

6 Tips for How Marketers Can Play a Vital, Appreciated Role in Fighting COVID-19

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Putting an altruistic foot forward has become table stakes in the business world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just ask any brand that's doing it—whether that means doling out millions of dollars to the American Red Cross, donating unused media time to food banks, staging star-studded musical fundraisers or producing hand sanitizer instead of booze.

While these are noble and in some cases life-saving efforts, will they make a lasting impact with consumers?

Hillary Haley, a social psychologist at Los Angeles-based agency RPA, sees the current wave of give-back programs as just the first phase of corporate response to the coronavirus.

The second phase, which some brands have already entered, carries far more weight, says Haley, svp and executive director of the agency's behavioral science practice. This step involves brands mobilizing consumers and giving them a sense of purpose during the global crisis by helping them be problem-solvers.

And marketers like Joann, Nextdoor, Uber Eats, Postmates, Lowe's and Rothy's are already ahead of the curve.

For instance, social network Nextdoor is enabling neighbors to connect to help the ill and elderly in their communities, crafters are sewing protective face masks with free kits from fabrics store Joann, and consumers are deciding, crowdsource-style, what kind of goods Rothy's factories should be producing. Foodies can also keep the lights on at independent

restaurants by ordering from local venues, with waived delivery fees via Postmates and Uber Eats.

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–Hillary Haley, social psychologist, RPA

At a time like this, Haley says, this sort of action is exactly what people need. They don’t just want to be helped, they want to provide help themselves, and they’ll reward brands that act as facilitators.

“We all know about the concept of fight or flight when we’re under stress,” Haley says. “But there’s another response—tend and befriend—and it has evolutionary roots. We have an innate desire to reach out and be part of the solution. When we do that, it alleviates our stress.”

There’s plenty of clinical research to back up that theory (Haley has already combed through it so you don’t have to) and it includes a 2007 study that identifies a positive emotion called “helper’s high.” In short, research shows that you feel good when you do something good for another person.

That’s where brands come in, with Haley saying they can see the most benefit long-term “if they can play the connector role” between worthy causes and home-bound, frustrated and anxious consumers.

There are ways to do it correctly and sensitively, while avoiding some obvious pitfalls, she says.

Here are her six tips for brands:

1. Keep it simple

Make any outreach program streamlined, accessible and foolproof. People are under “a huge cognitive load right now and can’t do a lot of complex thinking,” she says. “There should be a 100% guarantee that you’ll succeed if you participate. You want people to feel empowered—useful, needed

and ultimately more connected with others.”

2. Make it quick (but not too quick)

Devise a task that can be completed in 20 minutes or less, so there’s a manageable investment of time. Though a number of brands have launched simple app-based funds, Haley says consumers need more skin in the game. “Clicking on a link or donating \$5 does not satisfy the desire to help, does not feel gratifying and does not help your brand,” she says. “Aim for 20-minute chunks.”

3. Give it value

People want to know that they’re fulfilling a true need, so be sure to demonstrate why the program is important, what the effort will accomplish and who will benefit. “When people aren’t sure if their help is really needed, they may second-guess a brand’s judgment.”

4. Make it shareable

Think about social connection across all possible angles, and provide tools to help people share with their networks and connect with their fellow helpers. New York-based creative agency Fancy put out a series of images and GIFs for the peer-to-peer platform Mask Match that enables people to send unused personal protective gear directly to hospitals and caretakers.

New York agency Fancy created a series of GIFs and other social assets to promote Mask Match.

The Mask Match messages get straight to the point: “Job not essential? Your masks are,” “The scariest mask is the one your doctor isn’t wearing,” and, “Got masks? Give masks!”

5. Skip the logos, show the results

This is a good deed, not a Nascar race. Marketers should cede the spotlight to the givers and receivers and avoid plastering their brands all over the program. “You don’t want it to look sales-y or self-promotional,” Haley says. And whenever possible, share the fruits of the charitable labor, whether that’s first responders getting vital equipment or neighbors helping neighbors.

6. Make it authentic

Consumers want brands to step into leadership roles (75% believe brands have a responsibility to chip in during the crisis, per Ace Metrix), but they’re still skeptical. Stick to

core values and design a program that fits the brand. For instance, Lowe's, with DIY in its DNA, is encouraging consumers to make signs of gratitude for delivery, health-care, supermarket and retail workers. A just-launched TV spot features a montage of the hand-crafted banners, which aim to give shelter-at-home folks something constructive to do with their time.

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