

How to Advertise Now

A Playbook for Marketers During COVID-19

April 9, 2020



BRAINSIGHTS

How to advertise now – A Playbook for Marketers during COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on consumers' receptiveness to advertising, and what marketers can do about it.

Summary

- Ads in COVID-19 news content have the potential to drive greater Attention, Emotional Connection and Encoding to Memory if these ads can strike a specific tone.
- COVID-19 social conditions are likely to induce an emotional numbing in consumers, which will impact brand advertising effectiveness and media and advertising choices
- Marketing to mindsets can help advertisers strike the appropriate tone with their ads, combat any suppressed consumer response resulting from COVID-19 and drive advertising ROI

Brainsights has assembled a three-part series of insights that can help advertisers understand how best to navigate the minefield of advertising in the age of COVID-19.

We understand that for some brands, advertising is not wise nor possible right now. But if, as a brand owner, you intend to advertise during this time (and if you can, you should) read on.

The COVID-19 crisis presents advertisers with the following conundrum:

- Lower funnel advertising isn't the best place to put dollars given a collection of factors ranging from operational constraints that reduce supply to the perceived tastelessness of hard selling in a health crisis with severe economic consequences.
- Upper funnel advertising – brand building, which many equate to emotional storytelling – would be significantly less effective in this time due to *emotional numbing*.
- Crisis response advertising walks a fine line between opportunism and authenticity; it can risk trivializing a public health crisis. The well-intentioned decisions of today can appear tone deaf tomorrow.
- Pulling advertising entirely is a bad idea given what we know about how expensive it is to re-build lost share of voice and share of mind. However, COVID-19 is a much different scenario than a traditional economic recession, which means the adage of advertising through an economic crisis isn't completely relevant here. More details on this in Part Two of our series.

Add to this the fact that budgets are under significant downward pressure due to weakening demand and sliding consumer confidence, and you have a scenario where there's a limited amount to work with, and a minefield to work in.

This conundrum points to the need to prioritize an understanding into the *actual* mindsets of people – not just what they say, but how they feel – so as to strike a tone that works throughout the COVID-19 crisis. And to do so efficiently. That's what this series is about.

The articles in this series consolidate insights from three areas of study for Brainsights:

1. How consumers respond to advertising within a Coronavirus news environment;
2. How consumers respond more broadly to advertising when primed with their own mortality; and
3. How consumers respond to advertising in different content contexts.

Taken collectively, these insights will help advertisers determine how they should advertise now.

What this series does not cover:

- These articles do not cover how businesses could or should re-purpose their operations to join in addressing the human tragedy of COVID-19. As responsible corporate citizens, our view is that businesses should be taking care of their people – employees, customers, communities, environment – as best as they can.
- These articles do not cover how, why or whether brands should pull on other marketing levers during this time. It is our view that marketers should be ensuring that products are in the hands of people where and when they need them, and that makes their roles more vital today than ever before. That will require flexibility, nimbleness and the full use of the marketing toolkit. So, pull on all the levers at your disposal.

One of those levers is advertising. Here's how you can optimize that now and ensure your brand connects with consumers throughout this difficult time.

Part One: Advertising in COVID-19 news environments: Adopt a ‘Solution-Mindset’

Answer the following challenges:

- Should I advertise in a COVID-19 news environment?
- What tone should my advertising take during the COVID-19 crisis?

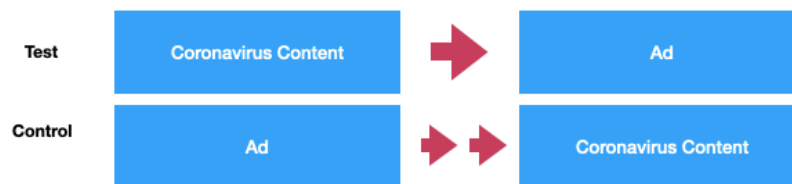
Brainsights had an opportunity to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 news content on consumer receptiveness to advertising. Here’s how we did it:

As in many of our studies, we run playlists of video content. These are re-ordered for each viewing session we host to control and account for any ordering effects. This process also allows us to test the ordering for these effects, given the large numbers of subjects we brain scan in each session.

In a viewing session in late-February, one month after the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Toronto, we screened a video segment entitled “This is how Asian restaurants in Toronto are fighting back against the coronavirus scare” from a popular local blog, BlogTO¹. The focus of the spot was how Chinese restaurants in Toronto were dealing with COVID-19, and it heavily featured cleaning and hygiene practices. The audience we tested was from the Greater Toronto Area.

In attempting to understand the impact of COVID-19 news on ad receptivity, we looked into how the ad that followed this BlogTO segment performed and compared performance in this environment to when the ad ran elsewhere (ie. outside of this context).

Here’s a methodological sketch[†]:



Testing the impact of Coronavirus News on Ad Receptiveness

Four different ads were played after the COVID-19 news content. Two were auto, one was packaged goods, and one was a grocery retailer. (For confidentiality reasons, we can’t disclose all of the brands in the ads. While brand name/fame would have been important in understanding overall creative effectiveness, that’s not our interest here. Rather, we’re interested in the changes to Attention, Emotional Connection and Encoding to Memory associated with the context – when people view the ads in a COVID-19 news environment versus viewing them elsewhere.)

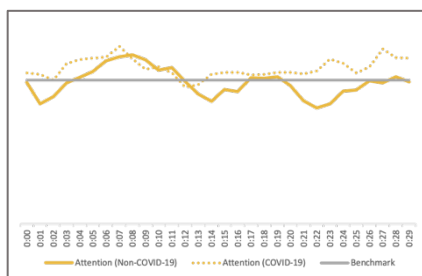
On average, ads viewed directly following the COVID-19 news content saw **double-digit percentage lifts across each metric we measure: Attention, Emotional Connection and Memory Encoding (ACE Scores).**

[†] The double arrow in the control environment is meant to indicate that the ad in question could have appeared at any other point before the Coronavirus content, but the key point here is that it was not primed by the Coronavirus content.

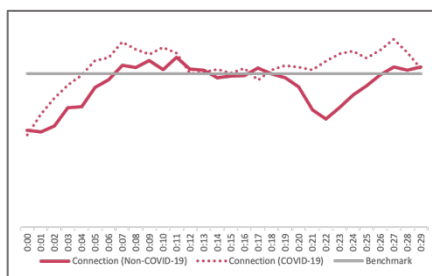
In other words, on account of the COVID-19 news context, consumers were paying more Attention to ads, Connecting more deeply with the ads Emotionally, and Encoding more of the ads to Memory than when these same ads were viewed in non-COVID-19 news contexts.

To understand what this means, see the below neural pattern curves for each Brainsights measure as people viewed the spot from the packaged goods advertiser.

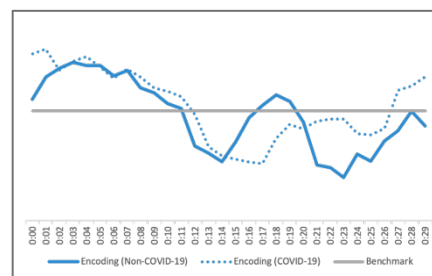
Here's what Attention looks like:



This is Emotional Connection:



And this is Encoding to Memory:



For each graph, the dashed line represents the response of consumers when they viewed the COVID-19 news content beforehand, and the full line represents when the spot was viewed in a non-COVID-19 news environment (the grey horizontal line is the baseline response of all consumers to all content). Both response curves— Non-COVID-19 and COVID-19 - are indexed to this overall baseline.

When viewed within COVID-19 news context, responses to this ad showed lifts of 11% for Attention, 11% for Connection and 10% for Encoding to Memory. As you can see, the significant changes in the neural curves happen at the beginning and end of the spot – audiences tune in, connect and encode more faster, and the key final ad moments perform stronger.

The trend of greater overall ACE scores held for one of the other three spots: an information-based spot about electric vehicles from BMW. There were mixed results for an automotive manufacturer's promotional spot (below average Attention and Connection, but above average Encoding), and a spot from Sobeys about their elimination of plastic bags (above average Attention and especially Connection, but below average Encoding).

Here's a summary of ad performance in this environment ("+" or "-" for each of Attention, Connection and Encoding):

CPG Personal Care + + +
 Luxury Auto (BMW) + + +
 Grocery Retail (Sobeys) + + -
 Mass Market Auto - - +

Let's dig into the ads a little more to understand these results and what they can teach us about advertising now.

CPG Personal Care + + +

The Packaged Goods company ran a Brand Power spot for a well-known personal care brand's facial wipes. The ad is delivered in an informative, 'matter of fact' tone. The brand's credibility is further underlined by the Brand Power authority, and product demonstration, which is conveyed as a consumer-friendly, scientific process. This helps it to be accessible, and legitimate. The ad has a clear 'problem-solution' structure.

The fact that the spot is hygiene-related helps, relating strongly to the content of the COVID-19 news content (the gist of the spot was having a solution that cleaned *and* moisturized).

Luxury Auto (BMW) + + +

The spot is also informative and delivered in a ‘matter of fact’ tone. It also has a clear ‘problem-solution’ structure, which is around the conceptual challenge and subsequent approach of developing a sound signature for BMW’s electric vehicles.

This process (solution) of developing the sound signature is also conveyed in a consumer-friendly scientific way, through the animated illustration of the sound engineer’s ideas, which makes it both accessible and legitimate. Interestingly, the broader social benefit (electric cars) is secondary.

Grocery Retail (Sobeys) + + -

The Sobeys ad focused on discontinuing the use/supply of plastic bags. This was styled as an announcement, delivered rapidly and in a bright, upbeat tone. It outlined the benefits of this move, but instead of more fully outlining the problem and then articulating a solution like the BMW and CPG spots, the Sobeys ad implied the problem. Further, it lacked specifics around how the problem would be solved (only saying “Goodbye, Adios, etc”). This was likely a factor in the below-average Encoding scores observed in the Coronavirus news environment where consumers are in an information-seeking mindset (we’ll review audience mindsets in more detail in part 3 of this series).

Mass Market Auto - - +

The mass market auto manufacturer’s spot was impacted most negatively by placement in Coronavirus news. The spot was high energy, delivered in a voice and tone that wouldn’t be out of place at a monster truck rally. It contains several selling propositions: affordability, award-winning credentials, innovative technology, and financing options. It also features what could be considered frivolous or excessive undertones, featuring multiple vignettes of the truck model towing a large boat and 4X4 vehicle. While the information relating to both affordability and financing drive strong lifts in Encoding, the frivolity and tone of the spot was likely to have caused tune-out and disconnect with consumers, when viewed in the Coronavirus news context.

So, this is what happened to the ads right after the COVID-19 content, but how long does the impact of the context last?

Notably, these trends hold for each of the ads even as more time elapses between the viewing of the ad and the COVID-19 news content.

There is one exception: the auto manufacturer promotional spot re-gained consumer Attention as more time elapsed between it and the COVID-19 news content. However, Emotional Connection remained suppressed/subdued[‡].

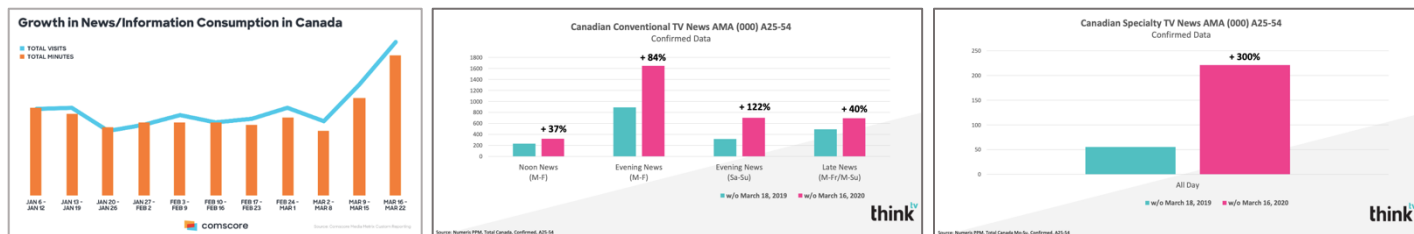
Key Learnings:

a) Attention:

Ads viewed in the context of COVID-19 news *can* garner greater Attention. And there’s other evidence of this: Lumen Research has found something similar using their eye-tracking solution².

People are much more tuned in to news and this attention is carrying over into the ads within this environment³.

[‡] The maximum amount of time observed between COVID-19 content viewing and ad viewing, due to the structure of the playlists and viewing session lengths was ~30 minutes, so we do not have data beyond that length of time for this study. However, we would expect these findings to hold beyond this timeframe.



News consumption is up significantly in Canada during COVID-19 (Week of March 16th, 2020)

This does not preclude advertisers from striking the right tone and structuring their ad in the best way to capitalize on this increased Attention.

b) Emotional Connection:

Brands can also drive deeper Emotional Connection in COVID-19 news context. But this very much depends on the structure and tone of the spot.

Advertisers that deliver solutions – topical and practical for individuals (CPG), or with benefits for society (BMW/Sobeys) – can see heightened levels of emotional resonance in the Coronavirus news context.

To ensure optimal ad performance, structure the ad with an explicit “problem and solution”.

Importantly, this problem-solution needn’t be Coronavirus-related, but this limited dataset suggests that it’s best if it does have an undertone of social impact.

c) Encoding to Memory:

Delivering a “problem-solution” structure in a matter-of-fact style, with details on how the product or brand is solving the problem, can help advertisers navigate the Coronavirus news context and deliver greater memory encoding.

Product details alone – like in the mass market auto manufacturer’s ad – can boost Encoding, but without the appropriate tone (solution-oriented, matter-of-fact), consumers will struggle to connect the brand with the message in this environment.

This solution-mindset has played out in other areas of business that extend beyond advertising, but nonetheless have a significant impact on brand reputation. Examples include:

- LVMH’s announcement⁴ that it would re-purpose its operations to produce hand sanitizer, which was quickly followed by breweries and distilleries, among others
- Industry giants as varied as GM⁵ and New Balance⁶ re-purposing their manufacturing processes to deliver personal protective equipment (PPE), like face masks
- Dyson, MacLaren and others working to produce more ventilators as demand soars from hospitals and care centres⁷
- Colgate-Palmolive giving huge amounts of soap to the World Health Organization⁸



While these findings represent an isolated study into the impact of the COVID-19 news context, additional research from Brainsights supports these key learnings.

For example, we know from previous research that information and product-focused spots tend to perform best in news environments. That holds here too, with the additional COVID-19-specific nuance of having the ‘problem-solution’ structure. We’ll review the impact of media contexts on mindsets in more depth in Part 3 of this series.

In a time of uncertainty and anxiety, people are looking for practical solutions. Under conditions of mass worry, they're likely looking for cognitive and mental barriers to be removed/relaxed (*one less thing to worry about*).

This insight may seem obvious, but three things make it less so:

- 1) Brands are **shying away** from advertising in COVID-19 news environments⁹. This is unfortunate, as not only are they missing out on bigger audiences of more engaged consumers, they are inadvertently starving news organizations of valuable income to continue to do their work.
- 2) As this data suggests, communicating Coronavirus-specific or Coronavirus-related solutions isn't necessary. This should be a relief to many brands who perhaps thought that because they had little to say about COVID-19, they would say nothing at all. BMW made no mention of COVID-19, and electric vehicles have no explicit relationship to a global health pandemic. Yet BMW's spot performed very well in the COVID-19 news context.
- 3) Many brands are taking a particularly emotional tone in their advertising, with the belief that this is the right tone to strike. It may not be. And not simply due to the findings of this study into the ads that perform strongest in the COVID-19 news environment. It also has to do with "emotional numbing" resulting from mortality salience, which is a unique feature of the broader COVID-19 social context.

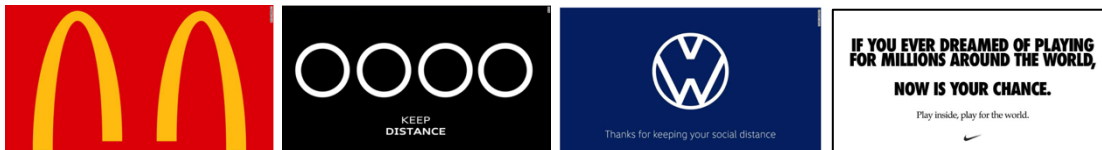
In Part 2 of this series, we understand this emotional numbing phenomenon in more detail. It's this understanding that will reveal why COVID-19 is unlike past crises as it pertains to advertising, and how new tactics and tools are necessary for marketers to navigate this unusual environment.

Part Two: The problem of emotional numbing.

Answer the following challenge:

- *Should I invoke an emotional tone in my COVID-19 advertising?*

In Part 1 of this series on how to advertise during COVID-19, we explored the receptivity of consumers to advertising in COVID-19 news environments, and outlined the best tone for advertisers to strike to connect deeply with consumers during this time. Part 2 of this series explores why emotional advertising may not work during the COVID-19 crisis.



Do these images strike the right tone? Do consumers care?

We've seen many brands – Ford¹⁰, Hershey's, Coors Light¹¹, Subaru¹², Hotels.com¹³, Google¹⁴ – pivot their messaging during the COVID-19 crisis, aware of the sensitivities at this time. General Mills is ensuring that their marketing “strikes an appropriate tone”¹⁵, as they seek to focus on brand building rather than bottom-funnel advertising.

But what is the *appropriate* tone? And what are the risks if brands miss the mark?

Brands have taken a variety of approaches in trying to strike a COVID-19-friendly tone:

- A “we’re in this together” approach taken by Ford¹⁶ and many others
- A gratefulness approach taken by Budweiser¹⁷, Google and Subaru among others
- A public service approach taken by Hotels.com (encouraging social distancing with their advertising), and by Hershey's and Coors Light (withdrawing their advertising in part because it featured human contact, which was something each brand felt inappropriate to encourage with their media). Several brands have also used their logos to communicate social distancing, whether it's the separation of arches, rings or a V from a W¹⁸.

While communicating the need for social distancing is essential, manipulating iconic commercial logos in support of COVID-19 measures can come across as self-serving, or worse, trivialize the issue. McDonald's effort was lampooned on social media as hypocritical in the face of their poor worker-health policies¹⁹.

Every brand will have its own unique conditions to consider and navigate, and they should be sensitive to how their communications will be perceived within the context of coronavirus.

But there's also a hidden challenge that all advertisers must contend with during this crisis: emotional numbing.

...

The reminder of one's mortality has the effect of numbing consumers' emotional response to advertising.

This was the key finding of a study into the impact of mortality salience on advertising conducted by Western University Psychology and Business Professor, Miranda Goode.

Dr Goode used experimental studies to demonstrate that contemplating one's mortality can temporarily numb people. These included standard manipulations from scientific literature that involved people thinking about their own death versus dental pain and then observing the effects on the level of emotionality people recalled in treasured memories, or predicted in future experiences (that would normally be highly emotional). Dr Goode also used EEG-based measures to look at emotional responses to ads, using Brainsights' consumer brain measurement platform to understand the dynamics of mortality salience on peoples' unconscious minds.

As Dr Goode writes: "Contemplating death dampened people's expectations of emotion in a future consumption experience and diminished the attractiveness of the experience. Similarly, contemplating death affected backward looking assessments of emotion, for example, when nostalgic memories are brought to mind. Importantly, this dampening effect of mortality salience was replicated with advertisements that portrayed death-related concepts and attenuated emotional reactions to subsequent advertisements."

(*"The numbing effect of mortality salience in consumer settings"* can be found the June 2019 volume of *Psychology & Marketing*.²⁰)

Under today's cloud of COVID-19, Dr Goode's findings couldn't be more relevant.

For as the world is glued to their screens consuming more news of the spread of the Coronavirus and its growing human death toll, collectively, we may be more primed than ever with our own mortality.

Of course, this is by no means everyone's experience. But over just a six-day period in Canada (from March 17th to 23rd - the last day for Canadian data), the percentage of respondents to YouGov's COVID-19 tracker who feared catching the virus leapt from 45% to 55%.²¹ And as cases and deaths have continued to rise, the fear of catching the virus will increase, and be compounded by further isolation measures.

Pandemic Advertising isn't the same as Recession Advertising.

Why does this matter for marketers now?

It matters because it changes the advice for marketers. This public health and physical risk feature of the COVID-19 crisis makes it significantly different to the typical economic crises that marketers are turning to for insights into how they should operate.

The advice proffered by media and marketing organizations²² and by pundits and academics alike²³ draws on research on advertising during an economic recession. And while that economic event is certain to come, the reasons for it are completely different to those that have come before.

This crisis isn't related to an economic asset class or burst bubble (2001, 2007-2009). Nor is it related to geopolitical events that cause energy prices to rise (1973-1975, 1981-1982).

In those crises, entire countries all around the globe were not forced indoors for weeks and months. In those crises, billions of people were not confined to their homes contemplating their own mortality, faced with an unfolding global health catastrophe. In those crises, the flattening curves we discussed were the ones that showed up only in the financial news reports.

The physical, psychological, emotional and social scars that will accompany the economic ones resulting from the COVID-19 crisis will be felt by more people, more deeply, and are likely to be felt much longer, too.

There are unique circumstances to this crisis that require a unique lens, one that neuroscience and psychology can help to elucidate.

So the advice for marketers can't simply be to maintain the appropriate levels of advertising investment to build brand during a downturn. *How* advertisers frame their message during this time also matters significantly.

Emotional Numbing Stunts Emotional Advertising

Consider the trends in COVID-19-related advertising²⁴.

Besides the popularity of “We’re here for you” as an ad title (11, at last count), some advertisers insist on using language and footage to remind us of how bizarre and scary life is right now.

The intention is benevolent – brands are eager to communicate to people that they understand the uncertainty of the situation, and that their brand can be relied upon. They want to convey empathy, while at the same time communicate that they’re working to provide a solution and way forward.

But the manner in which it’s done may not achieve this objective.

Reminding people of just how scary and precarious life is right now as a way to communicate that “We’re here for you” will likely have the unintended effect of consumers numbing their response to the key brand message.

This is part of the reason that the ‘problem-solution’ structure delivered in a ‘matter of fact’ tone works so well (see Part 1) – it has empathy and ‘the way forward’ built into it. By outlining a problem, the audience can relate in some way. This is the empathy. By presenting the solution to this problem, the audience are seeing the way forward. Delivering this matter-of-factly instills a level of confidence, authority and trust in an audience seeking quality information.

So, should marketers eschew emotional advertising altogether during COVID-19?

The evidence would suggest so. Not only does the matter-of-fact tone work best in the COVID-19 news context, it sidesteps the issue of emotional numbing, which would thwart emotional advertising anyway.

But there is a workaround. And it uses the principles we’ve been sharing in Parts 1 and 2 on themselves.

In Part 1, we outlined the ‘explicit problem-solution’ structure advertisers should adopt in their advertising during COVID-19. Delivered in an informative, matter-of-fact tone, these ads can live in and outside of COVID-19 news contexts.

In Part 2, we surfaced the risks of an emotional approach to COVID-19 communications resulting from how, when faced with one’s mortality, emotional numbing can ensue which diminishes one’s response to emotional stories.

Part 3 will introduce marketers to a solution, which uses findings from neuroscience to lay out a framework we call ‘mindset marketing’. Through careful media selection, and alignment between creative and programming context, marketers can strike the appropriate tone to ensure their communications are tone-smart and effective in driving the desired consumer response.

Part Three: Mindset Marketing to combat COVID-19

Answer the following challenge:

- How can I market in a tone-smart and efficient manner now?

Consider the following vignettes:

- 1) Walking purposefully, he twisted off his wedding ring and slid it into his jeans pocket.
- 2) He rushed off the streetcar and hurried towards the gym. Walking purposefully, he twisted off his wedding ring and slid it into his jeans pocket. He could hardly wait for his first post-COVID-19 workout.
- 3) He'd prepared the BBQ rub using two types of paprika. Walking purposefully, he twisted off his wedding ring and slid it into his jeans pocket. He reached the fridge, pulled out the ribs and began smothering them with the rub.

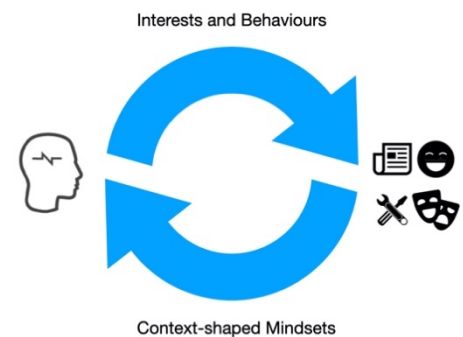
Think of your ad as number 1.

And think of numbers 2 and 3 as your ad within context.

Context Matters

Context shapes mindset. It changes the entire tone of the story - in this case from the drama of a potential extra-marital affair to the resumption of an everyday exercise routine, or the beginnings of an epic barbecue (provided he remembers to wash his hands!).

When we think of context in media, we typically think of the human-led factors like interests (Design, Food, Sports), and behaviours (commuting). These in turn inform where we place advertising for 'contextual relevance' for the audience we're looking to reach (location-based/targeted advertising is one obvious example, but also food advertising in food content).



But context also works the other way – where a content and media-led influence shapes the mindsets of consumers.

We saw in Part 1 of this series, that consumer Attention, Emotional Connection and Encoding to Memory patterns can change as an ad is consumed in different contexts. COVID-19-specific news contexts amplified ads that featured an explicit problem-solution structure and were delivered in a matter-of-fact tone.

We learned in Part 2 of Dr Miranda Goode's study into mortality salience, which proved that when people think of their own mortality, there's an emotional numbing response that results, which impacts receptiveness to emotional storytelling in ads²⁵.

Both studies speak to the power of context in shaping receptivity (or not) to advertising, and, specifically, how we should be thinking about the COVID-19 context, both in media and more broadly.

But of course, we're consuming more than just news content: media consumption overall is increasing²⁶.

And people are turning to media to escape and improve themselves, or continuing their typical routines, in addition to keeping informed about the crisis. The growth in online **gaming**²⁷, DIY-related searches, health/wellness content consumption, and educational content consumption are all evidence of this.

Some key stats:

- *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is powering Nintendo Switch to new heights. In March, Switch recorded its highest-ever sales week in Japan²⁸.
- According to Verizon, US gaming usage during peak hours has increased 75% since quarantine measures went into effect²⁹.
- Globally, Pinterest **reports** significant increases in searches on their platform during quarantine for “self-care at home” (+332%) and “home workouts” (+205-329%) as well as DIY “home care cuts” (+417%) and “work from home with kids” (+1657%)³⁰.
- ComScore **reports** considerable increases in the time spent with content categories called “Training and Higher Advancement” (+63%) and “Family & Youth Education” (+62%) in Canada from early to mid-March, 2020³¹.

This provides an opportunity for marketers to leverage the power of mindsets shaped by media to connect more deeply with people today. They can do this by understanding the overarching tones of content environments and aligning the tones of their ads to the tones of these environments.

Mindset Marketing

To support marketers during this time, Brainsights has prepared a Mindset Marketing guide, which summarizes its advertising insights from across various programming contexts.

The findings are drawn from dozens of Brainsights’ cross-screen, cross-environment neuroscience research studies conducted in North America, which collectively have involved thousands of consumers consuming content while they have their brain wave activity recorded every 2 milliseconds.





In these studies, ads have been held constant while different screens and programming environments (News, Drama, DIY, etc) have been tested, so as to understand the impact of the context on the ad’s performance regarding Attention, Emotional Connection and Encoding to Memory, as derived through EEG-brain wave measurement. The formats tested are primarily video, but also static display, too.

As a starting point, we’ve selected four popular genres - News, Comedy, Drama, DIY- from the dozens of genres we’ve studied, and identified the upside in Emotional Connection for content-context tone alignment.

Even when controlling for audience variation, the ads that match the mindsets of viewers result in a substantial lift in Emotional Connection.

We have focused on the Emotional Connection metric for this guide due to the importance of ad tone in the present environment. A helpful way to think of the variance in Emotional Connection by context is like an Impression Quality score, a sort of multiplier that rewards effective context-content alignment.

This will help brands understand where they can safely place their creative assets to both maximize impact and strike the appropriate tone with consumers.

 <p>News</p> <p>Embrace: Information-focused ads with strong calls-to-action</p> <p>Avoid: Equity spots, and emotional tone</p> <p>Why? Viewers are in an information-gathering mindset</p> <p>Impression Quality Potential: +28% Emotional Connection</p>	 <p>Comedy</p> <p>Embrace: Humorous and high energy ads</p> <p>Avoid: Serious and dramatic tone; heavy product focus</p> <p>Why? Viewers are in a light-hearted mindset</p> <p>Impression Quality Potential: +19% Emotional Connection</p>
 <p>Drama</p> <p>Embrace: Serious, positive emotional ads</p> <p>Avoid: Absurd humour and high energy</p> <p>Why? Viewers are in an emotional storytelling mindset</p> <p>Impression Quality Potential: +19% Emotional Connection</p>	 <p>DIY</p> <p>Embrace: Functional ads, focus on progress, performance</p> <p>Avoid: Slow builds, emotional tone</p> <p>Why? Viewers are in a learning mindset</p> <p>Impression Quality Potential: +14% Emotional Connection</p>

Impression Quality Potential: The lift that can be achieved for ads that is attributed to the placement in complimentary contexts compared to that ad's overall performance (across any/all contexts).



Mindset Marketing for COVID-19 - Considerations and Actions

As the guide reveals, there are opportunities for marketers to be emotional in their advertising and potentially avoid the pitfalls of emotional numbing.

In scripted Dramas, for example, marketers can capitalize on the emotional storytelling mindset of viewers. Placing emotional ads in this environment will ensure a greater likelihood for success in resonating with consumers

How you can activate Mindset Marketing right now:

Leveraging these insights to strike the right contextual-content tone requires the active participation of all partners in advertising and media.

Do a content audit. Advertisers and their agencies should take stock of existing relevant assets and deeply understand their tone. If you're unsure of the tone your content strikes, reach out and Brainsights can help. Work with media partners and technology providers to locate the programming environments, channels and creators that will offer the best context for your content, and re-traffic and/or re-orient your program and genre selections to align contextual placement and ad tone.

This way creative and media can act in unison for both greater impact and human sensitivity to an uncertain and changing situation.

Advertising in the Age of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis without precedent. The same rules of recessionary advertising apply only up to a point. It isn't enough to simply maintain advertising investment.

Advertisers must first strike the right tone with their advertising. This is where the tools of neuroscience and psychology can help.

Synthesizing insights from several studies, the evidence suggests that the best tone for advertisers to take under these conditions is a 'back-to-basics' form of advertising – an explicit 'problem-solution' structure in the ad, delivered in a matter-of-fact tone.

Such advertising tone and structure has two key benefits:

- 1) It works best in a COVID-19 news context, where people are in an information-and-solution-seeking mindset.
- 2) It is more resilient in the face of *emotional numbing*; which research reveals is a neuro-psychological state that occurs when people contemplate their own mortality.

Within the context of COVID-19, which is dominating (communications in) society today, it is reasonable to think that more of us are in this mind state. Marketers must navigate this prevailing feeling of *emotional numbness* caused by *mortality salience*, and in most cases and contexts, it's sensible for marketers to swap the 'warm and fuzzy' for the 'practical and matter-of-fact'.

However, other advertising tones can work. But to give these tones and the messages they carry the best chance for a successful outcome in the mind of consumers, they're best deployed in the right environments. This involves a deep understanding of the mindset-shaping powers of context, and what ad tones work best in various environments. The Mindset Marketing framework will help.

Marketers that understand the mindsets of their audiences – and how content helps to *shape* these mindsets - will be better placed to deliver value to audiences, improving Emotional Connection and marketing performance, during COVID-19 and beyond.

Additional resources and reading*:

**Brainsights do not endorse or recommend the views shared in these resources, only the consideration thereof.*

A Marketing Guide – What to do in a Recession

<https://byronsharp.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/recessionbyron.pdf>

Fast Company reflects on Ford's COVID-19 advertising

<https://www.fastcompany.com/90478322/ford-reads-the-culture-right-with-new-coronavirus-response-advertising>

Why and how to advertise in a recession

<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/marketing-your-way-through-a-recession>

Reflections on brand building now

<https://strategyonline.ca/2020/03/17/brand-building-in-unprecedented-times>

Google's head of media shares 5 principles of media planning in the age of COVID-19

<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-resources/covid-19-media-principles>

Comscore shares how media consumption is changing in Canada during COVID-19 crisis

<https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/Coronavirus-Crisis-is-Dramatically-Impacting-Digital-Media-Consumption-in-Canada>

Subaru's message to front line health workers

<https://the-message.ca/2020/03/31/inside-subaru-canadas-heartfelt-thanks-to-canadas-front-line-workers/>

A COVID-19 playlist created by Jenny Cooper, Creative Effectiveness Lead at Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLg8I1jdwKrbJtMsRNzp2lNA6hMNIDBtEQ&jct=te3-C71gj4e9k9YyadknqfYVktZOUA&app=desktop>

Volkswagen switches out creative to focus on Coronavirus response:

<https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/volkswagen-stops-regular-ads-favor-community-driven-promise-coronavirus-response-campaign/2248171>

The most popular online activity right now in the US and UK is searching for COVID-19 updates, according to GlobalWebIndex

<https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/themostpopularonlineactivityrightnowsearchingforupdatesaboutcovid19/43457>

"We're not in advertising mode" - Anheuser-Busch CMO Marcel Marcondes on staying relevant

<https://digiday.com/marketing/were-not-in-advertising-mode-anheuser-busch-cmo-marcel-marcondes-on-staying-relevant/amp/>

Opinion: Brands have an opportunity to frame the torch of humanity that is illuminating the darkness

<https://adage.com/article/opinion/opinion-brands-have-opportunity-frame-torch-humanity-illuminating-darkness/2248001>

Opinion: Hard news may seem unsafe but advertisers can win with a balanced approach

<https://adage.com/article/opinion/opinion-hard-news-may-seem-unsafe-advertisers-can-win-balanced-approach/2248186>

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ The piece can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNyolnxdSMg&t=2s>
- ² Read about Lumen's research into attention levels in Coronavirus-specific news content here: https://t.sidekickopen80.com/s1t/c/5/f18dQhb0S7IC8dDMPbW2n0x6I2B9nMJN7t5XYgdn9WW4Xy-5C3LQ1BCW8qIRZx56dy-ff5-gvnW02?te=W3R5hFj4cm2zwW4mKLS-3Z_VwhW41p0P14c1nTW3F7sgL43T4NRW3ZZn633zht5QW41YyJf41p0ZJW1Gy6wH3K8R9mW4cKKqQ1GzQ_cW41n_WJ3P1L6vW1Gzpr43T1k6SW3FbtzL41PGQQW49S91Q43Xd-f49KtVy04&si=6028819336265728&pi=3d170084-2a4c-4421-8687-f630035fca33
- ³ See Comscore's data on changing Canadian media consumption: <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/The-Coronavirus-Pandemic-s-Relationship-to-Online-Behavioral-Shifts-in-Canada?>
- ⁴ For LVMH's move, see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51868756>
- ⁵ To understand GM's operational pivot to making face masks, read: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/31/general-motors-spins-up-global-supply-chain-to-make-50000-face-masks-a-day/>
- ⁶ For New Balance's face mask move, see: <https://hypebeast.com/2020/3/new-balance-face-masks-hospital-coronavirus-covid-19-info>
- ⁷ The Economist covers the industrialists turning their operations and talent to ventilator production: <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/03/26/scientists-and-industry-are-dashing-to-make-more-ventilators>
- ⁸ Colgate-Palmolive announces the donation of soap and supplies to the WHO: https://investor.colgatepalmolive.com/news-releases/news-release-details/colgate-supports-world-health-organization-who-safehands-effort#__prclt=YDbwpCgV
- ⁹ See: <https://www.businessinsider.com/brands-save-american-lives-running-coronavirus-news-next-to-ads-2020-3>
- ¹⁰ Fast Company opines on the cultural relevance of Ford's COVID-19 advertising: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90478322/ford-reads-the-culture-right-with-new-coronavirus-response-advertising>
- ¹¹ Hershey's and Coors Light withdraw their advertising due to COVID-19 sensitivities: <https://the-message.ca/2020/03/11/a-virtual-library-for-press-freedom-fanta-celebrates-idiots-vws-celebrity-accountant/>
- ¹² Subaru Canada's COVID-19 messaging: <https://the-message.ca/2020/03/31/inside-subaru-canadas-heartfelt-thanks-to-canadas-front-line-workers/>
- ¹³ Hotels.com promotes social distancing with Capitan Obvious: <https://youtu.be/6dimCZCfGMI>
- ¹⁴ Google thanks front line healthcare workers: <https://youtu.be/-rtuEgAHWw0>
- ¹⁵ General Mills shares their COVID-19 ad strategy: <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/generalmillsmarketingstrategyatimeofcovid19/43394>
- ¹⁶ Ford's COVID-19 messaging: <https://youtu.be/sCAkKI2dwhs>
- ¹⁷ Budweiser's COVID-19 messaging: https://youtu.be/3_t9niMnKdg
- ¹⁸ CNN covers the brands using their logos to promote social distancing: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/26/business/social-distancing-brand-logos-coronavirus/index.html>
- ¹⁹ AdAge covers the social media backlash against McDonalds: <https://adage.com/creativity/work/mcdonalds-separated/2245431>
- ²⁰ The numbing effect of mortality salience in consumer settings: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/mar.21201>
- ²¹ YouGov's international tracking data can be found here: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/YouGov-international-COVID-19-tracker>
- ²² CBC shares strategies for advertising in a recession: <https://solutionsmedia.cbrc.ca/en/news/maintaining-advertising-investments-in-times-of-crisis-a-winning-strategy/>
- ²³ Mark Ritson shares insights on advertising in a recession: <https://www.marketingweek.com/mark-ritson-marketing-spend-recession-coronavirus/>
- ²⁴ An evolving COVID-19 ad playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6egQkFx7UkM&list=PLg8I1jdwKrbJtMsRNzp2INA6hMNIDBtEQ&index=33>
- ²⁵ The numbing effect of mortality salience in consumer settings: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/mar.21201>
- ²⁶ Comscore Canada research: <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/The-Coronavirus-Pandemic-s-Relationship-to-Online-Behavioral-Shifts-in-Canada>
- ²⁷ See: <https://ca.finance.yahoo.com/news/coronavirus-world-turning-to-video-games-150704969.html>
- ²⁸ See: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/26/21195022/animal-crossing-switch-sales-japan-famitsu>
- ²⁹ See: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gaming-usage-up-75-percent-coronavirus-outbreak-verizon-reports-1285140>
- ³⁰ See: <https://business.pinterest.com/en/blog/trending-searches-for-april-2020>
- ³¹ Comscore Canada research: <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/The-Coronavirus-Pandemic-s-Relationship-to-Online-Behavioral-Shifts-in-Canada>