

# Marketing in the Covid era - how to adjust and adapt

By [Gavin Knox-Grant](#) and [Yael Geffen](#)

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Good marketing relies on a thorough understanding of your target market, but when much of what you knew about your customers is suddenly no longer relevant, a major shift is needed.



Image source: Ptxabay.

With the onset of the coronavirus, almost every aspect of what was considered typical daily life was upended literally overnight, with people confined to their homes, anxious about the future and their financial security.

The most important question you should be asking is: "How best can I connect with my customers during a crisis?"

Marketing in these conditions should rather focus on community engagement, brand building and strengthening existing customer relationships with a view to cultivating brand loyalty and growth.

However, when adapting our marketing strategies, it's important to simultaneously plan long-term and not only focus on introducing temporary measures.

It's not only during the pandemic that business will be different, the way in which we all conduct business will be forever changed.

## Go digital

During the past decade, all sectors took a leap into the digital world to varying degrees but, with it being the primary option

for doing business during the lockdown period, it's critical that companies now fully integrate it into their business models.

And as both companies and customers are realising that digitisation actually allows them to be more productive and save on travel time, that online meetings can be very effective and many will adopt these measures as the new norm.

It's also become the key medium for marketing and customer communication. Businesses that fail to keep up now will be left behind later.

## **Diversity is key**

It's now more important than ever to have a complete digital strategy with a holistic online marketing plan.

All too often I see companies investing heavily in select buzz words like social media or search engine optimisation however, the components of online marketing should never be discussed as a strategy in isolation.

There is a large variety of factors such as remarketing, keyword marketing, social media marketing and organic search engine optimisation and how these all work together is where the real magic happens.

## **Assess, evaluate and adjust**

The best place to start is to evaluate your current overall marketing strategy, your key messages and regular channels to determine which, if any, are still relevant.

Take a close look at campaigns that are currently running or in the pipeline, including pre-scheduled content that is set to launch soon and determine which must be paused, discarded hold or prioritised.

An online marketing strategy is never complete; it can always be improved upon and the only way to do so is to have the hard evidence of statistics showing you how your campaigns are faring and how the market is responding.

If your budget stretches to it, having a marketing specialist onside who understands your business strategy is invaluable, especially when it comes to implementing various digital marketing tools that feedback to a single hub where you can monitor, assess change and refine on a daily basis.

## **Optimise e-commerce**

Currently, e-commerce is the only business model in South Africa where you are allowed to sell any product, bar alcohol and cigarettes. Globally, digital product sales have remained largely unaffected during the lockdown with some companies even reporting drastically increased sales.

To make more shoppers aware of your offering amidst all the competition, you need to optimise your e-commerce website so that it ranks highly in search engine results which will help you drive more organic traffic to your site.

And with online shopping fast becoming the retail norm, now is the perfect time to establish an online presence if you have not yet done so.

## **Discretionary Discounts**

Sadly, many people are going find themselves in financial difficulties as a result of the lockdown, and price-conscious shoppers will be looking for good deals, especially on products and services they really need at the moment.

If consumers perceive a brand to be willing to assist with access to products that can help them during a crisis, they are likely to feel greater loyalty towards it.

Discounts can also be helpful in attracting new customers, driving traffic to your site and increasing your sales.

## **Innovate and regroup**

This is also the perfect time to think out the box and figure out ways in which your business can temporarily – or even permanently – diversify using the resources you already have in stock.

Think of the liquor distilleries who are now making hand sanitiser, manufacturers with 3D printers are making much-needed PPE and face shields and organic wholefood businesses which are now doing home deliveries.

Businesses which aren't able to increase sales or grow their brand during the crisis or who cannot yet operate at the current lockdown level should take advantage of the downtime to evaluate their offering and prepare to come back stronger post-lockdown.

Even if they are unable to trade right now, they can still maintain brand recognition with a minimal amount of spend, especially on social media, to create leverage for when they shift into the post-Covid-19 environment.

## **Adapt your messaging**

It's important to remember that in everything your brand does, context is the key element.

And this is especially critical in a crisis situation that dramatically affects people's lives as we are seeing now during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It's crucial that brands address the issue with tact, mindful marketing and empathy and strive to balance business goals with sensitivity to the situation.

## **Avoid exploitation**

Many of your customer's needs will now be fear-driven or, at the very least, linked to anxiety. Companies should ensure that the new marketing strategy doesn't take advantage of the crisis by playing on their fears.

Exploiting a situation which is causing immense hardship for so many people just to make a quick buck is not only morally wrong, but also a very short-sighted business decision.

You may make a few extra Rands right now but in the long term, you are likely to alienate your loyal customers and drive off potential new clients.

## **Avoid the hard sell**

Rather focus on strengthening existing customer relationships and winning over new customers by being empathetic and genuine with messaging that reaffirms your commitment to being there for them for the long haul.

Craft messages that convey empathy, take into account your customers' new situations and concerns, and is honest, transparent and authentic.

Try to help your customers navigate this difficult situation with informative and practical guidance by sharing useful advice relating to your industry and products rather than merely pushing products. Making sure that you cater to their needs rather than your own.

Whilst it's very important to communicate regularly during this period, we should guard against constant bombardment as messages and products can easily just disappear into the cacophony of online noise.

## Adapt your imagery and language

Don't neglect to factor in that visual communication is a powerful message on its own, so it's important to think about the messages your brand is sending out; preferably avoid using images of crowds of people touching or gathered in close proximity.

Likewise, with marketing language that conveys close interaction such as "work hand in hand" or "work closely with your team."

Ultimately, what's most important is to be flexible and creative to navigate this period because there is a lot to be gained in the long term if you are able to remain focused on the future and can avoid getting too caught up in all the negativity and panic.

As Darwin said, it's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the one that is most adaptable to change.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gavin Knox-Grant is marketing guru and director of Karbon Media. Yael Geffen is CEO of Lew Geffen Sotheby's International Realty.

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