

Hot Takes

The best and worst brand responses to COVID-19



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I'm sure that you're one of the many receiving emails from brands you haven't heard from in months or even years. While it may seem odd, Opinium's latest research in their [US brand marketing in a crisis: why now is not the time for silence](#) has shown us that this is the right move: consumers are expecting brands to address COVID-19.

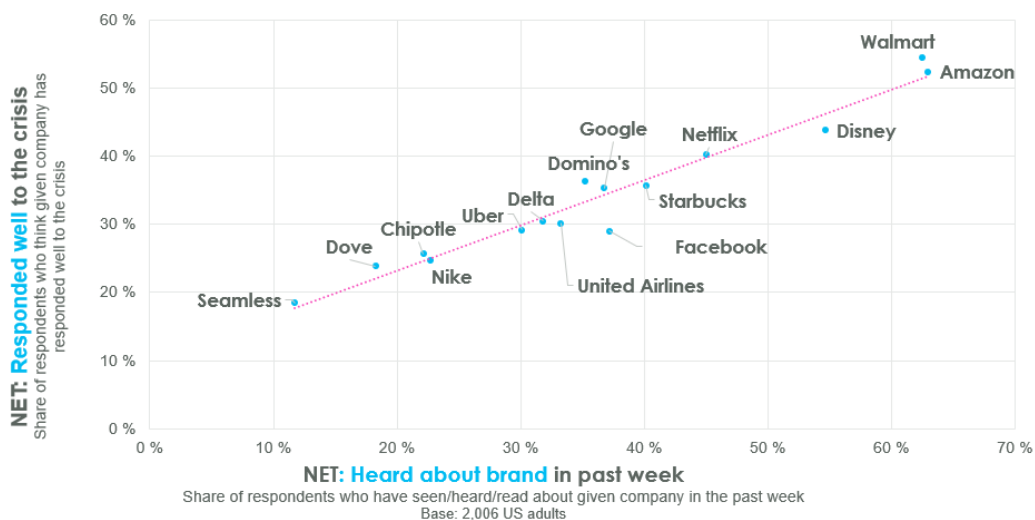
The data from Opinium says that silence isn't the best option, that email is the preferred communication medium, and that consumers want to hear from people on the front lines or from those in leadership. But it's not always easy to be on the right side of consumer opinion amid a crisis, and the communication teams of some brands have fared better than others.

So what happened? Which brand responses have resonated most? Which have fallen flat? That's what we're here to examine. As an advertising & branding guy, I was thrilled when Opinium asked me to lend my own take. After a deep-dive and a careful selection of the good, the medium, and the worst responses from brands, I've compiled what stood out and outlined it here for you.

Have you ever watched one of those red-carpet award ceremonies where the talking heads with the microphones comment on the best and worst dressed celebrities? That's me, right now – except we're talking about my favorite thing, instead: brands.

And let's be clear here: this piece is chock-full of opinions. The data aggregates sentiment, whereas the opinions here are my own (with some research behind them). But that's the best part of analyzing brands – brand sentiment is little more than the collective individual's opinion of a brand.

More vocal brands perceived to have responded better



The best

The outpouring of support from household brands has been phenomenal. Writing this article has been one of the brightest parts of my last few weeks – some of these brands are inspiring and are making me wonder what more we could all be doing, because they’re doing so much. That said, I think it’s important to make the following clear: the people who didn’t make “the best” list aren’t “bad.” We’re not trying to throw mud here.

When we get to “the worst,” remember: I personally don’t believe that anyone was directly trying to cause harm. It’s not easy to navigate business and communications in situations like these, and some do better than others. They’re (probably) not bad people or bad brands. But their response in the moment? Not very good at all. Let’s start with the positive and inspiring first. As Mr. Rogers’ mother once said, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” On that note, we’re diving in.



Amazon and Walmart are at the top of Opinium’s chart for good reason: they announced plans to hire a combined additional workforce of 250,000, are offering additional hiring bonuses, are [temporarily raising pay](#) for those working through the pandemic, and have launched a multitude of relief funds



Netflix, thinking about their industry being affected at-large, created a [\\$100,000,000 fund](#) to support the estimated tens of thousands of entertainment workers due to halted productions in studios – they also pledged two weeks of pay to people working on its own suspended projects, which include Stranger Things and The Witcher (some crowd favorites)



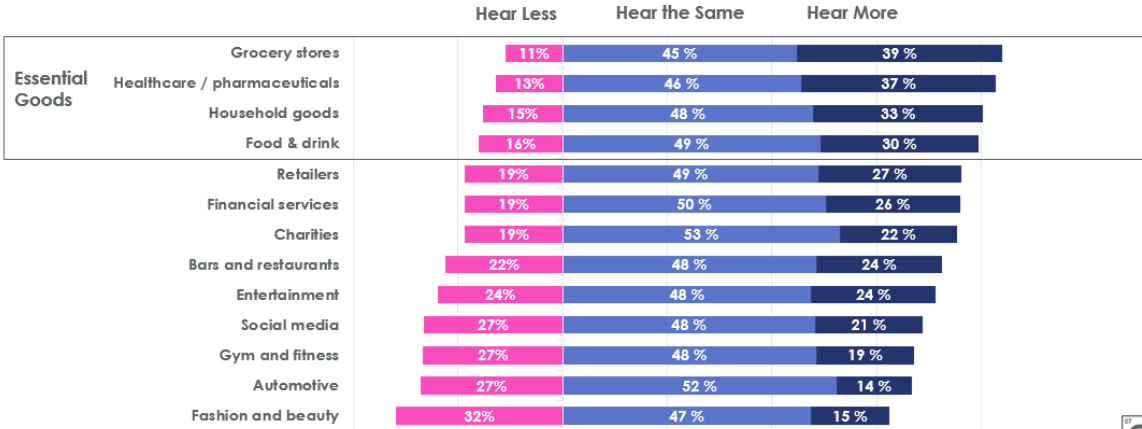
Google has not only joined the fight with the other tech giants in [fighting COVID-19 misinformation](#), they’ve also banned ads from individuals seeking to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic, are providing [paid sick leave](#) to hourly workers, and have launched an initiative to give small and medium-sizes businesses up to [\\$340 million in free ads](#) (Facebook has also [pledged \\$100,000,000](#) to help 30,000 small businesses)



Nike has been on the front-lines of what we’ll call “brand-based encouragement” for folks to go a little further and stay inside, rapidly launching the [#playinside campaign](#) which integrates a [myriad of celebrity-athletes](#); as of the writing of this article they’ve also donated multiple millions of dollars to COVID-19 causes, and are now teaming up with doctors and [nurses in Oregon](#) to manufacture protective gear for health care workers on the front-lines

Nike gets an additional shout-out for naturally integrating themselves into the fight against COVID-19 despite being in a category that is not central to the crisis. Apparel and fitness brands don’t top the list of those consumers want to hear most from right now and it’s not intuitive to imagine that a shoe company would ultimately be manufacturing PPE – but they found a way to become genuinely relevant by helping the world.

SECTORS ORDERED BY HOW MUCH CONSUMERS WANT TO HEAR FROM THEM RIGHT NOW



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



The medium

Business-as-usual is never easy when things aren't usual, but the below brands seem to be doing okay — so if you're okay with "okay," these guys are exactly there. They didn't get picked on in high school, but they were never the prom king or queen, either:



While **Disney** is nearly at the top of the sentiment list, this is likely not just because they've offered to [pay wages at Disney parks](#) until April 18th, but because of a branding side-effect: our screen-time has increased, we're getting up-close-and-personal with streaming networks, and everyone loves Baby Yoda and the loveable cast of Disney greats



Seamless's steps to provide support is positive (thank you, seriously), it's just kind of expected, pushing it to the bottom of our sentiment list: they [deferred fees](#) for independent restaurants and have started worker relief funds, but their measures are similar to what [competitors DoorDash](#) and [UberEats have both done](#), so it almost feels like a participation trophy. A third of those surveyed weren't even aware that Seamless had done anything to respond to the crisis.



Domino's is [hiring 10,000 people](#) due to the contactless food delivery demand, and we think that's a part of the factor – but similar to Disney, I personally think that part of the positive brand response is due to the fact that they're ready, available, and swamped with orders – [their response page](#) leaves something to be desired when you compare it to some other brands

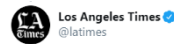
The worst

POPEYES Popeyes launched what’s being hailed as a tone-deaf campaign when they offered to give-away their Netflix password to the [first 1,000 people](#) who share a picture of themselves enjoying Popeyes – especially when highlighted side-by-side with KFC, who donated \$400,000 to go directly to pre-packaged meals for school children (KFC also [quickly and wisely pulled](#) their “finger-lickin’ good” ads)

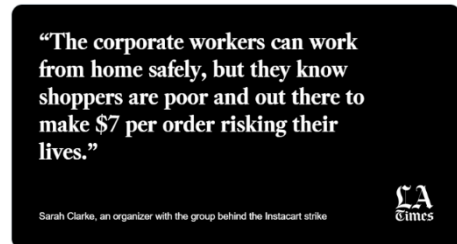
This isn’t to say that brands should be pulling their standard ads – According to Opinium, 72% of consumers are looking for ways to keep a bit of normality in their lives and are open to organizations that aren’t directly related or affected talking about “business as usual” so that they have a sense of stability; meaning, the further you are from the crisis the more you should maintain.

instacart Instacart’s shoppers (their team members who shop on the front lines) have shared immediate concerns about their own [safety during COVID-19](#) – and are asking for free safety gear and paid sick leave, which they are saying is currently not being provided (around the time of writing this piece, an official strike is underway)

yelp Yelp, trying to (maybe rightfully) insert itself into a conversation, took things a little too far when they partnered with GoFundMe to launch a series of fundraisers for tens of thousands of small businesses without their permission, [then forced them to opt-out](#) (rather than asking them to opt-in)



On Monday, workers with Instacart will hold a nationwide strike and walk off their jobs until the company provides free protective equipment, an additional \$5 per order in hazard pay, and an extension of the sick leave policy. latimes.com/business/techn...



4:04 PM · Mar 28, 2020 · Twitter Web Client

1.3K Retweets 2.8K Likes

Needless to say, for brands of every category, it isn’t easy to navigate a pandemic. Not to get on a soapbox, but I’m personally proud to be part of a global brand economy that looks like it’s doing its best. When you fail, it’s just an opportunity to do better next time. So here’s looking at you, Popeyes, Instacart, and Yelp: let’s see if you can pull yourselves up by the boot-straps and try to be a little more like Amazon, Netflix, Google, and Nike next time. I’ll put my mic down and I hope to see everyone next time on the red carpet.

About the Author



ASHTAN MOORE is Partner and Co-Founder of Model B, an award-winning digital agency. Leading the creation of Model B's growth engineering and influence marketing services, he helps companies and entrepreneurs increase sales, communicate with key audiences, and drive influence in the marketplace. With a background in engineering, Ashtan built Model B's digital marketing platforms to employ smart algorithms and helps companies use the power of big data online to achieve nearly any sales or communications objective.

A natural builder and problem-solver, Ashtan is a brand and digital strategy advisor who works with executive teams to build systems and influence platforms that shape perception, change public opinion, and drive marketplace shifts.

MODEL B is an award-winning digital agency that helps bring to life ideas, businesses, and causes. They're digital outreach experts with the full toolkit: in-house creative, web development, and technology-enhanced advertising. Their deep knowledge of marketing and its constant expansion into the tech world allows them to be at the forefront of trends, helping the companies they work with remain a fresh presence among their target demographics.

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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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