

# WHAT'S HOT

April 2020



# CUTTING THROUGH THE CORONA CLICHÉS



With a new aesthetic fast emerging amid restrictions in production capabilities, advertisers are finding new ways to avoid the dreaded ‘Corona clichés’. In this article we’ll take a look at the opportunities for brands to remain distinctive and get noticed.

As usual, Marketing Week columnist Mark Ritson was quick to the punch here, describing the ‘flood of generic messages’ that hit our screens in April that threw out the usual rules of branding in favour of empty streets, tinkling pianos and webcam shots ending with a fuzzy ‘together with you’ conclusion. This aesthetic echoes the wider shift towards the ‘left-brain’ in advertising and culture in recent years, that favours fast, bite-sized abstractions over in-depth stories set in a specific time and place.

However, the reality is that when [Virgin Media](#) aired an early version using most of these tropes on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, it absolutely nailed the format, while also appealing to ‘right-brain’ tropes such as empathy, humour and spontaneity. It was fresh, inspired and featured the perfect piece of music, ‘Keep Your Head Up’ by Ben Howard. Not only that, it was also bang in line with the brand’s values of keeping their customers connected.

It is a measure of how quickly the market zoomed in (no pun intended) on the UCG format that it now feels established and harder to make your own. It’s not that there aren’t still some excellent executions out there, which have fun with the homemade look as this ad for [Voxi](#) shows. But it’s becoming harder to stand out with every subsequent Zoom mosaic ending.

There are three ways that brands can cut through this new aesthetic. One is to focus on core product truths, particularly when the product in question helps people navigate uncertain times. [System1’s research](#) shows that ads with a strong connection to place and community and ads showing human connection, self-awareness and ‘betweenness’ are connecting better right now. This is something that recent ads for [TSB](#) and [Pinterest](#) share – showing how products help bring people together and offer solutions with human empathy.

The second is to build upon the brand codes they are already known for. This may mean remixing and revamping existing assets in a knowing way. System1’s research found that ads using established brand characters (so called ‘fluent devices’) and ads sets in the past are doing better than usual at the moment. Budweiser have brought back their classic ‘[Whassup?](#)’ ad from 1999, which combines nostalgia with a famous set of characters and a memorable device, revamped for quarantine times. The [Patak’s](#) paste pot ads also use familiar brand cues to great effect, shifting from past to present and featuring the recurring fluent device of the founder as a boy.

The third approach is to use media in different ways to aid the chances of getting noticed. Most advertising still works via association rather than persuasion, and opportunities to associate are abundant right now. With media owners eager to work with advertisers on new formats there are plenty of ways to achieve additional standout, from achieving extra SOV in underused channels ([Emily Crisps](#) brilliantly ran an OOH campaign pondering if they should have made a TV ad), to integrating brands into advertiser-funded programmes, breaking new ground in gaming and audio formats, and finding untapped contexts within the ‘new normal’, such as social distancing in retail queues.

Advertising is undergoing something of a metamorphosis right now, as we shift from left-brain to right-brain sensibilities. It is under times of constraint that we are forced to get creative with what’s possible. By leaning into product utility, building on existing brand values, and focusing media on standout channels and formats, advertisers can cut through the coronavirus clutter and increase their chances of getting noticed.



# THE RISE IN CONNECTED VIEWING



Increased hours spent indoors has resulted in a rise in media consumption with 80% of the UK saying they're consuming more content than ever before<sup>1</sup>. But it's how we're watching this content where there are some interesting shifts being seen.

Connected TV viewing in the home has risen exponentially in the last month, with 41% of millennials and over 1 in 5 boomers spending more time on online TV<sup>1</sup>. Throughout 2019, we had already seen signs that online TV viewing was catching up with linear (1h 20m v's close to 2 hours per day<sup>1</sup>). During lockdown however, we're seeing both at an equal level of viewing<sup>1</sup>.

The UK is now the largest market globally for watching YouTube via a connected TV, with 30% of all YouTube viewing now done on this device<sup>2</sup>. Whether it's DIY tutorials or fitness classes (13% of the UK are now working out to a livestream class via connected device<sup>1</sup>), we can't seem to get enough of non-linear content on our big screens. In fact, 10% of all UK TV viewing at 9am is now Joe Wicks teaching us how to touch our toes<sup>3</sup>.

51% of us are now watching more streaming services than ever before, and in a bid to cope with demand, platforms like Netflix and Disney+ are temporarily reducing their [video-streaming quality](#) across Europe<sup>1</sup>. The launch of Disney+ last month further highlighted our love for on demand content on our TVs, with UK consumers proving happy to add another platform to their viewing portfolio, with 15% likely to consider purchasing Disney+ as they are Netflix at 14%<sup>1</sup>.

For advertisers, this means more opportunities to buy connected TV viewers at scale, and with more sophisticated targeting capabilities.

This week, RTL AdConnect, the advertising sales house for European broadcast company RTL Group, rushed out its automated programmatic buying platform to buy ad campaigns across Europe on connected TV – taking full advantage of the European lockdown. Called VMP Connect, it is compatible with major demand-side

platforms, including The Trade Desk (its preferred DSP partner), without requiring additional set up.

Earlier this month we saw Samsung launch their ad-supported video service, Samsung TV Plus, with the ability to buy programmatically across the platform. Samsung claim it is one of the top OTT services, with "millions" of monthly active users and "billions" of viewing minutes per month. "With our scale, technology and proprietary data, we're uniquely placed to offer this free, OTT video service ..." said Alex Hole, vice president at Samsung Ads Europe.

However, as a relatively new ad channel, lessons are being learnt from across the pond.

Cybersecurity company White Ops recently uncovered what it reports to be the largest-ever connected TV fraud operation in history. Named Icebucket, the operation has counterfeited more than 300 publishers to date and spoofed at least two million internet protocol addresses from more than 30 countries (99% of which claims to be US-based) impacting millions of dollars in adspend. As the case develops, it has highlighted a clear issue – that as an ad channel in its infancy, there is a serious lack of transparency and regulation in its supply chain which is yet to be resolved.

Assuming the current challenges can be fixed, connected TV viewing and ad revenue is undeniably set to grow. According to Digital TV Research, the UK is predicted to be the world's third largest OTT market with a revenue of \$6.8bn by 2023. So even if lockdown has accelerated connected TV viewing, it's a habit that's likely to stick. We will see more advertising opportunities arise as audiences continue to increase, although personally I can't wait to work up a sweat outside, instead of in.



# COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS



As we move into the sixth week of lockdown, one thing is clear: we've never read, listened to, or watched more thought pieces than now. This article sets out our view on the most useful advice to help brands navigate through the crisis. With the aim of emerging fit for the future.

While the context in which we're living has never looked so different, many of the lessons learnt reinforce the best practices of marketing we knew long before COVID-19. The challenge now is how to deliver best practice in a world where reacting and adapting has become our way of life.

Overall, we think there are three areas for marketing to focus on.

## Firstly, maintain sight of the longer term (where possible):

While the long term may feel like a distance future, it is never more critical than in a crisis.

Learning from the past shows that strong brands recover quicker following recession. Maintaining, or indeed increasing, share of voice during tough times pays off disproportionately in the longer term (in 2008, brands that invested in ESOV saw 5x as many very large business effects and 4.5x annual market share growth<sup>1</sup>). Conversely, the cost of going dark does far more damage in the long term than good in the short (0% of brands with <0% ESOV saw very large long term profit effects<sup>1</sup>).

For brands with challenge in supply, demand or both, focusing on comms that builds brand (vs sales) in the short term becomes even more important, either in paid media or via content and owned comms.

Thinking about how comms can adapt according to "now, next and future" is therefore key to ensuring any short-term approaches do not come at the expense of the long-term health of your brand.

## Secondly, put yourself in the shoes of the consumer:

Lockdown has caused unprecedented behaviour change in the short term, and with that, consumer need states are changing. In many cases, we are seeing previously emerging trends accelerated – eSports, working from home, eCommerce and the rise of direct to consumer brands to name a few. This means existing customers are behaving differently, and new customers are experiencing products for the very first time (sometimes under distress).

Finding a way to pivot and adapt can ensure that brands remain relevant and front of mind in the immediate future, while anticipating what the green shoots of normality might look like to stay one step ahead.

Being in tune to opportunities as well as challenges is key, especially within media. TV viewing is up 21% YOY in April<sup>2</sup>, OOH weekly impacts are down 89%<sup>3</sup> and web traffic related to gaming is up 75%<sup>4</sup> – so shifting channel mix and testing new formats is key to find the opportunity among the disruption.

Monitoring shifting customer bases to understand new occasions and audiences is also critical to plan for recovery and assess which behaviours and customers are here to stay.

## Thirdly, find your role to get noticed:

With consumers expecting more from brands, finding a clear role that genuinely adds value is critical.

We have seen four roles for brands emerge during lockdown – **being useful** by providing practical help to customers or communities; **connecting** people or communities who can't be together; **entertaining** those in need of light relief; and **educating** those looking for new skills or home-schooling help.

Whichever role chimes closest with brand values, as more brands gravitate to similar techniques and aesthetics in comms, finding a distinctive way to communicate is important to get noticed.

As we continue in unprecedented times, we should focus on the things we can control. Keeping the long term firmly in view, putting ourselves in the shoes of consumers, and finding a clear and distinctive brand role are all key to navigating the changing landscape and building a plan for now, next and future.



### Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Advertising in a recession – Long, Short or Dark? Peter Field - 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020. <sup>2</sup>BARB – w/c 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020. <sup>3</sup>Kinetic Journeys – 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020. <sup>4</sup>Verizon – March 2020

# THE NEW NOSTALGIA



Nostalgia has a new kid on the block, with the 'good old days' now being more recent than ever. So much so that we've coined another new phrase – 'neo-nostalgia' - to sit alongside the 'faustalgia' we identified in 2019 (defined as those who think fondly or feel nostalgic about decades they have not actually experienced) as part of our study [Nostalgia: Is it What is Used to be?](#)

'Neo-nostalgia' is defined as a fondness for the recent past. Exacerbated by the current climate and enforced lockdown, 1 in 3 Brits agree they are feeling most nostalgic for a time within the past 12 months, 1 in 10 admitted their nostalgia was for a time earlier this year. Those most likely to be feeling 'neo-nostalgic' are the 18-34's, with their top reasons cited as 'missing my friends', feeling 'life is on pause' or feeling 'frustrated and bored'.

Nostalgia for any era has a key role to play in helping people cope with lockdown. Research with the7stars Lightbox Pulse in the past two weeks identified that looking back makes people feel happy (44%), comforted (41%), grateful (32%) and relaxed (31%). So it's not surprising that nostalgia provides a welcome relief from the here and now, with a further 30% agreeing nostalgic activities are helping them to avoid COVID-19 related communications.

There's been plenty of evidence that points to nostalgic behaviours taking place across the country, from a surge in online searches for baking and retro recipes, to traditional board games and jigsaws selling out. Another interesting area of nostalgic referencing is also evident in music and TV media consumption habits, with 4 in 10 realising their nostalgic indulges in this way. Topping the nostalgic music charts so far has been music from the 1990's and 2000's. Whatever your preference music is a facilitator of transporting to another time, whether that's Iron Maiden or The Spice Girls. One respondent put it aptly – *"I'm listening to Backstreet Boys, Five, Spice Girls, NSync - that reminds me of the best time of my life"*.

Interestingly, the majority of British adults would like to go back to a previous time rather than go forwards to the

future with 49% saying if time travel were possible, they would prefer to go backwards rather than forwards (30%). It was only the 18-34's who were more likely to want to go forward in time (40%), reflecting the fact that they feel lockdown has interrupted the forward direction of their personal lives and future careers.

We've identified three ways brands can capitalise on the trend of 'neo-nostalgia':

## Capitalise on brand equity

Building on what brands and products are already known and appreciated for through the reassuring confirmation of tropes and familiar assets is a potent way to connect to audiences in uncertain times.

## Help people face the future with confidence

It's clear that people aren't feeling confident about the future. Brands should think about how they can add the most value to consumers – whether educating those looking for new skills or entertaining people in need of light relief.

## Fuse an analogue aesthetic with digital distribution

There's plenty of opportunities to tap into stories of a resurgent past, and digital still has a huge role to play in how this content is distributed at scale. Listen to the conversations taking place and take inspiration for how your brand can join in or put a spotlight on (re)emerging communities of interest.



# IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS



In today's world where our physical social interactions have been restricted, we are searching out ways to demonstrate our 'love' for our nearest and dearest. As such, the act of giving a gift has never meant so much.

This is because gifting isn't just about the gift itself but the wider human interaction surrounding the gift. It allows us to show our appreciation and gratitude for the relationships we have. This is why the UK spends so much on gifting for others (£3.3 billion a year<sup>1</sup>). This huge market has evolved to not only being driven by the tradition of gifting at key milestones such as Christmas, birthdays or anniversaries, But gifting to celebrate the small moments or the 'just because' moments. These moments have created more opportunities for people to demonstrate the importance of the relationships they have, especially those relationships where we can't always be there in person.

This is particularly pertinent right now when much of our physical social interactions have been removed, so we are seeking out methods to compensate from the lack of physical contact. It is therefore predicted that the upcoming events of Father Day's along with the 22m UK birthdays due before July<sup>2</sup> will see consumers increasing the amount they spend this year. But also looking to add a thoughtful touch to the gift, whether that is playing into the trend of experiences over stuff such as 'sunny day gifts' (when a gift is purchased with the intention of using it at a later date) or personalisation of a physical gift.

Another area of gifting is self-gifting, a trend which has grown over the last few years. The idea that you don't need to wait for someone else to buy you a present but rather, "treat yo'self". Whether that is a one-off purchase or a subscription box (26% of Britons say they buy a subscription box as a pick-me-up<sup>3</sup> and this market is expected to grow 72% by 2022 to £1 billion<sup>4</sup>) the UK are buying into the culture of self-care.

The culture of self-care is now more important than ever. Whilst UK disposable income is under pressure and almost two in five (37%) believe they will be spending less overall<sup>5</sup>, there is an appetite for small indulgences.

A phenomenon known as the 'lipstick effect,' a way to boost mood during these uncertain times. Whether it is a new lipstick or 'quarantire' (searches for 'grey joggers' up 35% since Jan 2020<sup>6</sup>) or hammocks (up 1,292% YoY<sup>7</sup>) or purchasing digital content and subscriptions (spend increased by 17.4%<sup>8</sup>) consumers are seeking out cheap thrills.

As the coming months unfold, consumers will continue to seek out gifts for their loved ones to acknowledge the moments they are missing. Personalisation will be key for these gifts to help consumers showcase how much these relationships mean to them. Whilst self-gifting will be about using spare disposable income to provide themselves with pockets of indulgence through the small treats or upgrades on purchases they would usually make.



# POSITIVE NEWS THIS MONTH



With theatres up and down the UK having closed their doors due to Covid-19, a large majority have now made the very best shows available to watch for free. The National Theatre has opened up their vast vault of filmed performances, streaming a show every Thursday night for the months of April and May. The live production of Phoebe Waller-Bridges sell-out West end run of Fleabag is also now available online with all proceeds going to Covid-19 charities. In a statement, Waller-Bridge said: "I hope this filmed performance of Fleabag can help raise money while providing a little theatrical entertainment in these isolated times....Thank you in advance to those who donate. Now go get into bed with Fleabag! It's for charity!"

Social distancing measures have resulted in people shopping less frequently, meaning that the weekly shop is making a return to people's lives. Within this weekly shop, alcohol sales have gone through the roof, with the Office for National Statistics reporting that alcohol sales are up by one third since the lockdown began. Even the #quarantini is now trending. To soak up some of that booze, people in the UK have also been turning to baking. Google searches for bread recipes and baking tips are on the rise with sales in icing sugar, and cake mixes soaring by more than 40 per cent YoY (according to Kantar).



With the film industry struggling due to the global pandemic, there are positive steps being taken: the BFI and The Film and TV Charity have partnered to create a new industry-backed Covid-19 Film and TV Emergency Relief Fund to help support the creative community. Netflix is a key player in this, donating £1m to the cause. It also appears that with a lot of people stuck at home, TV viewing has seen huge increases. ITV1 adult viewership is up 21% year-on-year. The Big Night In, which aired on Thursday night on BBC1, drew an audience of 6.7m and raised a whopping total of £67m for charity.

