WHAT'S HOT

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NUDGESTOCK: PUTTING NUDGE THEORY INTO PRACTISE

Last week we tuned into Nudgestock, the annual behavioural economics festival, which reminded us of just how important behavioural science could be as we come out the other side of the pandemic.

In its simplest form, behavioural economics suggests that we make decisions according to the context in which we find ourselves, and by changing that context through subtle nudges we can change behaviour.

COVID-19 has completely disrupted the contexts in which our lives play out. But unlike the drastic, sudden changes of the crisis, Rory Sutherland argues that businesses will need to focus on behavioural economics, and the subtle nudges it teaches more than ever as we emerge out of lockdown.

Here are three of the ways we can put this into practice:

Context is king, and now more so than ever.

An often overlooked ticket to good media planning, context is king as we emerge from lockdown. Ensuring your brand is visible in the moments when context changes post-lockdown is one way to bounce back more quickly. Reviewing the basics, whether that's changing context like time of day or the new context of category behaviours like the weekly shop, is a good place to start.

Create positive feedback loops.

For businesses that haven't been able to viably adapt to lockdown (think cinemas or live music) there's urgency to return to pre-lockdown habits, but snapping back feels optimistic. Dan Ariely, a key player in behavioural economics, talked about the importance of closing the gap between fear and reality through positive feedback loops.

For things like commuting this will happen quicker, but for activities like going to a concert or to the cinema the gap will remain wider so long as we are not exposed to a positive experience. By creating "intermediary institutions" that get people used to the halfway house – e.g. smaller gigs or exclusive cinema experiences - brands can nudge back to pre-lockdown behaviours.

Get back to the "real why".

We should all be questioning 'the real why' people buy our products and services, and whether that's changed in the context of COVID-19.

During lockdown we've seen brands quick to find a new "real why" – services like Oddbox have seen an uptick in some customers subscribing as much for reliable delivery as for the contents themselves. As Rory Sutherland suggests, "the real why" is one of the last competitive advantages that brands have and something we should all be reviewing as post-lockdown contexts change.

Nudgestock has nudged us back into thinking about behavioural economics. Context has never been so important, and as we start to regain control of the contexts in which our brands and communications are encountered, we could all learn a thing or two from Rory and co.

THE RISE OF GAMING IN LOCKDOWN

Gaming – ‘*the action or practice of playing video games’* – has long held a difficult position in British society. To some it is celebrated as a means of improving dexterity, encouraging and developing the imagination, and helping to improve communication skills through connected play. To its detractors, gaming is an iconoclastic presence that isolates individuals, engenders sedentary lifestyles, and promotes an unrealistic and unhealthy perspective on human behaviour.

As an individual who sees gaming as a source of good, it lifts my spirits to know that the three months of lockdown have delivered nothing but positive vibes for the gaming industry. In fact, during a time where self-isolation has kept us all physically apart, gaming has kept us all connected. Whether it has been playing online with friends, consuming a non-stop diet of live streams on Twitch, or sourcing the latest Triple A titles through digital download transactions, the whole category has seen its figures soar in recent months.

The numbers are fairly staggering: Sony recently reported that ‘PlayStation Now’ – a subscription service that gives the user access to a library of over 700 games – doubled its audience when compared to last year (1m to 2.2m).

Mobile gaming has also benefited from this sudden increase in active players with the number of installs to smart devices increasing by 84 percent during the Coronavirus crisis.

While it is clear that the daily number of active gamers has increased as people turned to new activities to kill time during lockdown, there are other behavioural and psychological reasons behind these figures.

According to Dr Dayna Galloway, the Head of Gaming and Arts at Abertay University, online gameplay is a vehicle for “communication and collaboration”, and can readily “replace some of the activities that are no longer feasible due to social distancing”.

It is this ability to reach out and socialise with friends and family – albeit virtually – which drove Nintendo’s ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ to the top of the gaming charts and led to its coronation as the official ‘game of lockdown’. Many players have credited Animal Crossing with “providing a lifeline during lockdown”, courtesy of its fantasy world where building accommodation, catching butterflies, and the price of turnips has offered respite from the daily Covid press briefing and the tragic updates it delivered.

With lockdown now easing and our freedom of movement becoming more expansive the challenge for gaming is how to maintain the impressive increases in numbers across the last few months.

‘Traditional gamers’ have plenty to look forward to with the next-gen PS5 and Xbox Series X being released later this year. However, for gaming to continue to grow it needs to retain the casual gamers acquired during lockdown. To achieve this, publishers should double down on the features that proved successful over the last few months. Namely, a focus on online play, community, wholesomeness, and an ’everyone can play’ ethos should be the starting point for moving a pandemic behaviour into the mainstream.

ENSURING LGBT+ ENGAGEMENT

The majority of the focus of diversity and representation in advertising tends to be focused on creative execution. This makes sense as from a consumer perspective, this is the biggest signal of what the brand stands for. Brands don't exist in a bubble, they exist in culture, so advertising communications can play a major role in bringing diverse voices to the table.

However, there is a second element which consumers don't see, and which tends to be overlooked in the conversation. These are the decisions taken at the level of media planning, including the contexts and places the ads will be seen in, as well as who they are targeted towards.

Brands seeking to include LGBT+ audiences need to consider the full picture, including the paid for media approach by appearing in high quality, relevant spaces and ensuring brand safety measures aren't excluding diverse voices.

Appear in high-quality, relevant spaces.

Brands that target high-quality LGBT+ media environments will guarantee your reach of an audience actively interested in LGBT+ issues, while positively signalling your own commitment and interest in the community.

While it is advantageous to reach the LGBT+ community through print, radio, out-of-home, or even TV programming – you can also find diversity within diversity, with many titles dedicated to specific audiences across the spectrum. It is also possible to amplify your representative creative to a broad audience, through wider mass-reach media.

If you are using a 'site list' approach to brand safety, ensure you include a range of LGBT+ media platforms within it, and deliberately look and plan for online and offline media opportunities tailored to this audience. Working closely with these partners can be a great way of securing guaranteed reach and media value while working together on shaping content.

Avoid excluding LGBT+ audiences through brand safety measures.

While it's essential to use brand safety settings to limit the funding of hate – if used bluntly, these tools can accidentally end up excluding minority audiences.

This not only limits your reach to these valuable consumer groups but it also directly cuts off the funding of reporting and content relating to LGBT+ issues and makes it less likely these publications will continue to exist.

A study by Vice found that generic words like 'lesbian' and 'Muslim' were appearing more frequently on brand's key-word blocklists than 'murder' and 'rape'.

Adtech platform Cheq found that 73% of positive or neutral LGBT+ content was being misclassified and potentially blocked. Some of the real experts in this field are the diverse publishers themselves who deal with this issue, and safe ways to get around it. Consider working with one not just on their own inventory but as a means to improve your overall approach. Avoid generic keyword blocking in your brand safety approach, and ensure that minority titles are being broadly blocked.

THE HIGH STREET UNLOCKED

The COVID-19 crisis has hit the retail sector hard. And it will continue to as we find our way through the weeks and months to come. Whilst it would be naïve to suggest that everything will be rosy, there are reasons to be cheerful – not least an opportunity to re-evaluate what ‘bricks and mortar’ stores are for.

Lockdown has shown that people have really missed popping to the shops. Brits value the experience in a way that online shopping can’t replace. It’s more than just the products that people take home – it’s also the act of shopping in itself that people enjoy. The High Street is a destination, a community hub, a social occasion, and a form of entertainment in its own right.

The essential retail experience during lockdown tells us that people will make fewer shopping trips and spend more per trip than pre-crisis. With this in mind, the winners in the months to come will be retailers who have the strongest brands, clear promotions, a community presence, and those who understand the importance of the shop as a destination.

So, what to do? Firstly, in addition to always-important national campaigns – brand and activation, don’t lurch *too* hard into short-term trading. Retailers should also look to take a store-by-store local marketing approach too, across traditional and digital channels.

Secondly, as stores have reopened, provision for social distancing has forced retailers to reconsider the shop floor. This is likely to be the ‘new normal’ for some time, so while things are a little skew-whiff, it also makes sense to consider how to deliver an experience beyond convenience. In a recent survey by Raydiant, 85% of retailers say that creating in-store experiences will be critical to their success in reopening. This is where national chains can learn from independents and mirror their skill at curating places where people want to spend a bit of time.

Whether it’s independent bike shops with their espresso machines, or vintage clothing stores where the act of browsing is part of the fun, understanding that people often want more than just a product in their hand is going to be key.

POSITIVE NEWS THIS MONTH

All non-essential shops in England are now allowed to open – as of the 15th June, having been closed for the three-month lockdown. Shops have implemented social distancing measures such as limited store numbers, protective screens and keeping fitting rooms closed. This marks a welcome return to the high-street. According to Springboard data, footfall across all retail destinations increased by 41.7% in England on the 15th itself in comparison to the previous week.

There is also good news for the film industry, socially distanced cinemas are being allowed to open from July 4th. Cinema chains are following slightly differing rollouts of opening their screens across the UK however this marks a step in the right direction. Several blockbuster films have been on the backburner across a range of genres - with the new James Bond film No Time to Die set to be released, alongside Disney's Mulan and the sequel to A Quiet Place.

Football fans are finally back in luck as 'the beautiful game' has now returned. Channels are seeing strong uptake in viewing with BT recording their highest daily viewing since lockdown on 20th June and Sky games now tracking 44% higher than pre-Covid matches. The highest consolidated audience so far is for Spurs vs Man United on the 17th June at over 2.5 million adults with incoming games expected to dwarf this.