

# Owning an occasion: How brands are standing out during Covid-19

*The ability to anticipate and satisfy consumer needs in a rapidly changing market will be key to success during the pandemic and beyond, as the likes of Mastercard and Budweiser have shown.*

By Matt Barker 1 Jul 2020



The most effective brands are the ones that know how to think differently and stay constantly aware of shifts in consumer behaviour, according to BrandZ's 2020 global top 100 brand ranking.

Businesses that can spot an emerging trend and move quickly to ensure they meet consumer needs enjoy greater levels of success, explains BrandZ global strategy director Graham Staplehurst. When it comes to trends, BrandZ has identified a shift amongst brands towards trying to 'own an occasion'.

"The marketing department strategically can say, 'Right, we're going to make this the brand for X', to actually develop and articulate occasions and position your brand around them," says Staplehurst.

He cites the demand for athleisure, which has been boosted by so many people working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite not being included in the global top 100, athleisure brand Lululemon is third in BrandZ's list of fastest risers in terms of brand value, up 40% on 2019.

Netflix is another brand which has provided an enhanced service during the enforced lockdown, with its popular Netflix Party concept enabling users to watch TV with their friends.

The streaming service is 26 on the BrandZ top 100 ranking (covering the 12 months to 7 April), having grown its brand value by 34% to \$46bn. In the first quarter of 2020 alone, Netflix added almost 16 million new subscribers globally.

The digitisation of payments is another area to grow during the coronavirus pandemic, as consumers continue to choose contactless over cash. With many bars and restaurants expected to encourage customers to order via app and pay with mobile wallets, the shift towards digital transactions is set to accelerate further as we move out of lockdown.

## **Building trust**

One brand that has worked hard to position itself at the forefront of this ongoing change is Mastercard, which has been rewarded with an entry in BrandZ's top 10 for 2020. The payments giant saw its brand valuation rise by 18% in the year to 7 April to \$108bn.

In the opinion of BrandZ, Mastercard's marketing approach has long sought to drive affinity built around consumer trust and innovation, while keeping pace with the "constantly evolving interface between technology and finance".

Mastercard's chief marketing and communications officer, Raja Rajamannar, recognises that the pandemic has forced consumers to try things in a different way, with ecommerce being the obvious example.

"Innovation is at the heart of what we do," he explains. "In a world of similarities, you need to stand out, you need to stand apart for the right reasons and you need to think out of the box, to be innovative, to come up with solutions that are meaningful."

### **This is the time to serve, it's not the time to sell.**

**Raja Rajamannar, Mastercard**

Last month, Mastercard announced the launch of ShopOpenings.com, a free online search tool showing which shops and businesses are open as the lockdown lifts, initially concentrating on the UK and Italy. The concept is part of the brand's Recovery Insight programme, created to assist businesses around the world as they look to manage the health, safety and economic issues of coronavirus.

For Rajamannar, innovation and trust are intrinsically linked and this approach has helped Mastercard both stand out in a crowded global marketplace and increase its value. More than ever, he argues, trust has to be earned through actions rather than words.

"In times of crisis, consumers don't expect a brand to run and hide. You cannot go dark, you have to be there. Otherwise people will see through you from a mile away," Rajamannar states.

"Say and do things because you believe them, stand up for what you should be standing up for. These are the times when they get to see your true character."

## **Capturing the moment**

Owning a moment doesn't just mean coming up with a revolutionary product, it can mean creating an original, inventive campaign, or even dusting off an old one.

During the pandemic Budweiser, (number 53 in BrandZ's top 100 with a brand value of \$24bn) reintroduced its hugely successful 'Whassup' ads. First aired back in 1999, the advert chimed in perfectly with the need to check-in on friends and family.

The 2020 version used new dialogue – “in quarantine, having a Bud” – to repurpose the message, but stay true to the original campaign's spirit and energy.

“It's creative in the sense that they've rehashed an existing and very powerful piece of work,” says BrandZ's global head of research, Martin Guerrieria.

“But also from a literal media buy and creative investment standpoint, they've saved themselves a lot of money by not having to recreate a campaign from scratch.”



The 2020 'Whassup' campaign reworked the hugely successful original from 20 years ago.

Martina Isella, Budweiser senior brand manager, says that thinking differently has always been crucial to the way the brand engages with its audience.

“I don't think we'd really connect with them if we didn't try to think and behave differently,” she says. “If what we do isn't smart and creative, they won't value us.”

Isella agrees with Rajamannar's point that trust is fundamental to a brand's identity and equity. She cites research which shows people tend to put their trust in organisations that use their positions of strength to look out for others, whether that's suppliers or consumers.

“If we're going to keep a place in our audience's lives, we want them to see us as a partner, to know that we understand them and are on their side,” Isella states.

“Whassup spoke to the world that many of our audience found themselves in and did it with a degree of wit and irreverence. It was also important that it had heart; my favourite thing about the ad is that it's sincere and has a real purpose. People have used it to check in on their friends through social media. Combine that all together and it's created a real sense of shared values.”

Isella admits that it's too early to tell how marketing messages are going to be delivered post-pandemic, but she believes there will be changes in tone and approach.

Trust, as much as anything else, will play a big part in creating deeper engagement, something Rajamannar fully agrees with.

“These aren't the times when you should try and sell things to your customers, there's a sensibility that you have to display,” he adds. “This is the time to serve, it's not the time to sell.”