



Will there be a 'NEW Normal' or a 'new NORMAL'? The data from 100 years of behavioural research has a clear stance on this. Recommendation: pay attention to efficiency, less to attitudes.

The agile marketing guru Lindstrom: "There's no doubt: as soon as we are released (from lockdown) everything will be different. We will not travel, eat, shop or exercise as before... maybe forever."¹

He's not alone. The concept of a 'new normal' is being shouted at us on all channels so it must be true. And it goes without saying that a lot of NEW and a bit of normal is being predicted. A well-known Nuremberg consultancy has interviewed consumers. 85% said that companies would have to position themselves sustainably after corona or they would no longer be bought. The consultancy sees this as proof that all companies will have to change their strategy now in order to be successful in the future². 85% incidentally also say that animal welfare is very important to them. But almost all of them buy at the lowest NOT animal welfare friendly level! So much for the difference between socially reasonable answers and selfish behaviour.

One of the largest global online panels is commendably publishing almost weekly surveys on consumer behaviour during corona times. For example, what consumers want from advertising. That would actually be interesting.

What is frightening though is that companies are then recommended to stick to what consumers want!

Since when have consumers known how advertising works? "Consumers greatly appreciate virtually any form of corporate social responsibility. Brands that fail to contribute or to convey that they are contributing may be punished by the consumers after the pandemic". If that were likely, there would be no more BP, VW or Facebook today. The fact-loving marketing professor Ritson therefore speaks of "new normal bullshit".³



Anyone who believes that corona would make us less ME focused and more WE focused is being disproved by the actual behaviour. A short excursion into psychology for this: our merry-go-round of thoughts, or nicely said our monkey mind, is constantly occupied with the future. Corona is now painfully affecting our basic needs such as livelihood, health, orientation and control and triggering a constant state of alarm. Our brain is constantly making predictions about what might happen in the future. Everything becomes frighteningly NEW and not very normal. This is typical, understandable and human. And that also makes us managers emotionally open for all the



consultants who want to send us into this NEW future now.

Consultants are claiming a major change in our attitudes and motives towards a social, sustainable WE focus. But proven psychological models know better: you can often see anger in people who are beginning to break free from the shock of the lockdown, especially in men. Anger arises when people feel that they are unfairly hindered in their self-control. In generating an income, securing a livelihood, doing sports, childcare, social contact, dating. This anger is not only felt by conspiracy theorists like 'star chef' Attila Hildmann but also by normally grounded citizens, as the fierce arguments on Twitter show. Cautious people who value the protection of the restrictions and the disgruntled are clashing unchecked.

Have you noticed that these two groups have one thing in common? Both are focusing on themselves and not on the community, even if community-serving arguments are sometimes used like weapons in battle. When frustration explodes on a huge rubber dinghy demonstration⁴ on the Landwehr Canal, it's not just covidiot as the cautious presume but quite normal social classes.



What will the future look like now? As you know, forecasts are difficult, especially when they concern the future. Nevertheless, I am going to dare to look ahead, just like in the last two BrainCandies.

In this respect, I am primarily starting from two empirically proven phenomena: after every major crisis over the last 100 years, people's behaviour returned to normal after a brief interruption.

And secondly, that people will continue to think of themselves, their family and partners in decision-making situations. Evolution is not a plaything of short breaks in history. So people aren't going to change at all? Yes, they will. But not for reasons of a sustainable (sorry) change in motivation.

Brief comment: If you gear your company towards sustainability out of intrinsic conviction, then this is ethically and morally very welcome. But if you believe what the consultants are saying, that this is now the necessary path to a successful economic future because people will not only just pay this lip service but will actually buy sustainable offers above all else, then I would probably not want any of your shares.

What can help us to predict future behaviour? Behaviour always arises from concrete contexts and takes efficiency benefits for the decision-maker into account. I can only briefly go into contexts here. Contexts already explain much of the currently changed behaviour. Working from home, reduced working hours, travel restrictions, unemployment are contexts with a direct influence on buying behaviour. Keywords Zoom, mail



order, empty airports, empty practices, worries about the future.

It is important for all brands to understand how the brand's usage contexts will change and how one could actively respond to this. If roughly one third of employees are currently afraid for their jobs, how does this change purchasing in your category? If you are positioned in a premium segment, do you also need an entry price offer or should you leave this segment to others? Organic food (sustainability) is doing worse. No wonder.

The power of contexts is often obvious. The efficiency benefit is less so, because everyone automatically thinks of business management or technical systems rather than decision behaviour when it comes to efficiency. The psychology professor Tory Higgins has demonstrated how successfully we humans move through an increasingly complex environment with the motivation to be effective in a book that I consider to be groundbreaking, "Beyond Pleasure and Pain"⁵. This motivation influences our behaviour much more often than the other motives. Higgins does not consider marketing, I added this perspective in my book "Markenstaunen"⁶. When brands simply help us to lead our lives efficiently, we prefer them without thinking.

The efficiency benefit can be of different dimensions. Saving time, convenience. But also price. As a lower price enables us to get more mileage out of our wallet. Pure efficiency. Or to get certain things done more easily. An unpleasant example: conspiracy theories make it much easier for some

people to understand life than the more complex truth. The brain hates to work hard.

And in fact very much so, even if we don't realise this. Our brain even alters memories to make our behaviour serve our self worth and therefore seem more efficient. A very recent study proves that people remember their donation as more than it actually was later on. Altruists do not exhibit this effect⁷.

If you apply the efficiency concept, you will certainly be able to make better predictions about behaviour and also develop more effective products and services than if you are primarily guided by a new social WE-focus. Informing yourself about sustainability for all purchases is not efficient, even if the topic is really important for the individual. And paying more for sustainability is generally not efficient either. A niche. Unfortunately.

Let's look at some specific cases. The mail order business is booming. Amazon's stock price is outrageous. Due to the lockdown, people were forced to buy online who had not discovered this for themselves before. They are now experiencing how efficient this is compared to shopping at local stores. This behaviour will continue, even after 2021. Which is terrible for brick and mortar retail, which now urgently needs to think about how to offset the online efficiency advantage with other benefits. The high return rate for textiles could be a starting point. And an overall inner-city concept that efficiently satisfies several needs during each visit, for example, moments of well-being, entertainment, a community experience, awe and wonder, transporting shopping home, the spectacularly staged feel of textiles.



But if H&M now closes the dressing rooms due to lack of space and gives you the goods to take home with you to try on, it will certainly be a fatal move. Local retail's great efficiency advantage is then lost.

Will we prefer to Zoom in future rather than travel to personal meetings? If you don't really understand efficiency here, you will probably tap Zoom. However, studies now show that videoconferencing puts a much greater strain on our brain than we realise. We need to pay much more attention to understand our counterpart emotionally and we also have to pay more attention to how we present ourselves. Both of these lead to faster cognitive fatigue. We see this in online group discussions. The participants need much more input from the moderation and breaks in between. A tip: Make sure that your face is well lit, this makes decoding easier. USB LED ring lights are great.

Trust and mutual respect are important 'lubricants' of good sustainable relationships, especially in the business world. Zoom? Yes, but not to kill off business trips and meetings. Zoom consultations with your family doctor? Sure.

Highly efficient for both sides. Just not enough for every case.

Another example. Electromobility. The proportion of electric cars should actually be much higher with all the attention, shouldn't it? Not if you put your efficiency glasses on. For the automotive mainstream, the prices are not efficient, the range is not efficient and recharging will be far from efficient (ubiquitous) for a long time yet. And the necessary preoccupation with this new category is cognitively exhausting – the brain switches off.

And finally: Have you taken a good look at the food trade's current brochures? Have they all slept through the sustainability trend?

Or have they learned that it won't get people to open their wallets? But if consumers are not showing that sustainability, organic, animal welfare, fair trade, etc. are important and valuable to them now, why should this come later, when the corona effect subsides?

My conclusion at the moment: we will have a new NORMAL.

On average, the recession will strengthen rather than weaken the ME focus. Fridays for Future and the Greens will find it much harder to be heard, although this is very unfortunate. What is needed now is a forward-looking policy for the common good.

Brands will continue to be able to play their key role in relieving the strain of everyday life – if they do it smartly. Brands are efficient for our memory if they don't want to force us to actively deal with constantly changing information.



It is still important to communicate the unique brand images again and again to keep the neural image of the brand fresh in the memory, so it can be remembered more easily in the decision-making situation.

And the most important tip: Take a close look at your brands and your projects to see if and how the brand could make your target group's life more effective or more efficient.

1. <https://wwd.com/business-news/business-features/the-outside-view-coronavirus-weakness-to-strength-1203634084/>
2. <https://www.horizont.net/marketing/nachrichten/brand-trust-studie-warum-marken-die-welt-besser-machen-muessen-183314>
3. <https://www.marketingweek.com/ritson-oreo-tweet-future-marketing>
4. <https://www.morgenpost.de/berlin/polizeibericht/article229233444/Berlin-Schlauchboot-Party-sorgt-fuer-Entsetzen.html?>
5. Higgins, Tony: Beyond Pleasure and Pain, how motivation works, 2012 Oxford
6. Ohnemus, Ralph: Markenstaunen, Gewinnen im Informationstsunami, 2017, p. 71-92
7. <https://pca.st/episode/a392ebbd-d840-4ce4-a701-221a26c3dc26> Naked Neuroscience Podcast

Please send any feedback, suggestions or criticism on this article to:
braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com

Author

Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Director and majority shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001. Previously a K&A BrandResearch client for 15 years. Nationwide and international marketing and sales experience in senior management roles, including in FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications, most recently as Consumer Sales SVP in charge of marketing, sales and chains at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com

