



B. Business Impact
Rethinking Businesses

Force for good: Social media's bright side restored

ESCP Impact Paper No. 2020-33-EN

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Abstract

This impact paper analyses and confirms the crucial role of social media as a tool to respond to crises, including the unprecedented public health and social crisis caused by Covid-19. People are forced to adapt to a new way of living, turning to social media as a place in which to seek refuge, find a sense of community, and socialize while coping with physical and social distancing. Companies are rethinking the way they make use of social media to respond to the crisis adequately, reassure consumers, and gain traction for the post-pandemic era. By observing brands' reactions to Covid-19, a new social and societal role of social media is detected. Companies seem to be adopting a new stance with regards to social media, which the authors refer to as a "commitment to the common good". Due to the crisis, companies are not only forced to accelerate their digital transformation, but must also redefine themselves as purpose-driven brands which apply social media as a space in which to serve the community and the common good.

Keywords: Crisis communication, Crisis management, Covid-19, Social media, Social networks

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Force for good: Social media's bright side restored

The world is a different place to what it was just a couple of weeks ago. The Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound impact on societies and economies, individuals and organizations across the globe (Kotler, 2020). Country lockdowns have confined people to their homes and shifted consumers' purchasing behavior and daily habits. They have forced many organizations to work remotely, lay off staff, or even close for good. The pandemic is also accelerating existing trends, such as the digital disruption or the quest for a more sustainable and ethical approach to business.

Leaders, scientists, institutional decision-makers, executives, scholars, as well as each of us, are vividly debating what the post-Covid-19 new normal might look like. What new behavior is here to stay once the curve flattens and how should we adapt to it? What is already sure is that some businesses will benefit from it, while others will vanish.

The internet will be stronger than ever, becoming even more central and pervasive in consumers' lives with all its various forms, ranging from the social media which have become the public place for comfort and distraction in an age of social distancing (i.e. think about all the live streaming of concerts, museum virtual tours or even virtual wine-tasting sessions on Instagram and other leading social networks in these days), mobile and app usage, and several old (e.g., gaming, home delivery, messaging, remote health) and new tasks (e.g., business video conferencing for homeschooling children, aperitifs with friends and yoga classes; as well as mass people movement tracking), to e-commerce, in which big players, such as Amazon, are strengthening their competitive position and ubiquity while smaller players may disappear.

From a corporate perspective, surviving Covid-19 or even benefitting from it depends on several factors. First, it depends on the industry. The travel and transportation industry is inevitably in decline due to travel restrictions and mass isolation. Other product categories are seeing an all-time high, however, such as disposable gloves, bread machines, or even toilet paper. Second, it depends on a company's degree of resilience, defined as the capability of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or a significant source of stress (American Psychological Association). Resilience influences the ability to re-configure business models into hybrid ones where the digital sphere becomes a real alternative, rather than second best after the offline model. Third, brands' promptness and response to this unprecedented crisis will make a difference in consumer trust and brand familiarity, and eventually in post-pandemic sales and market share recovery.

This paper focuses on the role of social media during and after Covid-19. Companies are reconsidering how they use social media to reach their communities with the right message at the right time, in an attempt to reassure and gain traction for the post-pandemic era. This paper contributes to this debate. The extensive literature on social media use and potential for crisis management helps to substantiate our arguments, while several examples show how brands are using social networks to respond to the current global pandemic. The authors conclude by stressing the restored social function of social media, strengthening their increased use by companies as a force for good.

Role of social media in crisis management

Organizations are vulnerable entities, as demonstrated by the array of adverse events that can cause a crisis. Reasons range from internal causes (think of brands intentionally deviating from socially acceptable practices) to external ones (hostile takeovers, brand boycotts, or even natural disasters).

When a crisis impacts brand reputation negatively, the corporate response plays a role in restoring brand equity, customer trust and therefore financial stability (Hegner, Beldad and Heghuis, 2014). It is widely recognized that the type of response should depend on the nature of the crisis (Dutta and Pullig, 2011; Combs, 2014). Also, a prompt, transparent, and genuine response may lead to a far faster and more holistic recovery.

Social media use during crises has increased over the years, among both corporations and individuals. Social media thus represent an essential additional tool at a brand's disposal for crisis communication (Roshan, Warren, and Carr, 2016). Social media enable companies to contact consumers directly in a timely and effective manner (Kaplan and Heinlein, 2010). It thus appears evident that social media have become the new norm in crisis management. The actual and potential use of social media in crisis management has generated intense interest in academia. Scholars have investigated both the advantages and potential drawbacks of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter in crisis, but many aspects are still not adequately understood (Alexander, 2014; Kaufhold et al., 2019).

Being active on social media during a crisis comes with several benefits for firms. Companies connect with their consumers, support them emotionally, and create social cohesion and stronger relationships (Jin, Liu, and Austin, 2014). They make use of social media for crowdsourcing, co-creating, and crowdfunding (Alexander, 2014). Social media serve as a preferred information source with a higher level of credibility than traditional mass media (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Companies can listen to the consumers' concerns, which helps them to understand consumers better and enables a more emphatic and human response by the firm. Finally, social media can themselves be a place in which a crisis can be detected in time and possibly prevented (Alexander, 2014).

Social media platforms themselves are also adding features to support local communities in a time of crisis and potentially get even more data in return. Think, for example, of the Facebook Safety Check feature which was introduced back in 2014 as a simple and easy way to say you are safe and check on others during times of emergency. Its first massive deployment was on Saturday, April 25, 2015, in the wake of the Nepal earthquake. Immediately, it became a hub of vital real-time information on who was safe, where exactly the person was, and even what they were doing there. This knowledge helped to check on individuals' safety virtually, but also to set up emergency services in the physical world (Kaufhold et al., 2019).

The success of this feature, as well as its frequent use afterward, raises questions about privacy, data use, misinformation, fake news, and the like. It reopens the debate on the dark side of social media as amplifiers of news, regardless of their accuracy or veracity. Researchers warn of social media abuse or misuse during crises (Alexander, 2014; Kaufhold et al., 2019). They furthermore point out the need for evidence-based guidelines when integrating social media into crisis management practices (Jin, Liu, and Austin, 2014).

Social media amidst Covid-19

While the streets are empty, the web is overpopulated. Social media are experiencing a new wave of increased usage, accompanied by a return to their original social scope. Social media have become the place in which to seek refuge, find a sense of community, socialize in the age of physical, social distancing, and urge our families and friends to choose healthy food and more sensible clothing (Kotler, 2020). A recent survey involving 25,000 people across 30 countries revealed that consumers expect brands to use social media to communicate regularly. Points of interest are the company's general situation, as well as potential activities in the area of corporate social responsibility during the crisis (Kantar, 2020).

Usually, in times of external crises, the public is more likely to accept a firm's evasive responses (Jin, Liu, and Austin, 2014). During Covid-19, silence does not seem to be an option for brands, however. Nor is it an option not to integrate social media into crisis management.

Brands, meanwhile, are participating in social media, showing compassion, concern, transparency, and renewed corporate social responsibility amidst Covid-19.

A countless number of social and societal marketing initiatives on social media could be mentioned as examples of such virtuous branded social media marketing tactics amidst Covid-19:

- Foster social change and adherence to government public health guidelines. Examples: brands have redesigned their logos to reinforce social distancing, as in the case of McDonalds, Audi, and the Olympics distancing their iconic arches or circles in their logos. As well as heavy use of Instagram stickers by brands and users alike in support of the #stayathome campaign, there has been extensive use of content marketing to reassure and inspire with positive messages, as in the case of Nike encouraging everyone to keep doing sport at home (with the support of the whole app and Nike digital ecosystem), and for mental and physical health with the campaigns #playinside and #playfortheworld.
- Launch societal causes, often in the form of fundraising campaigns and/or donations to support local hospitals, health care providers, and international health organizations. Examples: In less than two months, over 800 initiatives were activated in Italy by organizations for a total of €709 million in donations (according to <https://italianonprofit.it/aiuti-coronavirus/>, data update on May 2, 2020). Among specific campaigns, some early reactions to the Italian outbreak were particularly interesting. Two examples have been The Ferragnez (among the most influential Influencer couples on the web) and their crowdfunding campaign launched on March 9 via the GoFundMe platform, "*Corona Virus, rafforziamo la terapia intensiva*" in support of San Raffaele Hospital of Milan which raised €4.5M in a couple of weeks. Second, the #Together campaign in which Moncler announced via Instagram (on March 17, 2020) that it was donating €10M for 400 intensive care units in Milan, gathering 60K interactions, many in the form of "thank you" comments to the post.
- Leading by example and a commitment to offering tangible solutions: marketers in categories spanning food to cosmetics to apparel have repurposed manufacturing

facilities to produce essential materials, including hand sanitizers (e.g., Amaro Ramazzotti, L'Oréal) and personal protective equipment like masks (e.g., Miroglio)

What is emerging is a plethora of purpose-driven campaigns based on brand values and established history championing a cause, including partnerships with users, influencers, and people outside the organization to cope with the crisis collectively.

Observing the massive response of brands to coronavirus, the need to add a further, more proactive and generous response to the crises emerges clearly. On the one hand, the existing literature proposes defensive reactions to disasters, such as in the work of Dutta and Pullig (2011), in which three options are at the disposal of brands to respond to crises: denial, reduction-of-offensiveness, and corrective actions; or the four (partially overlapping) clusters proposed by Coombs (2014): denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering. On the other hand, reactions to Covid-19 suggest that a "commitment to the common good" stance can be embraced by a brand in responding to the crisis. It could consist of actions (and social media updates and answers to questions from the public) to contribute to adapt to the new normal.

If the use of marketing to promote social objectives is not unique to marketing (it has a name, social marketing, and almost 50 years of history, having been introduced in 1971 by Kotler and Zaltman), the point here is about adopting social marketing seriously, planning social media marketing activities to make an impact on social changes, accompanying consumers during lockdown with positive messaging, while informing, inspiring and encouraging them. Brands should thus react proactively, with a clear communication strategy and utilizing their own social media channels to establish information authority and ensure the organization's accessibility (Jin, Liu, and Austin, 2014). Alongside the established (and well-studied) social platforms for crisis communication, such as Facebook and Twitter, the younger platforms have proven to be the most engaging, thanks to the power of images and short videos.

The campaign should connect to the core values of brands, even adding new purpose-driven efforts to take into consideration the realities of a world in crisis, via positive messaging that nurtures unity and builds confidence. While not incurring the risk of doing social advertising rather than social marketing, which would be more inappropriate than ever today, among deeply uncertain and emotionally distressed consumers.

Covid-19 could call for a new era of brand purpose, the next new normality in which businesses tangibly contribute to society's advancement and keep communicating self-pride, spelling out how each is serving the common good (Kotler, 2020).

Conclusion

Crises have a low probability of occurring but pose a significant threat to the survival of any organization. This paper contributes to the literature on crisis management, confirming the crucial role of social media as a tool for firms to respond to an emergency, disaster or crises. In a paralyzed physical world, consumers are heading online to socialize, while brands are navigating uncharted waters, rediscovering the social and societal role of social media and using social networks as a force for good amidst a global pandemic.

Consumers are expecting brands to be more responsible, do their part, and communicate about the actions they have taken to contribute to the community. To remain silent is not

an option for firms. Social media seem to be the primary tool for updating and responding in real-time directly with all stakeholders, the media included (as they too are using social media as a source of information and to comment). An enhanced blend of social platforms could and should be used by brands to improve outreach and public engagement, by adding Instagram and TikTok to the more established (including in crisis management) Facebook and Twitter.

The other evidence that emerges when observing the brand response to Covid-19 is that there is another response that seems to be a viable option in a time of global pandemic, which we could call the "commitment to the common good."

It is therefore vital to use the opportunity of this unprecedented crisis to start thinking about a renaissance in the use of marketing and social media as a force for good. Firms nowadays are expected not just to deliver a better self, but a better society as well. For companies, fine-tuning their purpose strategies could be paramount in the months ahead, as many deal with the harsh economic and emotional pressures brought on by the pandemic. Branding self-pride, as well as informing the public in a transparent way, responding honestly, in one word showing the human face of the brand.

What is also noted is that brands should be careful not to exploit the current situation to promote their products and services. Instead, they should seek to play a meaningful role in the daily lives of consumers.

In conclusion, brands might have learned a lot in this unprecedented crisis, not just in terms of forced digital acceleration because of and during Covid-19 lockdown, but also calling for a new era of purpose-driven brands using social media as a place in which to serve the community and the common good.

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