkability to keep brands salient in anticipation of the rebound. IPA data shows brands that sustain exposure throughout a crisis, can increase share 3x during downturns, but also rebound faster and

stronger in recovery. Alongside, the brand needs to prime for momentum upon rebound whenever it happens (different months in different nation may be). Identify categories and segments that will most benefit from pent-up demand and economic stimulus. Identify priority parts of portfolio with greatest potential. The brand needs to work with its media agency to re-allocate budgets and secure quality ad stock and leverage CRM and social platforms to activate existing users, and turn new followers into trialists.

The brand also needs to innovate and reshape its portfolio. Leverage data and insights to identify the most significant and lasting shifts. Accelerate claims innovation, product innovation, CX innovation. Consider how to leverage and strengthen Health & Wellness connections, across categories. And, as noted earlier, the brands need to shift towards digital channels and behaviours. Review Customer Engagement & Content plans. Address new needs and priorities in Digital content / Digital services / Utility / Commerce. Leverage martech and automation to enable more personalised and contextual creation and distribution of content in real time.

Thinking beyond Corona

The time is now ripe to not just think about or think at in a myopic manner but think beyond the corona pandemic as when the challenges/problems at hand are out of box, the solutions and answers also need to out of box. Research evidences suggest that it takes 66 days for the altered behavioral patterns of consumers to become a new habit. This finding is going to act as a powerful pointer for marketers engaged in designing marketing communication strategies.

Brands need to study and analyze changing consumer behavior during and after pandemic. Customers during lock down are looking for experiences that are newer and varied to escape inherent monotony of limited social interactions and movements. It is exactly where the creativity and ingenuity of marketers are put to test. Now, they have to discern and uncover ways and means to reach their existing and prospective consumers who are forced to be confined within four walls at least for some more time. The efficacy of all the promotional tools and marketing communications is going to be determined by the level of psychological connect and social bonding of the brands with the consumers, evolving from short-run acquaintance to sustained loyalty in the long run.

Going ahead, post COVID, when the consumers are allowed to pivot from the status quo, they would tend to try out new consumption patterns and test out new things in the altered conditions. For instance, there would be steep spike in demand for newer and emergent teaching-learning processes as both the teachers and the taught are left with no other choice. Likewise, other examples are soliciting advice of medical professionals and legal consultants online which earlier consumers were hesitant.

Pervasiveness of technology in our lives is the New Normal

Technology has affected every aspect of being human: how we think and make decisions, how we feel, what we crave, and how we relate to others. Technology has created a new set of “problems” and emotional needs, new ways of acquiring perceptions of products and brands, and new ways of interacting with the marketplace. The hunt for happiness has evolved. This entire phenomenon will get a huge boost with the exigency of social and physical distancing and the consequent need thereby to depend on fintech, edtech, healthtech, foodtech, martech, web entertainment, et al.

Five key psychological shifts catalyzed by our use of technology are of particular importance to how, when, and why people shop and buy, and this will further accelerate in the New Normal with immense technological dependence: Innovation optimism, consumer empowerment, faster ways of thinking, symbol power and new ways of connecting.

Going ahead with newer technologies, Google CEO said Artificial Intelligence is going to more imp than fire or electricity. Technologies like Affective computing or Emotion AI can bring in a paradigm shift in experience by combining data driven experiences embodying the latest techniques in Human Centered Design (HCD) inspiring deep emotional connections with products and brands, which in turn can drive loyalty and business growth.

On technology impact in the New Normal, one example is Jio Mart, the Jio's new ecommerce platform: Jio and WhatsApp can empower 3 crores small India kirana shops to digitally transact with every customer in the neighbourhood.

Consumers are likely to save more

Given the shift from consumption to saving and investment economy and more humanized brands using technology will perform better.

On consumer's front, there is fear on the use of daily consumables like food items, groceries for reasons of safety and security. Some sectors like travel, tourism will have a total flip. The nature of products and services may require a complete overhaul.

While big businesses continue to serve the public for good, small business run the risk of being out of market if they are not given enough sustenance and support, and may eventually die out. At present, what the marketers should be focusing on is not just surviving during crisis but maintaining consumers' perceptions through successful positioning strategies for building and sustaining a credible brand image far beyond the crisis.

Compassion, subtlety, nuanced communication is the need of the hour now and ahead. Marketers need to conceptualize, define, develop, and deliver brands that masses can

afford, buy, and get value from in terms of utility, satisfaction, and welfare. That would ideally be the harbinger and precursor for new normal that one witnesses in the post-COVID scenario.

In a recent Deloitte Digital survey of 800 consumers, 60 percent of long-term customers use emotional language to describe their connection to favored brands; likewise, 62 percent of consumers feel they have a relationship with a brand. Trustworthiness (83 percent), integrity (79 percent), and honesty (77 percent) are the emotional factors that consumers feel most align with their favourite brands.

Harvard Study on Marketing Ahead:

A detailed research by Janet Balis published in Harvard Business Review looks at the old and the new post pandemic truths of marketing and branding as follows:

(A) Old truth: Marketing begins with knowing your customer.

New truth: Marketing begins with knowing your customer segment.

Creating a personal, human connection within any commercial message requires defining consumer segments that describe people according to multiple dimensions that influence their purchasing behavior — from their psychographics to attitudinal characteristics.

The article also refers to the *EY Future Consumer Index*, which has conducted five waves of research with 14,500 individuals in 20 countries since the start of the pandemic, has identified five different cohorts of consumers, which marketers need to take note of:

1. Affordability first (32% of consumers): Living within their means and budget, focusing less on brands and more on product functionality.
2. Health first (25%): Protecting their health and that of their family, choosing products they trust to be safe and minimizing risks in the way that they shop.
3. Planet first (16%): Trying to minimize their impact on environment and buying brands that reflect their beliefs.
4. Society first (15%): Working together for the greater good, buying from organizations they find to be honest and transparent.
5. Experience first (12%): Living in the moment to make the most of life, often making them open to new products, brands, and experiences.

(B) Old truth: You are competing with your competitors.

New truth: You are competing with the last best experience your customer had.

Companies should follow three strategies to ensure their experiences deliver their customers' rising expectations:

Make brand scores a key KPI for the full customer-facing organization, ideally using real-time analytics as opposed to a snapshot looking backwards from a point in time. Build the right data and technology foundation to support important use cases throughout the customer journey. Align individual and collective goals across the customer journey so any disconnects between functional silos like marketing, sales, and customer service are invisible to your end consumer.

(C) Old truth: Customers hope you have what they want.

New truth: Customers expect you to have exactly what they want.

So AI-ML driven consumer data shall enable marketers to create more relevant experiences across one or more dimensions of the four Cs:

Content (that can be provided in experiences like emails or mobile apps);

Commerce (such as physical retail, e-commerce, or a hybrid experience);

Community (such as convening B2B buyers at a virtual trade show or hosting a webinar on home repair for consumers); and

Convenience (like offering consumers coupons or benefits from a loyalty program).

(D) Old truth: Courting customers is just like dating.

New truth: Courting customers is just like online dating.

Now, finding your perfect match may be less about chance and more about data and algorithms. In marketing terms, we have seen a shift from brand marketing to build reach to performance marketing to generate leads. The pandemic's acceleration of digital channels only exacerbated that trend.

(E) Old truth: Customers must sit at the heart of your marketing strategy.

New truth: Customers must sit at the heart of your customer journey.

The concept of customer-centricity is now accepted. We must remember that marketing is often just the beginning of a relationship with the customer. For example, in a B2C context, we go through a journey of engaging them, converting them to a sale directly or indirectly, and then hopefully retaining them so they become advocates and potentially open to upsells and cross-sells.

Marketing must be viewed in the context of the full end-to-end journey and, where possible, work to connect the dots.

(F) Old truth: Relationships matter.

New truth: Relationships are everything.

Covid-19 has placed a new emphasis on relationships, particularly in **B2B sales**. Faced with a virtual sales environment, teams with existing relationships have been able to maintain revenue momentum, capitalizing on the strength of their prior bonds. In contrast, prospecting for new customers has required an evolved set of

skills focused on selling solutions, not products. In a **B2C context**, trust also plays a tremendous role. As companies rely increasingly on personal data that they obtain with consent from consumers, they have the opportunity to consider building even more loyalty and differentiation by designing more transparent interfaces for privacy controls.

(G) Old truth: Agility is a technology process.

New truth: Agility is a modern marketing approach.

The fortunate outcome of the crisis was to create a mindset of marketing agility that is likely to be permanent. This includes continuous consumer listening and demand sensing, not only for the benefit of marketing but for the full company to capture the zeitgeist of consumer sentiment. Meanwhile, operationally, it also means faster decision cycles and more flexibility across key areas like creative, budgeting, and media.

(H) Old truth: Your brand should stand behind great products.

New truth: Your brand should stand behind great values.

The key themes from *EY Future Consumer Index research of 2021* show that while quality, convenience, and price still very much matter to consumer choice, factors like sustainability, trust, ethical sourcing, and social responsibility are increasingly important to how consumers select their products and services.

(I) Old truth: You need the right tech stack to drive modern marketing success.

New truth: You need the right balance of factors (including your tech stack) to drive modern marketing success.

For your technology architecture to drive results, it must therefore be matched with sufficient scale in data to fuel its success, the right use cases to drive results, and the right approach to human enablement. This latter requirement is perhaps the most important. **Human enablement** involves understanding how data and technologies will be used across the organization. Human enablement will also include tech reskilling of the consumers as well through free demos and training.

(J) Old truth: Marketing is important for growth.

New truth: Marketing is at the center of the growth agenda for the full C-suite.

During the pandemic, marketing has been elevated within the C-suite as a driver of digital transformation, a key leader of the customer journey, and the voice of the consumer — all of which are of paramount importance to other functional leaders.

Marketing as Both, an Art and a Science

Marketers are charged with a continued blend of art and science. We must achieve the perfect balance of humans and automation to unlock a future of better analytics and

deployment of AI at scale. We must use data as the fuel yet respect the craft of storytelling to drive meaningful human connections. We must tread a fine line between brand marketing and performance marketing, recognizing that we currently have a bias toward what we can readily quantify. And we must understand what should be centralized and what should be bespoke, identifying where consistency helps and where it hinders.

McKinsey & Company calls for the five R

Resolve: the need to determine the scale, pace, and depth of action required at the state and business levels.

Resilience: Businesses will need to act on broader resilience plans as the shock begins to upturn established industry structures, resetting competitive positions forever.

Return: Returning businesses to operational health after a severe shutdown is extremely challenging, as China is finding even as it slowly returns to work.

Re-imagination: Reimagining opportunities to push the envelope of technology adoption will be accelerated by rapid learning about what it takes to drive productivity when labor is unavailable. The result: a stronger sense of what makes business more resilient to shocks, more productive, and better able to deliver to customers.

Reform: Policies on critical healthcare infrastructure, strategic reserves of key supplies, and contingency production facilities for critical medical equipment will all need to be addressed. Managers of the financial system and the economy must now contend with strengthening the system to withstand acute and global exogenous shocks, such as this pandemic's impact. Educational institutions will need to consider modernizing to integrate classroom and distance learning.

TOP TEN CHECKLIST:

Ogilvy suggests Actions for Now and the Future:

- Don't wait for recovery; adapt to changes and focus investment on what is profitable now.
- Review product / SKU portfolio due to changed consumer behaviour. Disruption provides opportunity; revisit brand value and differentiation.
- Think outside your physical brand experience.
- eCommerce acceleration plan: product mix, new channels, data systems.
- Identify new growth opportunities: new occasions, new services.
- Use the slowdown to innovate.
- Maximise the value and power of existing customers.
- Have a long-term brand/ portfolio plan centered on changed consumer behaviour.

- Redesign/optimize your go to market plan: consider product mix, geography, sales channels and customer segment focus.
- Be ready for the After. Agility is a must

Way to Go Ahead

Go PhyGital.

Go Compassionate.

Converse and not Communicate.

Engage and not just Inform.

Get Techno-driven with Brand Values intact.

The author is a regular columnist and television studio panelist. He currently serves as the Secretary of Global Media Education Council, and till recently had been the Pro Vice Chancellor of Kolkata based Adamas University, and had been earlier the Dean of Symbiosis and Amity Universities.