



Beyond the virus – brand connection and the evolving human story of COVID-19

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As our flattening curve lends hope to easing coronavirus restrictions, headlines still scream Covid-19 is the biggest global challenge of our lifetime. No-one thinks its fake news; but understanding the human story is what allows brands to understand how to reframe their relevance as we look beyond the virus.

The lives of Australians and their day-to-day behaviours have been turned upside down

Enforced isolation challenges fundamental human cravings for freedom, choice and physical connection. The inability to socialise is not normal. We're struggling

without everyday routines, social interaction, freedom and sense of safety we take for granted in the lucky country. People are lonely, anxious, and not sleeping. Over-stockpiling and fortified with sanitiser, Aussies are now shifting attention beyond demand for hygiene and staples. Far from looking toward a new normal, the prospect of a recession is weighing heavily. Most long for the familiarity of the old normal.

Many of us are adjusting to a workplace culture where co-workers are our flatmates, partners, children or pets! We have a new appreciation for health professionals, teachers, childcare workers and supermarket checkout operators. Juggling Zoom

meetings with childcare and home-schooling fatigue is confronting. After years trying to control screen addictions, schools are ramping up software to connect with students and maintain the community spirit schools provide. Free to use technology more, ironically, most kids would rather be back in the classroom with their teachers and friends.

And our sense of economic confidence has been given a rude wake-up call. No matter the generation, and whether white, grey or blue collar; coronavirus has exposed the perils of overspending and living payday to payday. With little or no emergency savings, Aussies are faced with a new era of frugality, muted consumption, and the need to learn and embrace a savings ethos. Those working fewer hours, on indefinite leave or out of work are struggling with stretching their money creating opportunity for a financial services brand to offer actionable guidance and advice. Westpac's TVC teaching people online banking reveals a brand reframing relevance to connect in a time of need.

Against this bleak backdrop, messages of hope and acts of enduring optimism resonate

Australians crave leadership and believe it's important for trusted brands to show up in a crisis. In the UK, a 94-year-old great grandmother set the tone for a nation. Traditional festivities to mark the Queen's birthday did not ring out because she doesn't believe it's appropriate while the country battles coronavirus. Totally on brand – especially if you love The Crown!

Meanwhile, our fear of missing out has morphed into a fear of going out. Dubbed the 'Boomer Remover', for health-compromised and older Australians, health and wellbeing is a pervasive concern. Focus personal and workplace hygiene will be heightened. Face masks, shields and protective wear will become bathroom staples and commonplace in public.

Protection from exposure at all cost will be top of mind. The void of hospitality, entertainment, mall shopping and sport is giving rise to virtual experiences as a new way to engage fans. Brands have the opportunity to shape new forms of culture while live performance limitations open new opportunities for brand-supported experiences.

Whether social or sexual, we're living with an invisible virus where intimacy feels treacherous

But this isn't new. Like STD's before it, as the curve flattens, a new sense of optimism and resiliency will encourage risk-taking. Unlike past STD epidemics, right now, there is no vaccine for Covid-19. The virus can be transmitted asymptotically, encouraging us to view people as a threat to our health and safety – even those we love. We're adjusting to contact-free interaction and rethinking personal hygiene norms and handshakes or hugs used for respect or affection. Time will tell whether new gestures like elbow bumping stick around. For now, Aussies expect to continue social distancing.

Life has changed for us all – but ever resilient, Australians are hacking new ways to live

Life under lockdown is changing what we do, how we feel and the role of brands in our lives. For now, this is our new reality and brands must understand the role they can play to reframe their relevance. People are adjusting routines for the work-from-home lifestyle. Most adapted quickly. Already life-essential, technology is now the umbilical cord as we rediscover social ties and connections we crave. Instead of texting, we're talking again. People are creating virtual alternatives to pretty much anything. As life online goes on, it is essential that brands maintain contact – they can't afford to claim their customers come first, if they don't reach out to check in on how those customers are doing.

Right now, home is the epicentre of our lives and experiences – for good or bad

We're cocooning. People are seeking comfort in the familiar. Time at home is catalyst to a back-to-basics mindset and re-engaging with creative pursuits, craft and passions. With restaurants closing, people are forced to cook, and many are experimenting. For others, comfort food is staging a cultural comeback! People of all ages are turning to nostalgic brands and processed childhood favourites in search of emotional nutrition. Parents say they're not sweating mealtimes, rather adopting holiday meal and treat behaviours to get by. Brands have an opportunity to talk to emotional reward and encourage balance in our eating habits, not least when the threat of trading lounge wear for back-to-work wear hits home!

The digital shelf has been exposed as ill-prepared for the shift in customer demand

While demand may not continue at present levels when life goes back to normal, it has exposed customers to new behaviours, highlighting the opportunity for brands to sustain these relationships. Expectations of delivery and the cost of fulfilment have changed. Shoppers say they will continue to shop in physical stores but are looking online to reduce shopping trips. This adoption of digital channels will continue, especially if retailers invest in improving the user and customer experience. In bricks and mortar, consumers are shopping close to home. Retailers will need to adhere to new expectations of in-store hygiene; and continue to enforce distancing behaviours to bolster confidence in face-to-face retail in the short and longer term.

Right now, Maslow exposes category demand and choice are anchored in the physiological and safety. Australians are turning to staples for sustenance and survival, while emotional and mental wellbeing and financial security occupy hearts and minds.

As people start to think longer term, many see lockdown as an opportunity to 'reset' and build positive habits to last beyond coronavirus. There is an increased focus on family time and educating and entertaining children. Family-focused brands can inspire creativity as families seek new-shared activities and stress-free experiences.

Hot on the heels of the Australian bushfires, Covid-19 is accelerating the resurgence of human values

From belonging and shared humanity to a sense of duty to community, ring-fencing our borders from exposure to risk will amplify this trend. Quarantining inbound international flights from countries with confirmed virus cases and anyone in contact with a contaminated patient is expected to become part of our new normal – viewed short-term as protectionism, but some fear bordering on nationalism. The uncertain future shines a spotlight on the role of trust – redefining brand purpose and sustainability to a must-have.

Confronted with our own mortality, the impact of Covid-19 will be a scar on the global psyche

Without the shared rituals of gathering to mourn, welcome newborns, celebrate weddings and family occasions, who will help Australians recover from the pandemic of grief as we lose the human connection essential to coping with these experiences? Brands must step up as torchbearers for social and cultural connection.

As talk turns to kick-starting the economy and returning to society, the PM has outlined three conditions to be met before the Government will consider lifting restrictions. The watch-out? Just because political leaders say it's OK doesn't mean demand will re-emerge overnight. People are impatient to get back to normal – but know it brings risk. While people fear lack of privacy, most welcome technology as a weapon to help protect us.

When confronted with fear and uncertainty, the human story remains the same

We are driven by our emotions. Our fundamental needs do not change. Australians believe brands have a duty to help and bring people together. Meaningful action today will help recovery tomorrow. Amplifying shared values, activating your brand purpose and focusing on engendering feelings of community and optimism is critical. If sociability is core to your brand, elevate the joy of shared moments. Authenticity counts, and right now, empathy is critical to resonate. Your communication must fit the moment. Tune into your customers voice and needs and reframe relevance. This isn't time for inaction. Anticipate the changing human story and cultural narrative. Pivoting your offer and message to meet changing human needs is the new brand normal.

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