

Marketers seek to map out “after Corona” world

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After dealing with the immediate business impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, marketers are now shifting gears to combine short-term measures with planning for a time when the crisis has receded.

This viewpoint was shared by chief marketing officers from many different verticals at the second meeting of a special taskforce set up by the CMO Growth Council – a joint venture from the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and Cannes Lions – to identify best practices in response to COVID-19. (WARC attended this online meeting on the understanding that the views of participants would not be attributed. The outcome from the taskforce’s first meeting is available [here](#).)

As one attendee put it, this week has been more of a “settling in” period after initially managing the logistics of changing media and messaging plans, transitioning staff to working from home, and deploying assets to help manage the pandemic. Now, most of the marketers in attendance are devoting time to sketching out what their businesses will look like “AC” – or “after Corona.”

The focus of this planning isn’t just about consumers, but also the ecosystems within which each company operates.

Consumer behavior is changing – but how?

While consumer behaviour has already changed as COVID-19 spreads, what these new habits will ultimately look like, and how many of them will endure, is unknown. Several patterns are emerging, however:

- Some consumers are taking a more proactive approach to health and wellness, and showing an interest in products and services that will keep them healthy beyond the “pantry preparation” behaviours – tied directly to Coronavirus – that led many people to immediately stock up on items such as pain relievers.

This shift is also expressing itself in terms of concerns about fake news, particularly when it comes to bogus claims regarding effective treatments against COVID-19.

- In markets where Coronavirus has been an issue for some months, there is a clear hesitancy about returning to old habits, such as going to restaurants, even as the recovery phase begins.
- This anxiety, in turn, is leading to heightened consumer attention on food and product safety, and translating into an even greater emphasis on digital activity, given both the safety and convenience this channel provides. As one attendee said, “Even though the pandemic is at the end [in certain markets], it still has a long tail effect.”

Scenario planning is being deployed to figure out different ways the long tail may play out, particularly

concerning how consumers might react to a second wave of infection. “How do we get ready should this thing come back to the States in the fall?” one attendee asked.

Protecting ecosystems is paramount

In a phenomenon perhaps little seen during recent crises (such as the financial downturn of 2008/09), there is a keen emphasis on supporting business ecosystems, and going above and beyond the usual strategies in an effort to help pull partners through difficult times, with more of an eye toward cooperation than competition.

Some larger companies are putting special emphasis on small and medium-sized businesses, which have tended to be more deeply affected by the pandemic than larger ones. Specific actions being taken include helping to build out digital tools and services for smaller enterprises as demand for ecommerce increases. Offering discounts to distributors is another viable tactic here.

Larger companies are being aided by the members of their business ecosystems, too, as organizations are working with long-time partners on shorter term needs – such as crafting the correct messaging – while also taking a patient view toward long-term planning.

Raising prices is not the answer

One attendee noted that brand custodians should treat product pricing with great sensitivity. Even as many companies are seeing entire sales channels upended by widespread store and business closures, they shouldn't try and recoup revenue through raising prices for consumers, millions of whom find themselves suddenly unemployed.

As one attendee explained: “How we act today is going to matter in the long term. And we're fully aware that this is a long game. It's not a short game.”

The CMO Growth Council is a joint venture of the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) and Cannes Lions, which – like WARC – is owned by Ascential. WARC reports on the CMO Growth Council meetings according to Chatham House Rules, in which quotes are not attributed.

Members of the marketing ecosystem who would like to participate in the CMO Growth Council's COVID-19 effort should contact Nick Primola at nprimola@ana.net.

The members of the ANA's COVID-19 taskforce are: Zaid Al-Qassab, CMO, Channel 4; Dean Aragon, CEO, Shell Brands International and global vp, Shell; Fiona Carter, chief brand officer, AT&T; David Dancer, CMO, Inspire; Norman de Greve, CMO, CVS Health; Mathilde Delhoume, global brand officer, LVMH; Morgan Flatley, US CMO, McDonald's; Rick Gomez, evp/CMO, Target; George Hammer, chief content officer, IBM; Rand Harbert, CMO, State Farm; Jodi Harris, global vice president, marketing culture and capabilities, Anheuser-Busch InBev; Alicia Hatch, global CMO, Deloitte Digital; SY Lau, sevp/chairman of group marketing and global branding, Tencent; Alison Lewis, chief growth officer, Kimberly-Clark; Greg Lyons, North America CMO/beverages, PepsiCo; Rahul Malhotra, head of brand strategy and stewardship, Shell; Tamara Rogers, global CMO, GSK; Peggy Fang Roe, global officer/customer experience, Marriott; Meredith Verdone, CMO, Bank of America; Deborah Wahl, global CMO, General Motors; Hunter Zhang, director, corporate marketing and public relations, Tencent.

ANA executive management on the Council are: Nick Primola, the executive vp who manages the CMO Growth Council; Bob Liodice, CEO; Meg Wubbenhorst, vp/program lead, CMO practice.

Industry partners are Jeremy Kees, the Richard J. and Barbara Naclerio endowed chair in business, Villanova University; Fiorenza Plinio, head of creative excellence, Cannes Lions International; Cathy Taylor, US commissioning editor, WARC.

Also invited to attend the meeting were Rita Ferro, president, advertising sales and partnerships, The Walt Disney Company; Kirk McDonald, chief business officer, Xander; Jann Schwarz, global director, The B2B Institute, LinkedIn.

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