

Brand messaging during Covid-19: Don't be *that* guy

By  Alleta Liebenberg

24 Apr 2020

A friend's comment on a local retailer's Facebook ad popped up in my newsfeed this week.

Really? A R6500 candle? This is not the time, people."

I chuckled at my usually softly-spoken friend's outrage and what must have been a (huge) mistake in pricing. Curious, I clicked through to the website. I had to adjust my jaw as I realised that even though it weighed 2,5kg and bore the name of a well-known British brand, they were advertising a candle equivalent to the monthly living wage of a South African domestic worker.

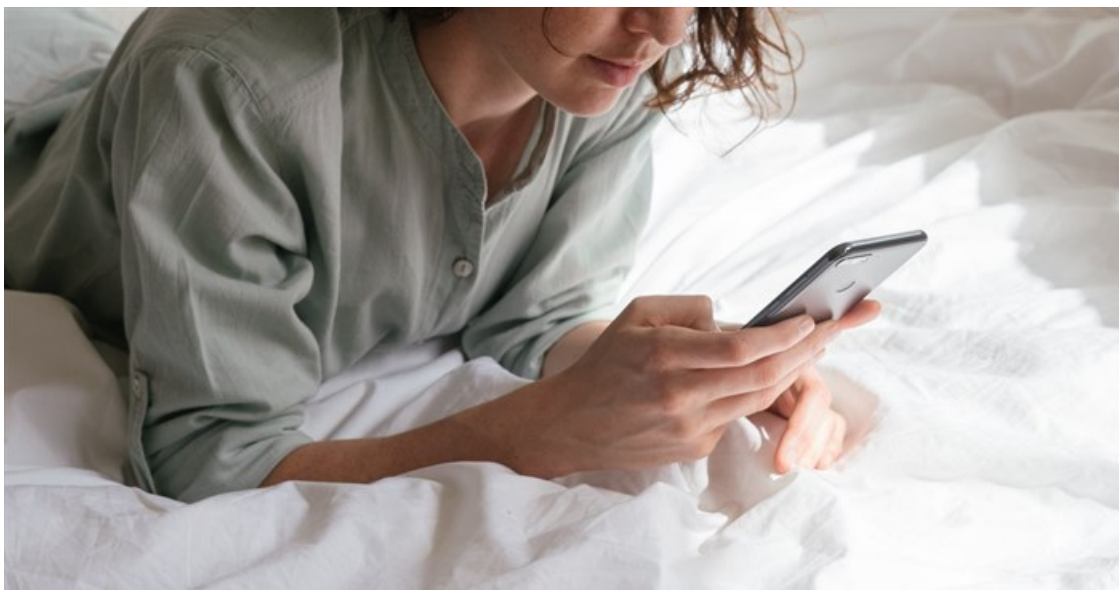


Photo by Retha Ferguson from [Pexels](#).

In a world caught in "a delicate balancing act between preserving lives and livelihoods" as author and scenario planner Clem Sunter [puts it](#), brands are under tremendous pressure to balance their need to use their messaging to show extraordinary empathy for their customers and employees, while pivoting their business model and maintaining momentum to make sure they survive the crisis.

Primitive urge for survival

2020 was always going to be a hard year for consumer spending even before we knew Covid-19 existed. By December 2019 and shortly before corona-panic hit SA shores, consumer debt had increased to a [staggering R1.72tn](#) according to the Consumer Default Index (CDI) released by Experian South Africa. Add to that the fact that we entered a recession in the second half of 2019, and brands were facing tough competition for their share of the consumer pay-check.



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Customers are currently driven by an almost primitive urge for survival as evidenced by the panic-buying before the physical lockdown was instituted on 27 March 2020. We also see it in the shortages of instant yeast and cake flour as

masses of people (myself included) try to bake bread for the first time (Albany, you are safe from me). Although, for now, our spending has also been on lockdown, time will tell how customers will utilise their buying power to vote for the brands that are congruent in their messaging and their action.

This week, Robert Grace, head of strategy for [M&C Saatchi SA](#) predicted that post-lockdown spend may track the spending habits of consumers in China after the [Sars](#) disease infected more than 5300 people in China alone and killed 774 people in 29 countries during 2003. Investigations showed that what followed the easing of lockdown procedures, was 3 months of splurging on takeaways, sentimental items and outings, pleasure retail and pampering.

If SA follows the Chinese model, which brands will consumers remember once the spending spree dies down? I predict that debt-laden, unemployed, or financially stretched consumers, will be extremely picky about where (and if) they spend their cash.



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Which brands do I predict will survive after lockdown is lifted?

There are three categories:

1. The noticers

These are the brands who noticed the needs of their customers who may not be their biggest spenders but are the hardest hit by the current crisis.

I think of brands like Standard Bank, who, shortly after lockdown waived ATM Fees for transactions at non-Standard Bank ATM's to enable their clients to withdraw cash at the ATM nearest to them. Pick n Pay also rolled out a virtual gift voucher that can be sent by SMS to someone's phone to enable anyone to send much-needed food to relatives and employees while maintaining lockdown regulations.

2. The leaders

The pandemic has laid bare the vastly different worlds South Africans live in. Shortly after Woolworths announced that they would cut their executive salaries by up to 30%, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that he and his MP's would take a 33% cut in their salaries until June 2020. A number of other big brands also pledged a reduction in their executive salaries for the next three months. The uses for these savings in salary costs ranged from making donations to the country's Solidarity Fund to using it to assist with the financial needs of employees experiencing hardship.

3. The generous

These are the brands that provided value for their customers and often non-customers through providing free advice or services.

From something as simple as sharing a reminder to start your car during lockdown so you don't end up with a dead battery; to Discovery's Covid-19 online doctor consultants which was made available for free to all South Africans in partnership with Vodacom; to the many partnerships formed and subscriptions and fees waived to ensure that parents were able to educate children from home where possible – these brands will be remembered for their generosity during a time when all instincts scream to self-protect.

Whatever the outcome is after we enter the “new normal” as it is being called, as a brand you still have time to change your “sell-sell-sell” messaging to one that shows empathy, generosity and care as long as it's backed up by action.

And once consumers trust that you do genuinely care, maybe they wouldn't mind too much should you try to sell them, say, a R6500 candle.

**This article has been updated after publication.*

ABOUT ALLETA LIEBENBERG

Alleta Liebenberg is a freelance business writer with a BCompt degree and a background in accounting, risk and education. A constant learner, she gets excited about writing for people and companies who are making a difference in the South African reality. In her spare time she reads, raises boys and listens to too many podcasts.
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