

The 'blessings' of Covid continue into 2021

 By [Johanna McDowell](#)

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It might seem like a strange headline but the truth is that there have been many blessings that we believe will - and should - continue into 2021. Some seriously important changes have taken place in the world of brands and advertising and we expect to see these continue.



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Some of these include the following:

Brands demonstrating purpose (and the agencies supporting them)

Covid brought out the best in some brands that stepped up to the plate and ensured that they remained visible, relevant and purposeful. They also demonstrated real care and commitment. These are the brands that will be remembered for their support during some incredibly difficult moments. Some notable retail chains - whether food or pharmaceutical - continued to operate, continued to communicate and continued to reassure. Their agencies also stepped up to help them, supporting clients through very tough, uncertain circumstances. Those key relationships will never be forgotten.

Banks and insurance demonstrating commitment

Consumers and small businesses alike needed support to get through the initial shock of uncertainty. Their style of advertising took on a marked change in the early stages of Covid and there still remains a caring tone that I never really noticed before. Did financial institutions mean it and were they sincere? We believe they were from what we observed both locally and internationally through our work with AdForum where agencies have been presenting their work over the past nine months.

Agencies determined to stay open

With working from home becoming the norm - overnight - agency leaders took cuts in salary in order to keep their agency doors open and their staff intact. Agencies know that the upturn always comes, and although for a while we did not know

what would happen next, we saw some real caring approaches to staff and a willingness to tolerate very unusual circumstances. Staff reacted positively and worked harder than ever to enable their agencies to succeed.

Pitches went on hold

For a short while marketers put pitching on hold - unless they absolutely had to - and this led to greater trust with their existing agencies that benefitted from the additional time that their clients were able to spend with them - even virtually. Pitch activity came back later in the year and there has been some 'pent-up demand' as a result of the delays in the early part of lockdown while we figured out how to pitch virtually.

Creativity

It was not just about a great brand ad, it was also about being able to produce in lockdown. Commercial shoots happened - all virtually. It is extraordinary what technology developments took place in such a short space of time. Over and above that there have been some extraordinary successes in creativity and tech in the past nine months, and these will continue into 2021.

Agency startups and the era of the independent

This was a global trend last year - some of it might have been economy-driven but much is the natural entrepreneurialism of most agencies wanting to make a real difference and realising that the pandemic could have been so much worse for all of us. There is no question that independent agencies are enjoying a renaissance period.

Agency holding companies (focus on staff)

What struck me in particular about the holding companies was their devotion to ensuring that as many of their staff as possible would maintain their jobs. And not only that - they demonstrated a clear commitment to their teams locally and globally and also ensured that they embraced the diversity challenges, which had always been a focus for some but were thrown into the forefront through Black Lives Matter.

Closer collaboration

There is no question that the industry came together - locally and globally - as we all paused our hitherto hectic lives of travel, in-person meetings, pitches and managing budgets. We learned the value of listening more and talking less, respecting others, valuing opinions, not just "chasing the dollar". Some of us spent more time in our homes with our families than we had done for years and years. It is somehow a quieter world of work than it was at the beginning of 2020. I believe that this collaborative way of working and living will continue in an authentic way into 2021.

ABOUT JOHANNA MCDOWELL

MD of the Independent Agency Search and Selection Company (IAS), and partner in Scopem Africa, with a background that includes being on both the agency and the client side of the fence, Johanna McDowell is well-placed to offer commentary on marketing and advertising in the South African and international contexts. She built her career in marketing and advertising since 1974, holding directorship in both SA and British advertising agencies. She was MD of Grey Phillips Advertising in 1988.

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