

Striking the right note: Why brands are sounding the same during the Corona-crisis

Close your eyes and listen – if you've had commercial TV on in the background or the radio during your daily lockdown routine, you may have found yourself listening to the brand soundtrack to the Coronavirus crisis.

It's amazing how similar the music and tonality is within a huge array of commercials – a point picked up in this by "Microsoft Sam".

Over the past two months, brands such as Uber and Samsung have adapted their advertising efforts to the current COVID-19 situation. The most common elements of Coronavirus soundtrack include soft piano music, voice-overs that invoke "these uncertain times," and dulcet tones conveying the brands' promises.

While consumers feel isolated and anxious, creating a virtual sense of community can bring a feeling of emotional comfort. People are staying at home, therefore making the adverts relatable and showing inside activities and familiar language can help ease the tension.

There are specific types of music that establish seriousness and show that a brand is taking a stand. Research shows that the use of emotional Piano-String-Ensembles evokes feelings like grief, empathy, and caring. Ergo, everybody taps into the same genre of music.

Does this matter? Well, as brands want to strike the right tone, they risk low engagement if they fail to stand out. There is however a bigger strategic issue that brands should consider.

Now think about Christmas, major sporting events and other seasons or annual events. The audio soundtrack to these also reflect a typical pattern. This is understandable – brands

want to reflect the mood of audiences. In the case of the current crisis, advertisers are looking for the mood and tone of adverts to match that of the worrying situation.

One of the brands that stands out sonically is , the recent winner of our . Even though the tonality of its visuals and messaging might be similar to some other brands, its use of music differs.

By leveraging a Sonic DNA based approach, Mastercard has created music that is culturally appropriate in style, but at the same time still features its iconic set of melodies. Mastercard has embraced a holistic sonic identity and managed to implement it across a variety of touch points, making it a

central element of their multi-sensory marketing strategy.

The Sonic DNA approach offers the best balance between creative flexibility and recognition, compared to a mere one-melody or an audio logo. The adverts communicate Mastercard's message in the spirit of the current Covid-19 situation but leverage sonic elements that help the brand to differentiate itself.

As we move away from screens and linear television viewing and interactive voice technologies become a bigger part of our everyday lives, designing audio brand strategies that can be woven, just like visual ones into every consumer touch point, whether service interaction or marketing execution makes

increasing sense.

Large numbers of households in many developed markets now use smart speakers and interact regularly with voice assistants. Research, transactions, entertainment and work are habitually being done through sound alone. Several recent studies showed smart speaker usage surge in the US and the UK.

This means brands must think of themselves as audio as well as visual entities. In the past, brands have tended to invest in short-term music licences for specific campaigns meaning they have no long-term audio heritage that resonates with consumers. Forward-thinking brands such as Disney, McDonald's or Intel have created sonic logos, but even this is a partial solution when you need an audio profile to work across everything from TV commercials to digital point of sale. Mastercard has created a sonic identity that is flexible enough to be easily expanded to new consumer touchpoints in a relevant way.

As brands tune in to the potential of sonic branding, we can expect a more varied and interesting commercial soundtrack to our lives.

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