

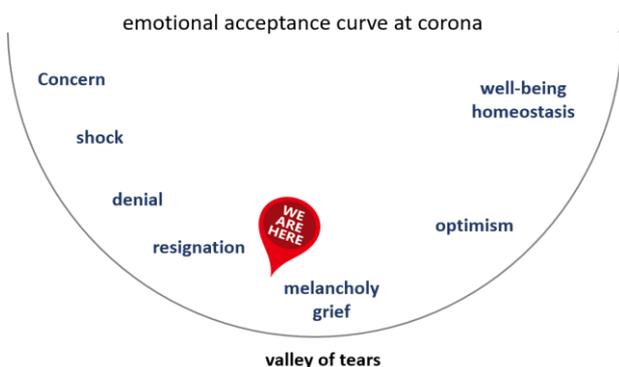


Coronavirus: consultants present themselves as pornographers of change. “You have to respond immediately, because your customers are changing forever.” A claim which is as plausible as it is wrong.

My inbox is overflowing with agencies with revenue difficulties and robber-baron consultants who are trying to convince their customers to do the most abstruse things. Now, at the beginning of a crisis. Nobody can predict what the world will look like in six or nine months’ time. One thing appears to have become the new and universal truth for these colleagues, however: people are changing, rapidly and forever. And once again, the media is already playing along. Distributing any amount of scientific nonsense to anxious managers.

At the moment, voices of reason and of experience are not gaining any coverage. This is something we are trying to do at BrainCandy, however. After all, it is about the brain and human behaviour. This BrainCandy comes in two parts: in the first part, I demonstrate why a permanent change in the behaviour of the masses is unlikely to take place. In the second part, in one week's time, I will look at instructive examples of brands.

Part 1: We are currently going through a crisis. A helpful psychological model is available that illustrates the emotional phases of crisis management:



in Germany, we are currently experiencing a period of resignation and mourning. The emotional low point is hopefully in sight. And there are many people who are not personally affected by the crisis, who do not have any existential fears, and whose employers have good prospects for the future. The public sector, for example. Those who work in the food and groceries industry, and many, but by no means all, of those in the healthcare sector. The world could hardly be any bleaker for those who work in the area of tourism or event managers, however.

It should be clear to everyone that people experiencing feelings of resignation are unable to imagine a positive future. They can't imagine things will be better in a few months’ time. Especially when many will be objectively worse off than they were before the crisis. This is known as homeostasis. We are blessed with the ability to adapt to circumstances on a neuronal basis. In this respect, just as we get used to an unexpected gain and aren't able to remain on a permanent high, we also get used to setbacks, and return to a normal emotional state. This process takes place without us being aware of it.

Overeager consultants currently predict that people are now going to behave differently on a permanent basis, that after the crisis, they will attribute more value to ethical management, and only buy from brands that behave on a sustainable, socially aware, CO2 neutral basis, etc., and that pay their shop assistants and nurses better wages. Placing society before consumption. If the situation weren't so sad, the behavioural scientists would be falling about with laughter.



Animal welfare was very important to most people before the crisis. However, over 90% of meat purchased has low animal welfare standards, i.e. non-animal welfare standards.

It is far more probable that in the medium term, however, those with a big enough wallet will automatically return to their learned behaviour. We saw this in the most recent crises (9/11; Lehman). Banks were forecast to lose their customers' respect, and their bank accounts. *Buzzer sound. Or the BSE crisis with beef in Great Britain in the nineties. The British were forecast to stop eating beef. Vegetarianism would be the new normal.

The facts: sales of British beef fell by more than 20%, before increasing steadily again and reaching their previous level after a few years, and more beef than ever before is now eaten in Britain. It is possibly the case that those who predicted a permanent change are no longer with us.

The media agency Wavemaker has just lived up to its name by announcing that around a third of all consumers have stated that they are currently considering which brands they will admonish when the crisis is over¹. What unbelievable rubbish!

Anyone who surveys people about attitudes and future behaviour in the current period of grief, or even does marketing in the period of depression, is overlooking the fact that people are now focusing all their attention on defending themselves. Defending their personal health and their social status. At present, anxiety is far outweighing thoughts of future opportunities.

The acclimatisation phase is already underway, however, and the emotional curve will soon rise again. It's a certainty.

Intrinsic forces of change often referred to as being 'facts' lead us off course. It is better to take a 'naive' perspective, and one can then see things much more clearly. In their (purchasing) behaviour, people orient themselves much more strongly to their environment and their current situation than to attitudes. Look at things differently; look at the individual context of your customers. Has something changed? With all of them, or an important part of them? What do they fear for their future? How are they currently behaving in your category? These are questions everyone can answer right, but they can't provide an answer on how they will behave tomorrow.

People don't want to think about brands right now. They didn't before, and they certainly don't now! Good consultants understand that brands only play a very minor role in our lives. Brands relieve us in our daily life. Thanks to brands, we don't have to make a genuine purchasing *decision*. Nothing more, and there are rarely any exceptions. Please do not misunderstand me. Brands play a relevant role in the purchasing situation. But thinking about the brand in detail is only of importance to the fewest of people. That would counteract the time saving that they provide. And even if people have more free time on an involuntary basis, they still won't actively engage with brands. And that includes Adidas.



They are more worried about themselves. Those who follow social media learn quickly that most people don't tend to change their behaviour much, and aren't using their leisure time to learn a new language or how to cook, for instance.

Now that people have time, they could surf the internet looking for nice fashion bargains. Yet neither Zalando nor Amazon has reported that this is taking place. In the context of isolation, to most people, new clothes seem pointless.

The feelings of uncertainty appear to be fought more effectively with Netflix, Playstation, tabloid newspapers, the over-consumption of social media, and with sweets, pizza and alcohol. And not, however, by reading empathically formulated announcements from companies about how emotionally connected they feel with their customers and their excellent employees.

Amazon is selling significantly more products against domestic boredom. A context that is easy to understand – and for which an in-depth psychological consideration isn't necessary. And that includes significantly more sex toys and puzzles. It isn't rocket science, is it?

What will make a lot of sense over the time to come is looking at the further development of the contexts of your target group, and recognising when the behaviour in your category begins to change. If you have currently benefited from the current developments, such as Zwieback: what can be learned to ensure the short term continuation of the behaviour? If less is being purchased in your category, will things gradually go back to normal?

Are there any new product ideas that could accelerate the revival? The key words here are efficiency motivation. (We prefer things that make our lives easier/cheaper/better) How can you make it easier for your customers to buy your products in changing contexts?

And as a recession is certain – we just don't know how severe, it makes a lot of sense to understand how the lower disposable income will affect your category. At the moment, many people don't want to think about complex or high-priced assortments, will this remain the case for your category?

Will there ever be a change in behaviour? But of course not. In certain areas. Especially where efficiency advantages have been learned. Video conferences, for example. In one's job and circle of friends. Or with online yoga. People will be only too happy to save the trip to the studio every now and then.

Will nurses and shop assistants really be better paid? Perhaps. I don't see much of a chance for shop assistants. This is an area in which new checkout solutions will be implemented and Amazon and Jd.com will market their shelf automation solutions to retailers.

Will we start flying again? At the moment, it is hard to imagine that happening. Do not rejoice too soon, Greta. While many people will try to relax things on a regional basis in 2021, the lure of sunny dream destinations will quickly become stronger, and our attention will increase again, as soon as our wallets allow it.



Therefore, don't allow yourself to be unsettled; don't throw away your good strategy too quickly. But watch closely how the contexts of your buyers change. Now is the time for tactical measures to secure sales, and there will be more about this in the next BrainCandy.

1. <https://www.horizont.net/marketing/nachrichten/wavemaker-umfrage-welche-marken-verbraucher-nach-der-krise-abstrafen-wollen-182125>

Recommended reading

By Ralph Ohnemus:

Markenerleben. Die Strategie im Hyperwettbewerb und Informationstsunami [> order here](#)

Markenstaunen. Gewinnen im Informationstsunami [> Order here](#)



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