



OPINION

Marketing Inspiration During COVID-19

BRANDS ARE ABLE TO MOBILIZE AND WORK TOGETHER TO FIGHT AGAINST THE PANDEMIC. **BY LISA SHERMAN**

There's no other way to say it: We are facing an unprecedented international crisis in COVID-19, a pandemic that's rapidly unfolding before our eyes. The information evolves daily. The road ahead is tough to see.

But one thing is clear: The hard work has just begun. Stopping the spread requires each and every one of us, with cross-sector industry support.

As I continue to think about how best to help in the days, weeks and months ahead, I recognize how much I've learned as I've watched our partners show up, raise their hands and go all-in. We're all in this together, so I want to share what I've learned so far with the hope that these insights help others.

Everyone who can help wants to; they just need a job to do

A member of my team told me that her neighbor built a spreadsheet to give fellow neighbors a way to share the specific ways they could help each other, anything from "I can

tutor geometry over FaceTime" to "I'm happy to pick up groceries for anyone who is unable." They also included any specific needs they might have. Everyone wanted to help, and many have unique skills—they just needed the spreadsheet to translate goodwill into action. In less than 24 hours, it had nearly 600 contributors.

This example holds true at the corporate level, too. Some CEOs are able to say, "Use our production resources." Others are able to deploy their creative teams or donate media. They just need the spreadsheet. This is the power of convening.

When messaging can change overnight, do what you can today

As our understanding of COVID-19 evolves so rapidly, the wait-and-see approach can be tempting. What if we create messaging that quickly becomes outdated? During catastrophes like 9/11 or Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, our efforts were more about recovery than prevention.

The COVID-19 crisis is different. The virus is spreading so quickly that there's no time to worry about the expiration date of today's message, not if it's needed today.

There's no such thing as a competitor

Media, tech and digital companies are generating unbranded, platform-agnostic creative that can be used by anyone who wants it because getting out the message about social distancing, personal hygiene and mental health is the priority right now. The unifying principle is that it's all hands on deck time.

Peer pressure can be positive

We can't just meet people with the right message at the right time. We have to get people to relay that message to others who trust them: in texts, on phone calls, in workplace Slack channels, on social media accounts. Scale and speed are imperative. The message must spread faster than the virus.

AD COUNCIL PARTNERS WITH BRANDS TO DO THEIR PART

Last week, in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control, the White House, the Department of Health and Human Services with unprecedented support from across the industry, the Ad Council launched public service messaging on social distancing, personal hygiene and risk factors to help slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

This is a moment for irreversible empathy

Before this pandemic, millions of people woke up not knowing how they'd put dinner on the table or how they'd pay their medical bills. As the number of people who find themselves in this situation soars, so too does the number of people who understand at a visceral level what instability feels like.

As we move through these next weeks, it will be critical to reflect on how we can deploy what we learn not just to address the coronavirus pandemic but also to recognize severe hardship, insecurity and inequality in all forms as we rebuild. And we will rebuild.

No one can offer us certainty right now, and increased empathy doesn't pay anybody's grocery bill. But as I see the unprecedented response rise up to meet this unprecedented crisis—each time I speak with someone desperate to help in any way they can—I am reminded of my hope.



Specs

Claim to fame

Lisa Sherman is president and CEO of the Ad Council, which convenes the world's leading marketers to tackle today's most pressing issues through public engagement campaigns.

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