

Advertising in the pandemic: How companies used COVID as a marketing tool

December 1 2021, by Maha Rafi Atal, Lisa Ann Richey



Credit: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

At the start of the pandemic, consumers were bombarded with a new and hastily constructed form of advertising. In those "uncertain times," customers were promised, they could rely on their favorite brands for

help.

The adverts, [often featuring](#) somber piano music and declarations that everyone was "in this together," were [ubiquitous](#). Now [our research](#) reveals the tactics behind these adverts, and why [consumers](#) should be wary of marketing in a crisis.

When COVID was still new and confusing, when governments were unsure about how to respond, corporate advertising sought to define the pandemic in ways that made companies—and their products—an essential part of whatever the solution might turn out to be. We found that from mid-March to the end of April 2020, companies used advertising to tell three main types of story about COVID.

Some, like the global shipping giant Maersk, emphasized the supply chain impact of the pandemic and pointed to their role helping to get essential equipment to the right places. This kind of marketing defined COVID as a crisis of logistics—a problem for which corporate managers could argue they have the most specialist expertise.

I am happy to report that the inaugural flight of Maersk Bridge is en route to Denmark. The Maersk Bridge is an air bridge and supply chain operation to source and transport personal protective equipment, including millions of masks, for Danish health care workers. pic.twitter.com/ghEL7iZyS3

— Robert Ugglä (@RobertUgglä) [April 7, 2020](#)

Others, especially [consumer goods](#) brands like Starbucks, concentrated on the financial side of the situation, and their role in donating food or money to those in sudden need. This kind of marketing defined COVID as a crisis of capital. If the problem is not enough cash, then wealthy corporations can swoop in as heroes by freeing some up quickly.

Millions more Americans could face hunger due to the impacts of COVID-19. If you are able, please join us in providing relief to our neighbors in need with a donation to [@FeedingAmerica](https://t.co/UJ70TQWI5n).
<https://t.co/UJ70TQWI5n> [pic.twitter.com/0eMQcb4UYK](https://t.co/0eMQcb4UYK)

— Starbucks Coffee (@Starbucks) [April 16, 2020](#)

Then there were those, especially fashion and [luxury brands](#), which focused on the emotional impact of the pandemic, and pointed to their products as ways to make the experience easier and even fun. These adverts made the case that personal consumption—shopping from your lockdown—could be a form of humanitarian heroism, with you as the grateful recipient, or a way of [taking care](#) of yourself.

Late capitalism is nothing if not predictable.
[pic.twitter.com/vYpi0P14iN](https://t.co/vYpi0P14iN)

— Kate Cronin-Furman (@kcroninfurman) [March 19, 2020](#)

But there were risks attached to these messages, and not all of them landed well. Some ads seemed oblivious to the wider social problems that were making the crisis harder for some to bear.

Fashion advertisements targeted at women which described the pandemic as a kind of "[staycation](#)" for example, sat uncomfortably next to [news reports](#) about women who were leaving the workforce under the crushing burden of childcare and housework.

E-cigarette advertisements encouraging consumers to take up vaping "for your health" [invited a backlash](#) when hospitals were filled with COVID patients on ventilators.

Some companies even [provoked consumers](#) by mocking the severity of

the pandemic, including an Italian ski resort which [invited](#) travelers to "experience the mountain with full lungs" in a place "where feeling great is contagious." Elsewhere, [social media companies](#) struggled to [stamp out misinformation](#) from "influencers" hired by wellness brands to promote untested products as COVID-19 cures.

Even adverts which took the pandemic seriously found themselves on shaky ground.

When the UK was coming out of its first lockdown, the cleaning brand Dettol [went viral](#) (in the wrong way) when it appeared to be encouraging commuters to return to the office. Some consumers conflated the ads with government public service announcements promoting shopping as a way of boosting the economy.

The misconception contained a grain of truth, as Dettol was the [government's corporate partner](#) for sanitizing public transport. Indeed, several brands in our research mentioned partnerships with government as one of the benefits of the crisis. Meanwhile, advertisements [encouraging consumers to shop](#) to "help" rebuild the economy (and companies in it) [have proliferated](#).

Advertising which addresses [social concerns](#) is common, not just in relation to COVID, but to a range of causes where consumers are primed to see corporate solutions for everything from [poverty](#) to [climate change](#).

Consuming with a conscience?

Our research shows such advertising is frequently designed to influence how the public understands social problems, and encourages people to think of ethical consumption as a [way of helping](#).

As others [have argued](#), such marketing related to good causes "creates

the appearance of giving back, disguising the fact that it is already based in taking away." Consumers can be deterred from campaigning for more radical change, believing they have already played their part through "ethical" purchasing.

One familiar example is when companies boast that a percentage of proceeds from certain products goes to a social cause. The [amount donated is often small](#) while the revenue the new product generates for the company is considerable.

As another commentator [has put it](#): "If we insist that this is the only way to effectively address massive social problems, we resign ourselves to a world dictated by consumer impulses."

The risks then, of attaching a social issue to an advertising campaign, are considerable—for the company, the consumer, and the cause itself. Our research suggests that not every time is the [right time for advertising](#). We should beware of brands bearing gifts.

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