

Consumer-centred brands in times of crises

 By [Sindiswa Masuta](#)

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Covid-19 has brought about the notion of people working together for the greater good, rather than a world where people exist for their own survival. Humanity has been tasked with looking out for one other because what we do now has a ripple effect on others. In saying this, brands also have the responsibility to consider more than just their businesses but also their communities, cities, people and every element that they directly and indirectly impact.



Image source: [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

The new consumer

Brands are being counted on by their customers to assist them in any way they can during this crisis, which will greatly improve the relationship between consumer and brand in the long run. This is important, as there is currently a risk that consumers will deviate from what they know and try something new for various reasons: they may have less income and thus need to downgrade to more affordable alternatives; they may be looking for new or interesting ways to keep themselves occupied, or they may have more time on their hands to research new things.

These behavioural changes make it imperative for brands to stay relevant, helpful and a part of their consumers' lives by ensuring their consumers feel more like partners who understand their needs at any given time. "Make it clear that supporting your customers during tough times is a guiding principle for your business and that the long-term benefit of being there for them will outweigh short-term losses," says Tom Treanor, global head of marketing at Arm Treasure Data.

Personalised shopping experiences that offer value

Consumers are changing, therefore so should brands; a consumer will remain loyal to a brand that sees their needs before they have asked for them to be fulfilled. A great example of how a brand has extended itself and made its consumers feel supported through new ways of serving them is the retailer John Lewis. They have launched a virtual personal shopping service so that their consumers no longer have to go in-store for purchases and advice about products they may wish to purchase.

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John Lewis was aware that with lockdown restrictions and people's fears about leaving their homes, a virtual personal shopping service would make consumers' lives easier and relieve the stress of going shopping. "The lockdown has changed customer habits, but customer service remains as important as ever," states John Lewis's head of customer experience, Steven Hand. This service offers customers a personal shopper who gives advice on all products in-store, from bedding to mobile devices. This follows other successful virtual services for home interiors, personal styling and advice for expectant parents, as well as masterclasses on skincare, make-up, and food and wine pairing.

Rebuilding with branding

In Australia, the car brand Volvo is assisting the travel and tourism industry by informing consumers about road trips they can take now that their domestic travel restrictions have been lifted. In this way, Volvo is helping rural communities to rebuild after the devastating impacts of the bushfires and the coronavirus pandemic by asking their consumers to travel in their vehicles across their states in support of travel and tourism.

Volvo has also provided a series called Recovery Roadtrips, where they take you on a journey to tourist attraction spots, as well as places where you can support the locals along the way. They do this by encouraging consumers to spend quality time with their families outdoors and use this time to connect with their communities, explore new places and try new things. There is a direct correlation between vehicle travel and travel and tourism, so this kind of support from Volvo is likely to

increase trust for this brand. The campaign is also a great example of a brand willing to help its community and the travel and tourism industry, which has significantly declined globally.

Branding mishaps

While brands need to understand their consumers in order to intrinsically form a part of their lives, they also need to understand the context, i.e. the time, place and circumstances in which their consumers exist, as this affects how brands will be received and consumed. Richard Shotton, head of insights at Zenith, says “Brands should focus as much on target contexts as they do on target audiences”. This has become increasingly important as consumers now have a say in everything that happens in the world – from race to religion to politics to how brands behave.

An example of how brands can go wrong that is currently top of mind would be the Clicks and TREsemme racist hair advert. This is a case of brands not having thought through or understood the context in which their consumers exist. This has been a lesson for brands in South Africa and Clicks and TREsemme have taken steps to attempt to rectify their wrong. But what brands need to know and understand is that the context for many South African consumers, racism is still a big factor and plays a role in many aspects. This goes to show that even the biggest brands are not immune to making major mishaps.



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Putting the consumer and their communities first

Then there are brand failures not related to racism but are examples of how brands have not understood the context of their consumers. Pepsi wanted to keep singularity in their identity throughout the world and thus used the same slogan, which they directly translated into the languages of each market they were present in. This did not work well in Taiwan, as their slogan “Come alive with the Pepsi generation” translated to “Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead”.

Another example of a brand mishap was when Kellogg’s tried to infiltrate the Indian breakfast market by introducing their cereal as a breakfast meal. However, they neglected to conduct proper research into the market and thus made fundamental mistakes that stunted their growth in India. Kellogg’s failed to understand that India was not at the time a cereal-eating market; breakfast meals were vegetable dishes, mainly because of their affordability.

It is by understanding the consumer and what is happening in the world that brands can identify how they need to either evolve or extend themselves through innovative ideas. This is how many brands have survived through crises over the years. Brands that put the consumer and their communities first, as well as show an understanding of their audience’s context, are setting themselves up for future survival and growth through loyalty. And is that not ultimately what every brand wants to achieve?

ABOUT SINDISWA MASUTA

Sindiswa Masuta is the strategy business director at Grey Advertising Africa.
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