

US brand marketing in a crisis: Why now is not the time for silence



27 March 2020

Communications in a pandemic: Why now is not the time for silence

As marketers, we get wrapped up in what we, the experts, believe, rather than what the public thinks, feels and does. We love to offer opinions about how brands and businesses should act, what they should say and why they should say it, especially during a crisis.

The past few weeks have been tumultuous for everyone. And while it's easy to voice our views, we also need to listen to the people we claim to be talking to and speaking for.

So we did. Opinium surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,006 U.S. adults aged 18+ between March 20th and 25th. The survey was conducted online. Here's what we heard.

Don't let fear stop you from communicating with your audience

Many marketers have come out describing this time of crisis as a 'tightrope' for brands—Those who engage with the crisis risk being seen as disingenuous, and those that continue with commercial activity risk being perceived as tactless. By this logic, it might appear that you're damned if you do or damned if you don't.

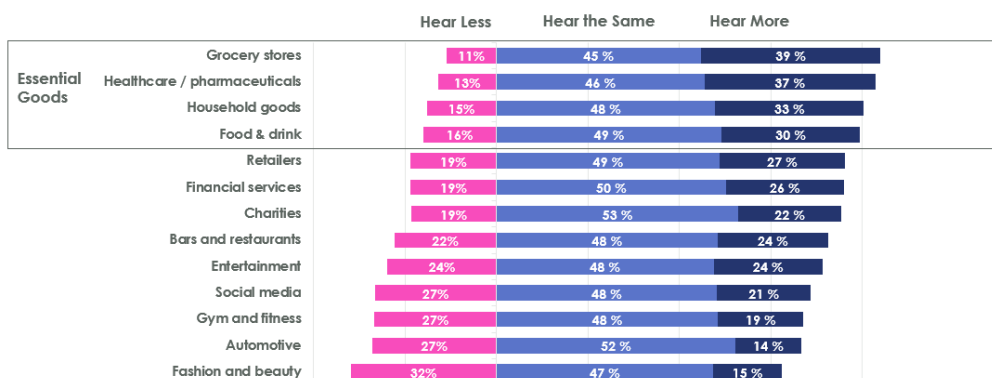
So, should companies be scrapping their campaigns and 'going dark'?

Not according to consumers, who are, after all, the targets of our efforts as communications experts and marketers. When you actually ask *consumers*, brands have a lot more space to play than the tightrope analogy implies.

Consumers *want and expect* to hear from you right now.

In fact, across every industry surveyed, the vast majority of consumers either want to hear the same amount or *more* from brands and companies at this time.

Consumers expect to hear from brands across sectors



"Would you like to hear more or less from these types of company at this current time?" Base: 2,006 US adults

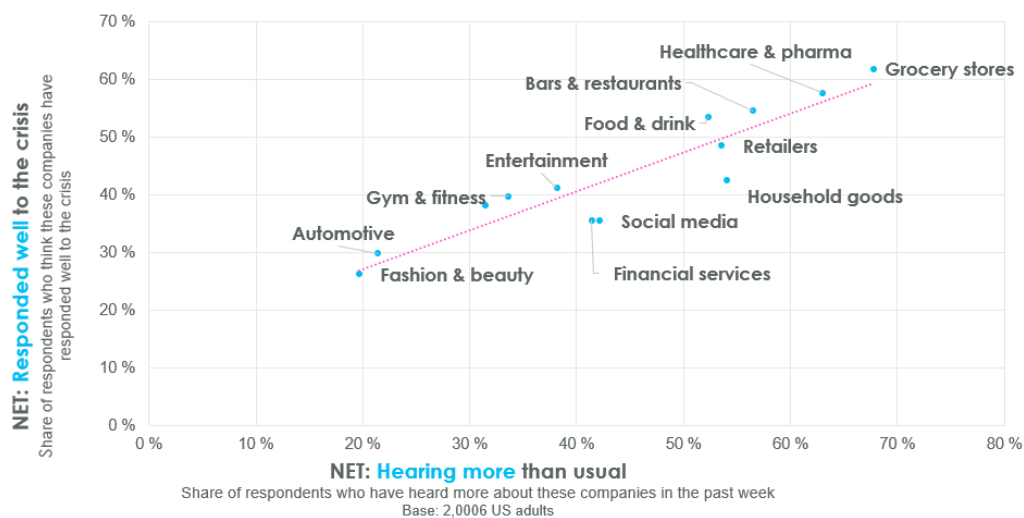


Unsurprisingly the types of companies that consumers want to hear more from are those that provide the essentials: grocery stores, healthcare and pharma, household goods, food and drink. But even brands that are less immediately relevant to the current crisis, such as fitness, automotive, fashion

and beauty brands aren't written off by the public, the majority of whom are perfectly happy to continue hearing the same or more from the brands that are willing to engage.

Despite the handwringing in some sectors, those that consumers have heard more about in the past week are perceived as handling the crisis better than those that have been less outspoken. Across the board, the US public has had a net positive perception of every sector's responses to Coronavirus, meaning it's time for brands to get back in the saddle.

More vocal brands perceived to have responded better



How to talk about Coronavirus

Authenticity is [still] king

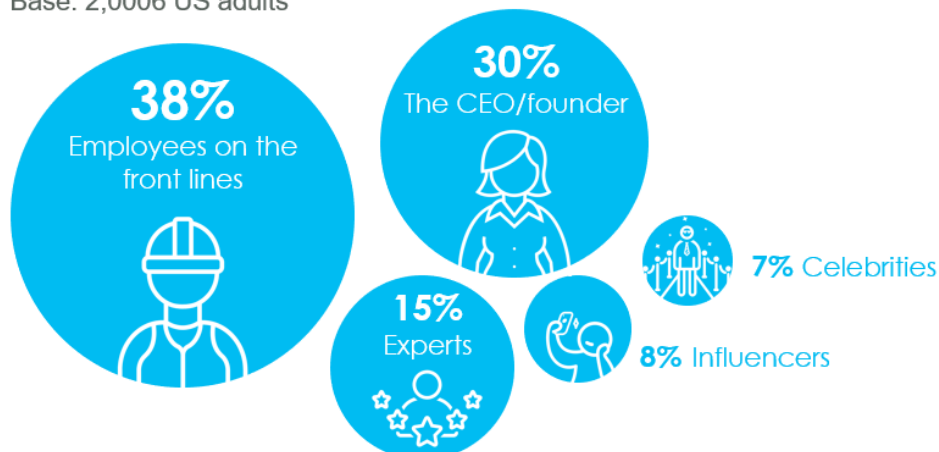
We may be entering an unprecedented time, but this old rule still applies. With over half (57%) of the US population believing that brands are 'jumping on the bandwagon' with their messaging around coronavirus, it's clear audiences aren't convinced by the sincerity of brand communications.

Doubting the authenticity of brand messaging is nothing new, but as more people are stuck at home than ever before, consumers seek content that conveys the day-to-day experiences of employees implementing their company's plan to deal with the coronavirus. Yes, consumers are still interested in hearing from the CEO, but as we become more physically distant, we crave content which brings us closer to real people *on the front lines*.

It goes without saying that consumers don't want to hear from influencers or celebrity spokespeople right now.

Consumers want to hear from the front lines

'Thinking about communications from brands, who would you like to hear from at this time?'
Base: 2,0006 US adults



Are we allowed to talk about anything else?

In short, yes, but what consumers want to hear from you and what tone is appropriate depends on your industry. Here are a few human truths and trends revealed by the data to guide your content strategy.

1. **With the level of drastic change that has been thrust upon us, people miss 'normal'.** Nearly two thirds of Americans say they miss talking about things other than Coronavirus and 40% say they would *prefer* for brands and organizations to talk about something else, while only 16% explicitly disagree. A staggering 72% want to keep normality in their life, as 58% feel that their way of life has been heavily disrupted.
2. **The rise of escapism.** Over a third of US respondents have begun actively *avoiding* the news in the last week, but the younger cohort is doing so most (41% of 18-34s). Nearly half (47%) are turning to entertainment to avoid what's going on in the world, again highest for 18-34s. And the vast majority (81%) say we could all use with a bit of good news – that's 97% for the over 65's.
3. **People haven't stopped caring about other things.** While 31% believe that tackling Coronavirus is the only thing that matters right now, a *larger* share disagree (41%) and over half (55%) think there are important things other than Corona that aren't being addressed. If relevant to your brand, consumers will welcome content on other important issues that are currently being side-lined.

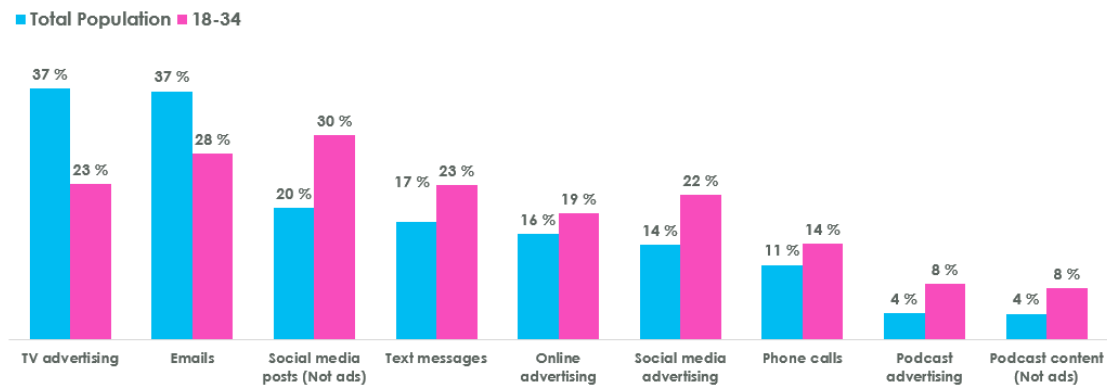
Health warning! Though consumers are open to content beyond Corona, the degree to which brands can play into this depends on their proximity to the crisis. Consumers expect to hear more practical, helpful content from companies that provide essential goods in this time of need. If you are a grocery brand, or healthcare/pharma brand, consumers are more interested in business updates, advice on how to deal with the crisis, new products and services that may be useful during this time, etc. Meanwhile, consumers are naturally more receptive to light-hearted content on how to entertain themselves and their families coming from companies that are less immediately implicated in the crisis, like entertainment or fitness brands.

Where to reach them?

Stuck at home and seeking to escape this unpleasant reality, over half of US respondents report watching more live TV than usual, indicating an opportunity for brands to reach a wider audience during cheaper day-time slots that usually full-time workers wouldn't see. In the US, 37% say they would like to see TV advertising from brands, making it the preferred channel for consumers to hear from brands during these times, alongside email. Yes, good old email. Despite [viral social posts teasing brands about the onslaught of emails](#), the data suggests [consumers are opening and interacting with emails during this time at higher rates than before](#).

The hierarchy of preferred channels differs most for 18-34s who report wanting to hear from brands through owned social posts (not ads) above all other channels, with email a close second.

TV and email are preferred channels



*What are your preferred channels for brands to advertise and communicate with you while you have to stay home? Base: 2,006 US adults



So, what are you waiting for?

If you'd like to know more about what people expect of your brand or how consumer's attitudes and behaviours are changing, get in touch: hello@opinium.com

About Opinium

OPINIUM is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people **think**, **feel** and **do**. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

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