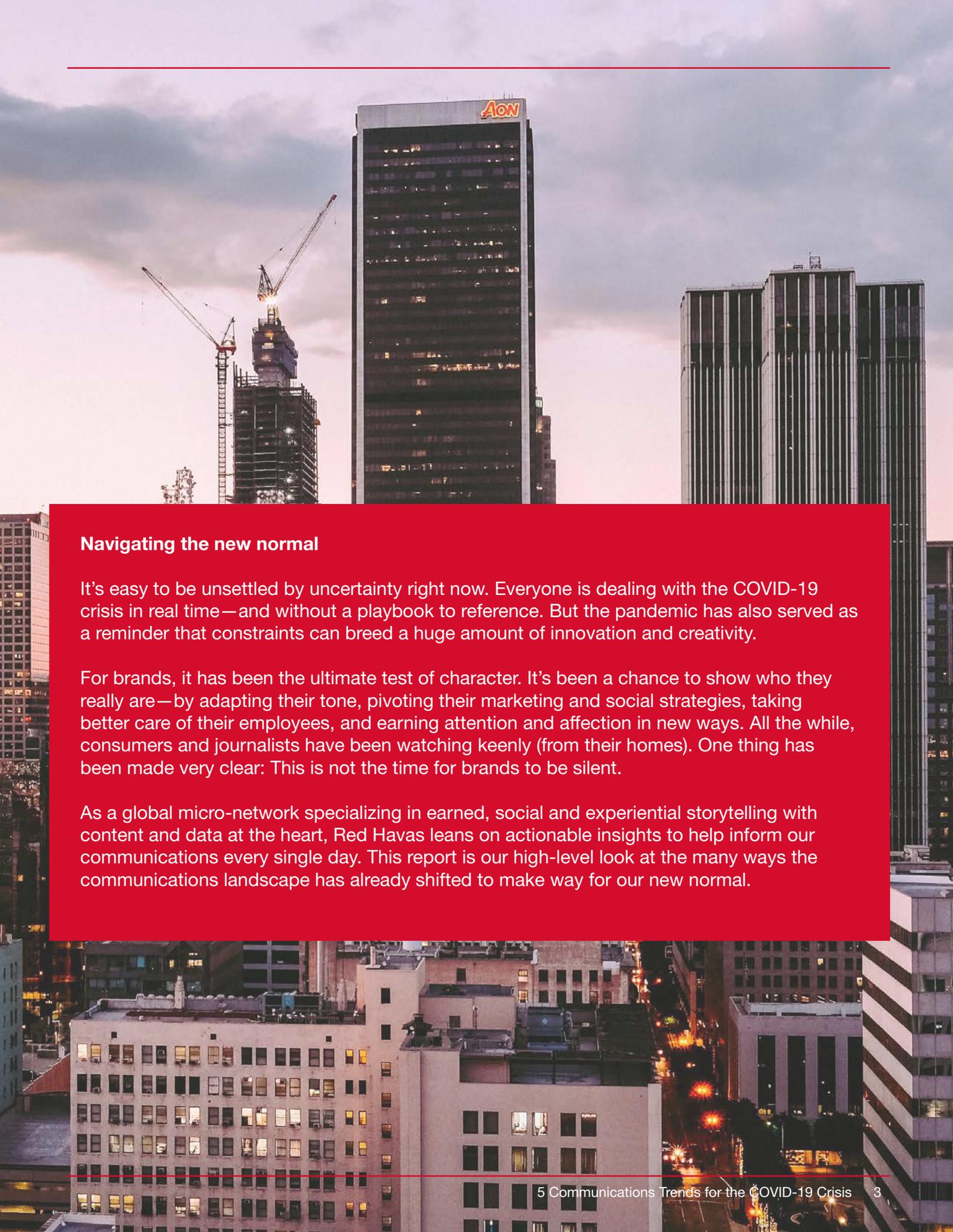


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Communications Trends for the COVID-19 Crisis







Navigating the new normal

It's easy to be unsettled by uncertainty right now. Everyone is dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in real time—and without a playbook to reference. But the pandemic has also served as a reminder that constraints can breed a huge amount of innovation and creativity.

For brands, it has been the ultimate test of character. It's been a chance to show who they really are—by adapting their tone, pivoting their marketing and social strategies, taking better care of their employees, and earning attention and affection in new ways. All the while, consumers and journalists have been watching keenly (from their homes). One thing has been made very clear: This is not the time for brands to be silent.

As a global micro-network specializing in earned, social and experiential storytelling with content and data at the heart, Red Havas leans on actionable insights to help inform our communications every single day. This report is our high-level look at the many ways the communications landscape has already shifted to make way for our new normal.

1 Capturing Captive Attention

Since the news media has become inundated with COVID-19 coverage, marketers' approach to earning the attention of both media and consumers has been flipped on its head. Now most all attempts to engage audiences are filtered through a pandemic lens, and this is all being done while brands and newsrooms are under intense financial and psychological pressure.



Never not watching

The news is the trendiest of trends—with personal media consumption soaring as people wake up and tune in for COVID-19 information all day and all night. Around [six in 10](#) American adults (57 percent) say they are following the news about the virus very closely, and an additional 35 percent are following it fairly closely. Their habit is further fed by major news outlets' decision to temporarily [suspend paywalls](#) for coronavirus coverage, opening new channels for information. Across the board, local, national and international newscasts have drawn [record-high audiences](#) week after week. Even though this goodwill for, and reliance on, the news media is being built, the increase in viewership has not translated into economic relief. Many advertisers are [cutting spend](#), especially with some of the most valuable broadcast content being [postponed or canceled](#), leading to spending reallocations by advertisers and a subsequent drop in income for media companies, leaving freelancers in the lurch and newsrooms to execute rounds of layoffs and furloughs.

Read the room

The coronavirus crisis has forced PR and communications professionals to adapt quickly and to practice the true art of tact. Navigating how to pitch during the coronavirus outbreak has required agility and appropriateness of tone. As always, reporters are [seeking stories](#) with relevance, connection and appropriateness for their audiences, all of whom are laser-focused on the pandemic, but now there is an added layer of consideration for the journalist as a member of their own local community, facing numerous challenges on the job. While local reporters have been more apt to continue to cover [non-coronavirus stories](#), most pitches now are viewed through the lens of the crisis. This has reminded us all that savvy news consumers have a strong radar for authenticity, and journalists and media professionals will be well-served to remember this in the post-COVID-19 world.

Captive conversation

Social distancing and stay-at-home orders have created a captive, albeit stationary, audience for brands and the news media. With consumers urged to acquire goods from the safety of their own homes rather than from brick-and-mortar shops, online retail visits [are up](#). And needless to say, brands are not currently looking to secure roadside billboards or mass transit ads. Instead, brands have met the coronavirus challenge with a simplified delivery and more considerate messaging that acknowledges the time and space consumers are living in. For instance, [Audi](#), [Taco Bell](#), [West Elm](#) and many others have developed free custom Zoom conference call backdrops to capitalize on the large number of Zoom work and personal meetings taking place. And while economic concerns still reign in many markets, consumers are actively browsing—and in some cases buying—providing a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak retail landscape.

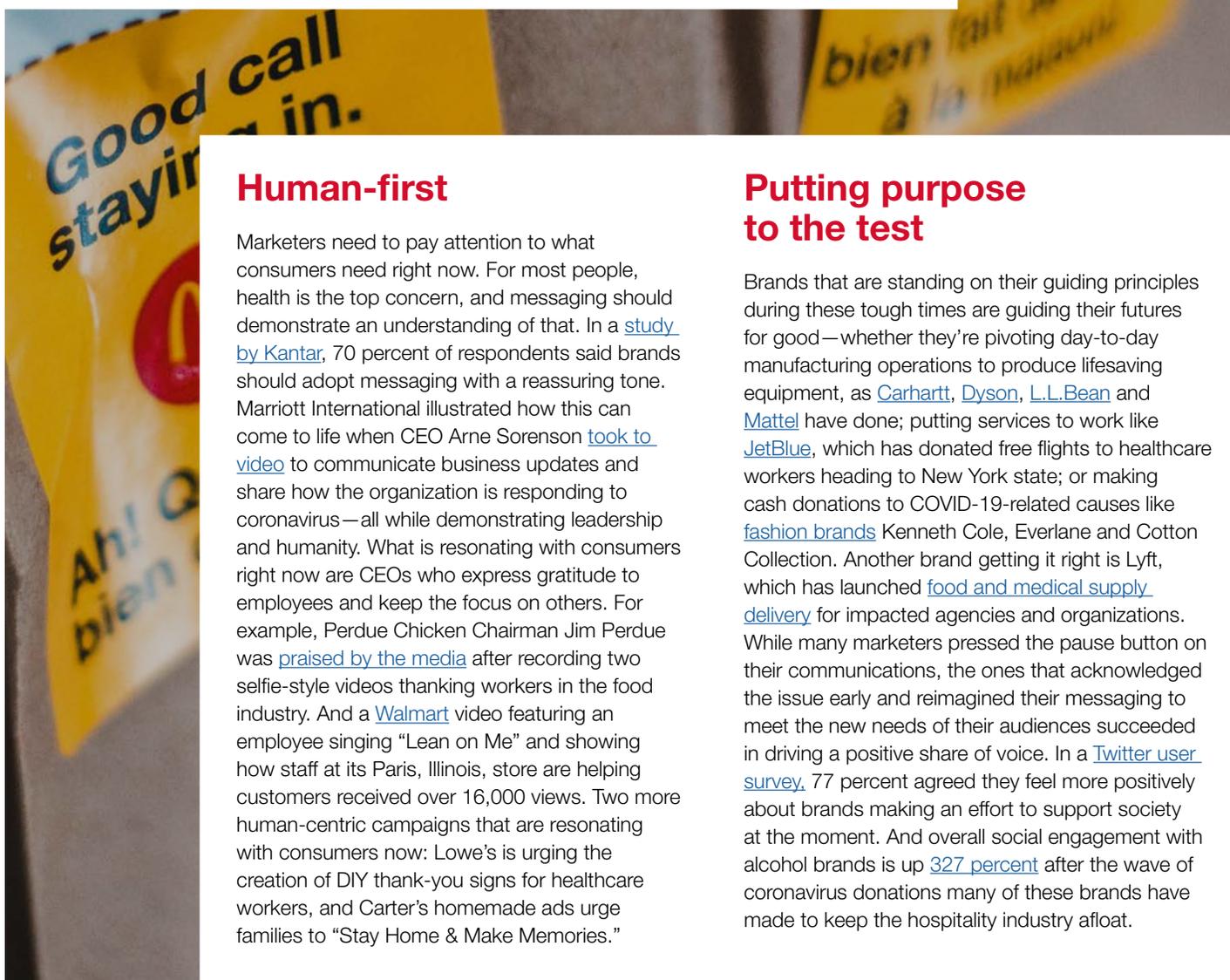


Brand name news

Consumption of news media and brand messaging has changed for the long term. With the coronavirus reminding consumers of the indispensable role journalists play in society, consumers will find their esteem for the media much improved after COVID-19. Younger generations (who are already [more likely to pay for entertainment and news than older generations](#)) in particular will be amenable to new payment models that create financial stability in the media industry so that we can ensure we have journalists when we need them most—during a crisis.

2 Conscious Communication

Brands and communications professionals have had to take a crash course on tonality and tact, and what does and doesn't resonate with consumers in this uncharted crisis. The best brands have managed to deftly strike the balance between relevant and helpful, while the worst have come off as tone-deaf or ignorant.



Human-first

Marketers need to pay attention to what consumers need right now. For most people, health is the top concern, and messaging should demonstrate an understanding of that. In a [study by Kantar](#), 70 percent of respondents said brands should adopt messaging with a reassuring tone. Marriott International illustrated how this can come to life when CEO Arne Sorenson [took to video](#) to communicate business updates and share how the organization is responding to coronavirus—all while demonstrating leadership and humanity. What is resonating with consumers right now are CEOs who express gratitude to employees and keep the focus on others. For example, Perdue Chicken Chairman Jim Perdue was [praised by the media](#) after recording two selfie-style videos thanking workers in the food industry. And a [Walmart](#) video featuring an employee singing “Lean on Me” and showing how staff at its Paris, Illinois, store are helping customers received over 16,000 views. Two more human-centric campaigns that are resonating with consumers now: Lowe’s is urging the creation of DIY thank-you signs for healthcare workers, and Carter’s homemade ads urge families to “Stay Home & Make Memories.”

Putting purpose to the test

Brands that are standing on their guiding principles during these tough times are guiding their futures for good—whether they’re pivoting day-to-day manufacturing operations to produce lifesaving equipment, as [Carhartt](#), [Dyson](#), [L.L.Bean](#) and [Mattel](#) have done; putting services to work like [JetBlue](#), which has donated free flights to healthcare workers heading to New York state; or making cash donations to COVID-19-related causes like [fashion brands](#) Kenneth Cole, Everlane and Cotton Collection. Another brand getting it right is Lyft, which has launched [food and medical supply delivery](#) for impacted agencies and organizations. While many marketers pressed the pause button on their communications, the ones that acknowledged the issue early and reimagined their messaging to meet the new needs of their audiences succeeded in driving a positive share of voice. In a [Twitter user survey](#), 77 percent agreed they feel more positively about brands making an effort to support society at the moment. And overall social engagement with alcohol brands is up [327 percent](#) after the wave of coronavirus donations many of these brands have made to keep the hospitality industry afloat.

Elevating employees

More humanity is being shown to employees during the COVID-19 crisis as compared with the global financial crisis at the end of the 2000s. We're seeing companies lead publicly with the steps they're taking to support and care for employees. Out of 100 public employers in the U.S., 64 percent have offered special customer accommodations, and 38 percent have expanded paid sick leave policies, according to [JUST Capital](#). For example, [Target](#) raised its wages by \$2 an hour and waived its absenteeism policy, [Dollar General](#) allocated \$35 million in bonuses for store operators, and [S&P Global](#) expanded global care leave and minimum sick leave, committed to pay employees who contract COVID-19, and extended access to mental health services. The companies that act humanely right now will be remembered for years to come, by both consumers and employees—and the same applies for those who miss the mark.

Connecting with community

Smart brands are using this time to create bonds with their community—with bonus points going to companies donating their products locally, partnering with a local charity or making financial donations to coronavirus relief efforts in their area. For example, Boston Beer Co. didn't think it was right to launch its typically high-energy, lighthearted campaigns for its suite of top alcohol brands, so it instead put its creative and media spend into the [Restaurant Strong Fund](#), which it created with Boston-based Greg Hill Foundation, to raise money for restaurant workers sidelined during the pandemic. [Guinness](#) has donated £1 million to support organizations "where we work, live and celebrate." Brooklyn-based cereal company [Magic Spoon](#) has donated 20,000 boxes of cereal to children in NYC in partnership with local organizations like Rethink Food NYC and The Food Bank for NYC. And [Brooklyn Bedding](#), which is based in Phoenix, is producing masks for the state of Arizona as well as essential workers in the region.

Serving with sensitivity

With most of the population (60 percent, according to [Statista](#)) worried about exposure to the coronavirus, it's important for brands to be sensitive with their creative, marketing and media buys right now. In particular, communicators need to pull any campaigns that may promote unhealthy hygiene. Unfortunately, [not all companies got the memo](#): When KFC launched its new commercial featuring 60 seconds of people eating chicken and then sticking their hands in their mouths, consumers complained that it was irresponsible. The same goes for Hershey, which aired a commercial showing strangers hugging and shaking hands over gifts of chocolate.



A future with purpose and profit in balance

Brands that build stronger relationships with their employees, customers and supply chain, and that adjust their charitable programs to serve our new reality, will be stronger post-coronavirus. With B Corps—companies that have been privately certified as having purpose and profit in balance—being [63 percent](#) more likely than other businesses of a similar size to make it through a downturn, we can expect to see more brands opt for a greater balance of purpose and profit in the years to come.

3 Back to Social Basics

Brands are getting back to basics on social media, and it's a good look. In most cases, having trimmed away content fat, what's left is showing consumers who companies truly are and what they can offer beyond their product or service. Consumers have also been reminded of the original purpose of social media—and perhaps of life: human connection through shared conversation.



A simplified story

Branded content in many industries has become decidedly “de-sophisticated” since COVID-19 struck. While remaining active on social, many large and leading brands are sticking with simplicity in their executions—favoring straightforward, static, text-based social posts or user-generated content over highly polished and produced formats. [Target](#) is spurring optimism by asking its followers to share something that makes them smile, even suggesting that its 24 million Facebook fans drop pictures of their fur babies into a comments section. And [Nike](#) stayed on brand while urging its Instagram followers to stay home with the messages “Play inside, play for the world” and “Isolation. Just do it.” Facebook, meanwhile, created a moving, human-centered [video](#) compilation of empty city streets around the world, reminding us that “We’re never lost if we can find each other.” It’s the meaning of the message rather than the message format that matters now.

Hero what’s helpful

During this stressful time, consumers need brands to help make their lives easier—whether that’s putting out helpful and accurate information on coronavirus, as the World Health Organization is doing on [TikTok](#), or getting out of character, as [Coca-Cola](#) has done by notifying fans that its Instagram Stories will “look a little different” while it amplifies meaningful messages. Before hitting “Post,” brands are now pausing to ask: How does this content meet our audience’s evolved needs during this turbulent period? Does it offer information or answers they are missing, enhance their at-home experience or provide them with a resource they can learn from or leverage in their socially isolated lives? As best practice, brands should offer clarity in this uncertain situation through the curation or aggregation of accurate, simple, useful and timely information. In a [Twitter user survey](#), 89 percent said brands should provide reliable, accurate information.

Tag, you're it

With staying home trending, “challenges” are taking over on social. No stranger to going viral, Oreo implemented [its #CookieWithACause Challenge](#) on TikTok, asking fans to put a cookie on their forehead and move it to their mouth without using their hands. In exchange, Oreo is donating to Save the Children. Orange Theory presented a burpee challenge, and Audi challenged its social followers to recreate the four rings of its logo using everyday objects and then post them with the #FourRingsChallenge and #AudiTogether hashtags. And many families isolating together are taking to TikTok to participate in dance challenges like “Blinding Lights,” “Savage” and “Something New,” no doubt contributing to the platform’s [15 percent](#) rise in traffic since the beginning of the year. Instagram Stories have also exploded with viral challenges, like “See a Cheers, Send a Cheers.” Most recently, users have been sharing their senior pictures in honor of the class of 2020 graduates who are missing their graduation ceremonies this year.

The meaning of memories

At the beginning of stay-at-home orders, we saw a lot of content around how people were using their time—baking, exercising or taking an online class. Now, as the time people spend sheltering in place increases, we’re seeing fewer “in the moment” moments and more flashback content. From users wishing they were back on vacation to remembering times hanging out with friends and family, this type of content is filling our feeds. Facebook kick-started this back in 2015 with its “Memories” feature designed to increase users’ personal update frequencies, so while not new, this commemorative content-sharing mechanism has now become our new normal. Post-coronavirus, it will be fascinating to see how this behavior will tone back down and whether the passive consumption versus active sharing trend we’ve seen rise in recent years will come back or continue.

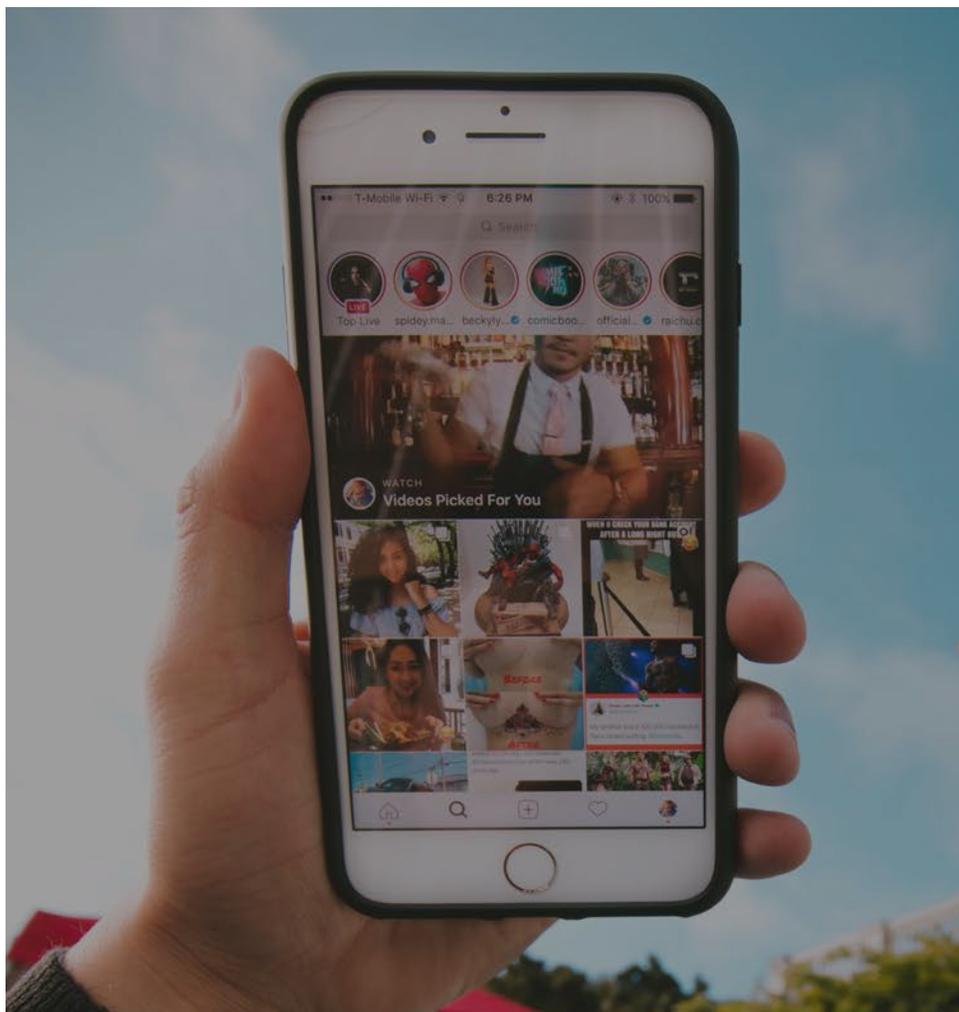
Cultivating conversations

We’ve never been in a situation like this one, and a pre-planned social content calendar just isn’t cutting it right now. Instead of guessing what audiences want, brands are asking and listening—tapping into simple featured formats like Instagram Story Questions or user-generated content to aggregate insights they can act on or questions they can answer through content. And it’s a great time for brands to be listening because consumers are talking more than ever on social media right now, creating space for authentic two-way conversations between brands and followers. WhatsApp has experienced a 40 percent increase in usage since the COVID-19 outbreak. Facebook also [reported a rise in Groups](#) usage and a 70 percent increase in Messenger group video calls. By uncovering what people are feeling through social listening and community management, brands are turning their typical content into what people want—and need.



A more humble and human social experience

Back when it first started, social was simple, with quick texts (hello, 140-character tweets) and a new way to connect: one on one. This quickly moved to highly polished productions and content, competition with the algorithm, and big dollars being shoved behind video, animated and even 3D assets. But social is having a full-circle moment in a COVID-19 world: Gone are the days of agonizing over the perfect shot and caption. Rather, brands will keep their content simple and will leverage social to reach out to the people behind the screens to offer a friendly voice and a helping hand. With people fearing the unknown of what the future holds, they’ll come to expect human touch and authenticity from brands on social media.



Categories shifting

While influencers in categories like travel and fashion are taking a hit, others are soaring. For example, with consumers unable to go out to dinner, they're looking for ideas to help them create dishes at home. While gyms are closed, fitness influencers are having a moment creating daily or weekly content to replicate the in-studio exercise experience. And with all the kids home from school indefinitely, parents are seeking out influencers with tips on homeschooling, arts and crafts, games, and other activities for their children. [PE with Joe](#) (the Body Coach TV) has become a phenomenon as over a million households worldwide tune into his YouTube channel for morning workouts with the kids.

4 Innovating Influence

During normal times, it's an influencer's job to showcase their beautiful body, curated living space, perfect family or big travel adventures. But COVID-19 has changed everything, and such posts today are not just tone-deaf; they're also dangerous and costly.



Influence for good

Many influencers have found ways to be themselves but still use their platforms positively. For example, they are sharing content to help “flatten the curve,” such as the right ways for people to wash their hands or practice social distancing. The World Health Organization launched the [#SafeHands Challenge](#) encouraging people to follow their directions to be safe and healthy, and used stars such as Selena Gomez to promote it. Other influencers are rallying their followers or working on their own initiatives to contribute to relief efforts, providing food and critical healthcare equipment. Influencer and fashion designer Danielle Bernstein ([@weworewhat](#)) donated \$20,000 of her swimwear sales to two hunger-relief nonprofits including River Fund, and she continues to help the charity with social awareness. A video with informative COVID-19 content by Finnish YouTuber [Roni Back](#) received over 100,000 views after just two days. And Finland’s government has even enlisted influencers to share information with citizens who are difficult to reach through more traditional channels.

The impact of lack of tact

Influencers who don’t examine their business practices in light of the pandemic risk coming off as off-key. When many consumers are suddenly finding themselves or loved ones sick, or struggling to make ends meet, it’s not the time to promote products, showcase an affluent lifestyle or belittle anyone’s suffering. As one example of what not to do: Fashion and lifestyle influencer [Arielle Charnas](#) announced that she was feeling ill, and then she pulled strings to get an unwarranted COVID-19 test, posted images of herself interacting with her family after the test came back positive, and fled to a vacation house in the Hamptons, continuing to promote luxury products throughout it all. This business-as-usual posting, showcasing unsafe practices to hundreds of thousands of followers, resulted in a huge backlash.

Small business, big influence

With influencers staying put at home, they’re forced to rely on their local businesses for must-haves. That’s an opportunity for these small businesses. As influence stays

hyper-local, small businesses trying to stay afloat can look to micro-influencers—those with fewer than 5,000 followers—to promote their brands to the community. These micro-influencers typically provide high-quality engagement and more bang for the marketing buck. They can encourage consumers in their areas to shop small, buy gift cards, and keep struggling small businesses top of mind.

Branching into new areas

Partnerships are paused. Trips are canceled. Affiliate programs and advertising dollars are being cut. With everyone’s priorities shifted to the immediate concerns of health and safety, many influencers don’t have much to say into this environment. The good news is that, while consumers are stuck at home and spending more time on screens, many influencers are seeing their engagement increase. Some are using this time to ramp up content to help attract new followers. Others are wisely diversifying their income streams by creating and selling assets to brands that may need fresh content, or even getting into social media consulting or developing ebooks or webinars from the skills they’ve acquired.



Make-or-break moment

While the influencer “bubble” likely won’t burst, it will shift, and the content being created now will have a lasting impact. Influencers who are sharing accurate information with their followers, or helping to raise money or awareness for critical goods, will rise to the top. Those who carried on as if nothing were wrong—or, worse, attempted to profit from unproven or dangerous “treatments” for the virus—may permanently lose clout and followers. Social platforms must find a way to add depth to both their content and their business models, keeping in mind that the current disaster will not be the last. Post-coronavirus, consumers will expect influencers with vast followings to use their platforms as a force for good.

5 The Rise of “Phyrtual Reality”

The pandemic has made our virtual lives indistinguishable from our physical lives. During social isolation, workout classes, concerts, birthday parties, baby showers, even proms and weddings, are all being made possible by a Wi-Fi connection as we lean into technology to connect us more deeply to friends and family and to endear us to brands that are showing us where their hearts lie during tough times.



Mental health (finally) at the forefront

The COVID-19 crisis has been traumatic. To self-soothe daily stress, 34 percent of us are spending more time focusing on online content about health and wellness, per the Group Nine 2020 COVID-19 Consumer Sentiment & Impact Survey. And governments and employers around the world are stepping up to offer mental health support—virtually, of course—to those feeling depressed, lonely, scared, anxious, and on and on. Brands are doing their part, too: Kate Spade has created a [24/7 crisis](#) text line for healthcare professionals to cope with anxiety, and Zappos has launched its [“Customer Service for Anything” program](#) to provide its customers with human connection. The need for such initiatives is proving to be great, as two healthcare workers in Italy and a government official in Germany have already committed [suicide](#), and [62 percent](#) of Britons have said they are finding it harder to be positive about the future compared with how they felt before the outbreak.

Forging new family dynamics

Before COVID-19, screen time was largely a solo activity, impairing the amount of quality time parents and children were spending together. COVID-19 has flipped that script, resulting in family interaction on a new level as each member balances the virtual sides of their “outside lives” with a new, forced reality of togetherness. While the demands on parents are higher than ever as they navigate a new normal and attempt to work and home-school kids, this forced togetherness has also brought back old-school family time. Sitting down together for dinner, doing puzzles and games, coordinating the latest TikTok challenge, organizing Zoom celebrations and catch-up calls with loved ones, and learning with the help of educational apps, families are engaging more, both virtually and physically. Of course, it’s not all happy family bonding: We’re also seeing record-high numbers of [domestic abuse](#) instances and [divorce filings](#).

Virtual VIP events

With social distancing eliminating in-person events, marketers are tasked with creating and innovating the experience online. While challenging, it

creates a unique opportunity to connect with customers in a fresh way. For example, [CK Mondavi](#) wines created virtual educational tastings for its Aloft and Dark Matter wine brands. The company was considering this strategy prior to coronavirus, but the pandemic pushed it to try something new. The best part about virtual experiences is that they open a new wave of opportunities, from virtual rides to fitness classes and online courses. CK Mondavi can now build relationships with its members who may not have the opportunity to visit Napa Valley.

Cordially invited from your couch

Things we once experienced in large groups and in person—concerts, performances, sporting events—have now shifted to virtual, and brands are embracing it. The [NBA](#) noted DJ D-Nice’s [Instagram Lives](#) and invited him to host one of their own to their 47 million followers. Chipotle launched daily [“Chipotle Together”](#) sessions on Zoom, inviting people to meditation, workout sessions and more. [Andrea Bocelli’s](#) Easter performance in Italy became the most watched classical music concert on YouTube with more than 2.8 million viewers. Going forward, a digital experience will have to be part of the planning mix.



Forget physical or virtual; experiences will be “phyrtual”

Experiences will no longer be “in person” or “online.” Rather, there will be the option to choose either. Not only will big-ticket events like sports and concerts be livestreamed, but so too will the birthday party down the street or your cousin’s bridal shower. No matter how big or small, the option to be digital will now be embedded in our daily lives, so those unable to be there physically can still be there virtually in what will be a new “normalized” social engagement.

Undeniable Passion Fearless Ambition Incredible Ideas

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