

Behaviour Change:

Tone Deaf to Social
Marketing Messages

Ways to help focus in times of crisis



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BEHAVIOUR CHANGE: TONE DEAF TO SOCIAL MARKETING MESSAGES

Ways to help focus in times of crisis

We're currently knee-deep in the Corona Virus crisis with many businesses and many organisations – government and community – struggling to push forward with their strategic plan and objectives given the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives. And the question could be asked, is this the right time to be thinking about strategy? We would say yes. In fact, you have to. In many ways, this is the beginning of a new way of working but more importantly, it's new because people are thinking and behaving differently in response to COVID-19 and in order to continue to be relevant, organisations need to understand what that means for them and their objectives.



The Essence Team's new way of working while social distancing!

The Corona Virus response – psychographic profiling

As we're sure most of you would agree, the response from community members to the Corona Virus and how people are behaving has been fascinating. As we always see in times of uncertainty or change, there are a range of typologies or responses that appear and most of them have been on display at the supermarket! We've seen:

- The Selfish Hoarder:
sadly, this segment reflects the worst of human spirit with their response to Corona being to panic-buy, bunker down and protect their own family at all costs;
- The Deny-ers:
possibly at the other end of the spectrum, this segment isn't concerned about Corona believing it to be an overreaction (Note, Gerry Harvey who said he didn't know what all the fuss is about... He's not worried and he's 80!)
- The Over-The-Top Do-Gooders:
who are lecturing us all on what we should be doing and virus-shaming people publicly online. They may be entirely correct but the way they are going about it is earning more criticism than support; and
- The Reasonable But Under-Prepared:
that's probably most of us at Essence! We're hearing the warnings and want to act responsibly and trawling through all the conflicting advice on what we SHOULD be doing. And of course, not being able to get toilet paper by the time we finally make it to a supermarket...

It is like seeing our entire professional lives parading before us.

So, we've been thinking about these typologies and can see there is an opportunity for us to share more about our understanding of human behaviour and how it works; to talk about, during these times, what impacts or interventions could you put in place that might trigger a change in attitude or behaviour? Because it has never been as important to understand how people think, and what motivates their behaviour than it is in a period of uncertainty.

There is business to be had

At Essence, we believe that, understanding this now is critical, especially if your strategy is under threat due to coronavirus. There must be so many businesses that could benefit from this - there is still absolutely business to be had. Yes, people may be living their lives differently at the moment (and maybe for the foreseeable future) - so their behaviours may change. What a great time to engage them!

If you are an accountant now is a great time to engage your customers, encourage them to spend time at home getting their tax up to date and meeting with you virtually for their tax planning purposes. Or if you know how to engage children, then offering virtual babysitting 'workshops' will be massive. Cafes, restaurants and fresh produce businesses changed their models to package contactless home delivery options - as did many home improvement and gardening stores. There are absolutely opportunities for businesses to re-imagine and build a new 'go to market' strategy.

But we'll have more on that in the next e-book.

Behaviour change and social marketing

In this e-book, we offer 5 tips to help focus your social marketing project, program or organisation now and into the future in light of a shift in attitudes and behaviours during and post a crisis; to consider behaviour change in this new world that has been impacted potentially forever by the Corona virus.

Where to start?

In social marketing Essence works with government at all three levels to encourage behaviour change. Whether it be working with local councils as we have done recently to help them engage their ratepayers, or State Government to encourage job seekers to consider a career in policing, or indeed, working with the Commonwealth Government to evaluate the role of graphic health warnings on tobacco packaging, to continue to encourage people to quit smoking. In all of these examples, Essence has undertaken significant research to first understand existing attitudes and behaviour, and then identify the opportunities for change.

Research is a natural starting point for our change strategies - because you can't change someone's attitudes or behaviour if you don't understand their motivations and current belief set first. Why do people believe what they believe? What could you say that would change that?

Right now, we want our communities to self-isolate and maintain social distancing - yet despite all the noise, the facts and the evidence that has been thoroughly promoted, we saw people in their thousands flocking to Bondi Beach. Despite repeated calls and messages NOT to hoard, that there is plenty of toilet paper in warehouses around the country if we just buy what we need.... There were still empty shelves regularly in our local supermarkets.

But this isn't new. It's not just Corona that has made the public tone deaf to social marketing messages. We have never known as much as we do about healthy eating... never had as much evidence about eating the right foods and the importance of physical movement.... And yet as a nation we've never been as obese. Clearly there isn't a straight line relationship between 'knowing' and 'doing'.

So what are the key tips and ideas we have to help tackle the social issue that you may have in front of you currently?

1. Identify the problem you are trying to solve.

We know that sounds very basic, and it probably is – but you would be surprised at how often we leap straight into solutions without having properly identified the problem first. What is the problem we are trying to solve with COVID-19 for example? Is the problem that we don't know how to identify and isolate them appropriately (eg the Ruby Princess cruise line experience in NSW?) Is the problem that some people aren't taking it seriously (a la Bondi Beach)? Or is the problem wide scale panic buying? And what if it's all of the above?!

Often it is multiple problems and that's common – but to think we can fix all of these issues at once with one communication is not appropriate. We have to identify the problem we want to address, then we can decide WHO we need to target and work to understand their beliefs and perceptions.

2. Identify the barriers to the optimal behaviour

If we want our target audience to do or think something differently tomorrow than they did yesterday, what are the barriers to achieve this? What's in the way? What's stopping them? You would expect us to say – as researchers – that you need to do research to understand this, but we really believe it! Time and again in social research we see our assumptions and best guesses about the barriers are unfounded. We often have a very good sense of the problem – but understanding a compelling key message that will overcome the barriers to desired beliefs or behaviour is often very different to what we may have hypothesised.

There are often unintended consequences of not appropriately identifying the barriers to the optimal behaviour. A perfect example: some years ago, we were tasked with undertaking developmental research to inform communications to discourage violent behaviour in emergency department waiting rooms. While our messages sought to address the violence, in fact, the most common response in research was fear – fear of being in what they now perceived to be a violent environment as a result of the communication. Not the desired outcome of the campaign.

3. Understand that people are not rational

Despite what many might think, the reality is, people are not rational and evidence may not work to engage them. The behavioural change theory that underlies much public policy is the rational choice model which assumes people rationally seek to maximise their welfare. People assess the choices before them in terms of costs and benefits and then select the choice that maximises the benefits to them. The traditional policy tools follow from this model – sanctions (fines and other penalties), price signals (taxes, financial incentives), regulations and the provision of information.

These traditional tools often work very effectively in achieving behavioural change. Removing plastic bags in supermarkets is a good example. Whether people fundamentally believe in the change or not doesn't matter – this is not an attitudinal-led change, it is a behavioural one. So rational choice model can work.

However! Government often provides information in an attempt to influence behaviour using the underlying assumption of the rational choice model. That is, if people knew that behaviour or is bad for them, they will stop, reduce or eliminate it. But we can see right now that information and evidence is often not sufficient to change the behaviour of large numbers of people on a sustained basis. The model of rational choice has limitations from a behavioural change perspective.

Again, research can be really useful for this. We have so many examples where the rational evidence or information was not believed, not known, or just not compelling enough to break through the adopted habits and behaviours. And you can identify the emotional beliefs and heuristics that drive people's essential 'truths'. Once we know that, then we can determine what to say that might trigger a reframing of those beliefs.

4. Look to align desired behaviours with values

So, there's a thing called the Cognitive Consistency Theory which says people are motivated to seek consistency between their beliefs, values and attitudes and their behaviours. Recent research we have done into Culture explains this really well – it showed that people make decisions and behave in a way that is consistent with their cultural norms. If you're interested you can read more about it in our ebook on Using Culture to solve Wicked Social Problems on our site, www.essencecomms.com.au.

5. Find interventions that are EAST

No, that's not a typo – it's an acronym for Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely, the fundamentals of behaviour change that many of us subscribe to. There is a heap of reading about this, but we can't emphasise enough the importance of brainstorming a range of ideas and suggestions of what could be done BEFORE research is undertaken, and then to test this in research to find out what THEY consider to be Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely.

One of our greatest battles in behaviour change is the escape hatch. Heard of it? We're sure you have. Fundamentally people don't like change, and they will find every reason to wriggle out of the proposed change: "That's for other people", "I don't need that", "I'll do it soon", "If I was in a different location/stage of life/financial state I'd do it for sure...." Closing off all those hatches is also part of EAST. We suspect that keeping schools open during the COVID crisis was the perfect escape hatch for many people. Whilst it may have been the right public health response, it also gave a huge escape hatch to many who thought, "Well, if it's OK to keep schools open we can go to the beach..."

That's it!

So that's our five tips for thinking about behaviour change during these very strange times in business and social marketing. The great thing about research is that it is still an industry in full swing. We are conducting a number of online bulletin boards for various clients to better understand their audiences, and what they need to do to change attitudes and behaviour.

As always, if there's anything we can help you with, please get in contact or check out our website at www.essencecomms.com.au.