

The lockdown revolution

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While planning around COVID-19, a sports fanatic friend and colleague reminded me what Mike Tyson once said, “everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face.” That sounds about right. This pandemic has sent us all to the mat, scrambling to shake off the hit and get back on our feet. In the blink of an eye the world changed. And those that are fleet of foot will get a jump start on the race to recovery.

The Future of Strategy 2020

This article is part of WARC's The Future of Strategy report, which is based on a global survey of senior strategists and in 2020 focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on strategy.

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We've experienced transformative events like this before...but over 300 plus years not several months. The Age of Enlightenment (1685-1815) radically reoriented European thinking and behaviour over 130-years. The First and Second Industrial Revolutions (1760-1840) in Britain and America transformed the very structure of industry and economic means within a brief 80 years. The Third Industrial Revolution – The Digital Revolution (1969–present day) – has come to recast commerce, culture, community and communication for humanity within an almost instant 51 years by birthing the internet and its digital, mobile, e-commerce and social media progeny. Now COVID-19. As we've all seen, infecting and affecting anything and everything since the first detected infections, at an unprecedented speed and scale. Bam...right cross.

Like previous disruptive or transformative socioeconomic events, the arrival of the virus has not only created an abundance of marketing challenges yes...but also an array of opportunities to productively adapt, act and evolve. Will the COVID-19 crisis fundamentally change the way agencies work? Beyond working remotely Zooming, Teams'ing and Skype'ing in pajamas, it already has ... can and will in an even more impactful way.

1. **Deeper & Wider:** Market structure has changed. Supply has changed. Demand has changed. And brands have cut \$50bn from global ad spends in response to sickened demand across ailing sectors.¹ The pressing need to account for greater and greater uncertainty had made one thing blindingly clear: the value and need for senior, experienced and diversely skilled planning and account talent. The challenges and emergent questions facing brands are complex and well beyond fundamental communications strategy i.e., ecosystem development, annual brand planning, campaign planning and briefs. With the demand for deeper, wider, faster and greater strategic counsel, the pandemic presents a real opportunity – perhaps necessity – for agencies to:
 1. Rethink staffing ratios to reinvest where increasing demand and value exists: strategy, data, digital, creative technology, CX, UX Design and Creative.
 2. Re-define what agency, account and planning leadership needs to be vs. is now, to ensure it can tangibly lead, plan and enable business transformation through creativity in all its forms.
 3. Radically redesign team structure by creating smaller and faster ‘Task Teams’ of diverse strategic expertise, enabled to circumvent or reinvent any obstacles that impede efficiency and effectiveness across people, process, resources and approach to focus on mid and long-term brand planning beyond the day to day.
 4. Re-look at implementing deeper project management expertise across businesses to free up valuable account talent from operational management to business strategy development that proactively drives growth and margin for both client and agency.
2. **Pressing for Definition:** Yes, the need for speed in moving to market with communications is a real need, and we’ve seen agencies and clients doing just that during COVID. But the continuing sense of urgency and lack of time can quickly become a standing excuse for a complete lack of clarity on what the marketing investment needs to achieve. With vastly varying data on pre-COVID sector GDP recovery timelines, the urgency for action cannot be allowed to marginalize effectiveness. Pitter patter let’s get at ‘er. A concerted refocus on defining and aligning against commercial, marketing and communications objectives is an absolute necessity. If not now, when? What seems like an obvious step prior to spending a dollar is all too often sacrificed, yet effectiveness and efficiency have never been more critical than in an environment of COVID constrained commerce. To get a set of desired results means I need to know your desires! Guessing, fuzziness and generalization is not a strategy for success. The pandemic presents a clear and present danger or opportunity to stop, define what success needs to look like...and then apply creativity to achieve commercial results.

3. **The Long View.** Economic, sector and regulatory uncertainty. Client supply chain disruption. Shifting consumer behaviour. Altered consumption demand. Predictions of a 'second wave.' In combination, all have spawned a significant need for focus beyond quarterly or annual planning. Prior to COVID-19, planning occurred within the context of relatively stable market structures, historically consistent or predictive demand curves and evolving consumer behaviours. No more. Now, both clients and agencies are needing to plan for a variety of plausible futures in which current decisions could play out given a set of constantly changing market and behavioural uncertainties:

1. **Product:** does the Brand have the right product and pricing offering if full employment and HHI incomes don't return to pre COVID-19 levels until 2023 or later? What do people need that product and pricing to be? Do we need to create a net new product or service? Provide a stripped-down version of the current product?
2. **Infrastructure:** what does a widespread move towards cashless commerce mean for the Brands digital, data and e-commerce capabilities? Do we have sufficient data capabilities to define who's digitally shopping the brand beyond first party data?
3. **People:** if a viable vaccine isn't found until 2021...or ever, how does that impact the Brands Customer Experience? The Brands Customer Journey's? The Purchase Funnel?

For planners, business leads and brands, scenario planning seems like a no brainer to ensuring the continuation of brand salience while increasing the odds of effectively securing future earnings. Assuming that tomorrow will be exactly the same as today, seems like no plan at all.

Will COVID-19 fundamentally change the way agencies work? It already has in many ways and still can in many ways. And frankly, it should. Despite the many challenges posed by COVID-19, history would suggest "to the adaptive and innovative...belong the spoils" ...with full apologies for the amendment to Senator William L. Marcy. Or put another way for my sports obsessed friend and colleague "the key is not the will to win...everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that's important" - Bobby Knight. The question at hand is who's willing to prepare, because that takes hard work my friends.

Source: WARC Data, Global Ads Tracking, May 2020.

