

# How Brands Are Shifting Ad Campaigns Amid The COVID-19 Outbreak

By Leigh Blickley 4/9/2020

Consumers are receptive to pandemic commercials, but they want to see compassion, not cash grabs.

Brands are ditching their usual ad campaigns to make room for coronavirus-centered content. But is it paying off?

A few weeks ago, KFC was still touting its “finger lickin’ good” chicken. Beer brands were hoping you’d pop open some ice-cold brews with friends. And Charmin was going on and on about its ultra soft product.

These days when you turn on the TV, the last thing you want to see is a toilet paper commercial.

As we make our way through the socially distant life of the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising agencies and their clients are facing an unprecedented level of uncertainty. The Interactive Advertising Bureau reported that 74% of media buyers, planners and brands say the coronavirus will have a bigger impact on advertising than the 2008 financial crisis. Overall spending on digital ads is down 33% while spending on traditional media is down 39% from what companies had expected to lay out.

But as Nielsen data shows, when people are forced to stay inside, they watch about 60% more content than usual – and brands are taking note. They’re ditching their usual ad campaigns to make room for coronavirus-centered content. Ikea is urging us to embrace our abodes, Hershey’s chocolate is asking us to spread love from a distance, and Hotels.com’s Captain Obvious is stating the obvious: Just stay home.

Commercial shoots, like all film productions, have shut down amid the outbreak. But that hasn’t stopped advertisers, marketers and creators from imagining new ways to attract the eyes of the millions of people at home watching television and scrolling through as many digital platforms as humanly possible every minute of each day. And according to experts in the field, brands could effectively enter the COVID-19 conversation, depending on their category, geography and philosophy.

“Marketing pretense and fabrication will be sniffed out in seconds,” Jason Bagley, an executive creative director at ad agency Wieden+Kennedy Portland, told HuffPost. “But if brands know who they are, then all they have to do is respond authentically and courageously to whatever is currently happening, and it will connect. That’s a brand’s best insurance.”

Take [Guinness](#), which was one of the first brands to address the coronavirus head-on. In the lead-up to St. Patrick's Day, the beer company released a poignant message about the cancellation of celebrations in light of safety guidelines. "Don't worry, we'll march again," the narrator says as footage of a parade appears on screen.

Ace Metrix research found that the spot earned positive responses for likability, relatability and information delivered, with 7 in 10 beer drinkers having increased purchase intent.

A similar response happened with Ford, which was the first carmaker to run ads offering financial relief programs to help customers affected by the outbreak. Now, the entire auto industry is rallying behind this approach. Used car retailer CarMax, for example, has ramped up its presence with pandemic-pegged ads that are frequently appearing during morning shows like "Today."

[Motor City](#) can pull at the heartstrings, too. On March 31, the Doner ad agency released "When the Motor Stops," a black-and-white spot featuring the eerie, empty streets and desolate landmarks of Detroit. "Here, we don't stop in the name of fear," the narrator says. "Here, we stop in the name of love."

"The idea for this film came from a young brand strategist ... who said, 'We can't make ventilators or masks — that's not in our skillset — but we can make content,'" Jimmy Kollin, Doner's executive vice president of business development and communications, told HuffPost.

From there, Zeke Anders, director of content production, built a camera rig for his car and shot the deserted streets of Detroit before editing the footage on his at-home system. Copywriter Olivia Hill recorded the voiceover in her closet before an audio engineer mixed it from home. "None of the content was pre-shot," Kollin said. "And everyone worked separately to bring a powerful film together."

Like Doner, some production teams are sending out one photographer to capture footage while other agencies are relying on pre-taped, animated or miscellaneous content to splice together a piece. Standups are being recorded via Zoom or other video platforms, and audio taping is being done remotely. Most of the ads we're seeing were created quickly using resources the respective creators already had on hand.

"We are finding that makers want to make, and the best artists want to help find innovative ways to contribute right now, which can happen outside of big shoots with high-end production values," said Eric Baldwin, another executive creative director at Wieden+Kennedy Portland. "With health and safety guidance in mind, we've found ways to crowd-source filmmakers, livestream-capture performances, remote-operate small shoots, and brief artists to create in their home studios, and we are utilizing our emerging tech capabilities in ways that will change the landscape for our clients."

“The worst thing that agencies and brands can do right now is start from the perceived production limitation and reverse engineer all their ideas from there,” Bagley added. “When you look back over the past decade at some of the best ideas we’ve seen, many of them pioneered totally original forms of production and execution.”

Although there are a lot of creative juices flowing, many of the ads today feel like public service announcements, with their static shots or b-roll scenes, voiceovers and animated text. W+K’s text-only spot for McDonald’s highlights the line, “We can still be here to take your order.” And David The Agency’s Budweiser commercial – with images of health care professionals, teachers and other essential workers – declares that the brand is shifting its sports investments to take care of those on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19.

“People are looking for truth, authenticity and human connection from brands more than ever,” Bagley said.

The Ad Council has been looking to its own history when creating coronavirus content, which of course includes PSAs and urgent messaging around the national crisis. So far, the nonprofit has worked on the #AloneTogether campaign, NBC’s “The More You Know” spots and Sesame Workshop’s family-focused segments, as well as with organizations like Feeding America and AARP. Alongside a host of partners that have donated time, talent and resources, the Ad Council – which started during World War II and continued its work in the aftermath of tragedies like 9/11 and Superstorm Sandy – is aiming to quickly distribute critical, life-saving information.

“Our mission has always been to harness the power of communications for social good, and in times like now – when unease, fear and confusion are reaching across the globe – our work is more important than ever,” the council’s president and CEO, Lisa Sherman, told HuffPost. “We are proud to do our part to bring the industry together to provide guidance, education, support and comfort.”

Advertising during a crisis. When people are forced to stay inside, they watch about 60% more content than usual—and brands are taking note. This article discusses the delicate art of advertising without appearing to capitalize on a crisis.

After reading the article and watching the video's linked in the article, answer the following questions:

1. Consumers are receptive to brands' COVID-19 advertising strategies, but actions speak louder than words. In what ways can businesses do their part to give back during this time?
2. Consider the morality of advertising during an international pandemic—in what ways do ethical responsibilities and priorities change during a crisis?
3. How can a company aim to fulfill both its financial goals and its social responsibilities amid a pandemic?
4. Discuss the rise of mission- and cause-based marketing. What components make an effective advertisement?
5. Search for other examples of compelling COVID-19 advertisements. Find 2 and explain the ad. Link them and explain the main point and who is the target market?