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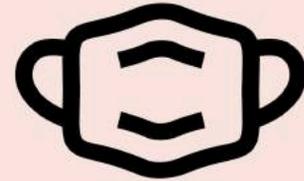
Stay Meaningful

How can brand marketing adapt to coronavirus in a culturally relevant way?

April 2020



A pack of 5 non-medical grade masks
L.A. Protects



What makes for meaningful marketing during Covid-19?

From left: Chipotle; L'Oréal; food deliveries to healthcare workers in NYC; facemasks by Reformation clothing.

Covid-19 is resetting cultural and behavioural norms on a mass scale, leaving many brands and marketers unsure of how – and where – to tread strategically.

We're facing the first virus to take hold in an era of 'viral' content sharing; and the pace of the marketing landscape has vastly accelerated, as consumers stay home and seek compelling content (and distraction) from brands online. These shifts have seen brands innovating rapidly – yet at the same time, brands need to take a long-view, aware that while new behaviours might come & go, brands will come out of coronavirus stronger if remembered as brands that truly 'did something' for good.

In order to build such brand associations with emotional sensitivity, comms must be **culturally relevant**. We've taken a close-up look at how 3 brands are navigating Covid-19 effectively by tapping into the wider cultural landscape in which their values sit.

This report explores Crocs' online strategy; BrewDog's hand gel announcement; and the cultural meanings & significance of Oatly's Instagram campaign.

We'll wrap up with **3 key take-outs**, providing brands with clear direction on ways to navigate the crisis and build clear connections with consumers in distanced times.

Brands are inseparable from the culture that surrounds them.

In this report, we've used granular semiotic analysis to uncover the ways brands adapt to cultural changes, and tell stories to consumers at a conscious & subconscious level.

Focusing on how brands have adapted their marketing **before and during Covid-19**, we've explored the ways key visual & language cues (e.g. colours, TOV) can effectively communicate the changing cultural meaning of a brand's values, while remaining faithful to their brand equity and heritage.

Sign Salad is a cultural insight agency, trained in semiotics and language analysis. By using semiotics, we help clients understand how culture impacts the way people respond to their brands and products, and ensure that they are optimally relevant and meaningful.

Whilst talking to consumers will help to understand their opinions and perceptions, **semiotics** investigates the cultural conditions that created those beliefs - and how those beliefs will change as culture changes.



1. Crocs

In 2015, Crocs staged a powerful brand turnaround by defining comfort as empowerment - from its “Find your Fun” campaign to “Come as you are” (2019). This, and their renowned creative collaborations, gave Crocs an ideal foundation from which to act as a brand-meets-public service.

Before Covid-19: Creative Comfort

Before coronavirus, Crocs had associated their clog-like shoes with creativity and self-referential wit, directly addressing the products’ perceived visual shortcomings - rather than attempting to deflect from them. Language focused on ‘being comfortable in your own shoes’ aligned the brand with the cultural momentum of self-expression and self-definition that has surged in recent years.

Crocs were on track to dial up self-expression, and encourage fans (“CrocNation”) to embrace standing out. Their strategic focus on charm-like Jibbitz, ‘one of a kind’ brand ambassadors, and collaborations that strayed into the surreal (Crocs x KFC; Crocs x BEAMS fishing vest sandals; Crocs x Peeps candy) conferred the brand with a sense of delight in absurdity, and a creative interpretation of the meaning of ‘comfort’ food. ▶



Before Covid-19: Crocs x KFC. Yes, they're chicken-scented.



During Covid-19: Delightful Distraction meets Serious Care

Building on established brand associations with a) surrealism and b) the importance of basic comfort, Crocs identified & communicated their brand relevance amidst the surreal impact of the pandemic on home life, and the impact of a devastating crisis on our physical and emotional comfort and wellbeing.

In addressing this, Crocs' response has been twofold. They released a series of GIFs focused on the oft-bizarre scenes of WFH life, showing responsible citizens weight-lifting and draining pasta with the help of their clogs. The campaign builds on their brand equity in playfulness, while the medium reveals Crocs' understanding of the relief internet humour provides in our daily lives at home.

This light-footed playfulness is matched by the serious approach the brand has taken to ethical outreach. Crocs have supported healthcare workers on a mass scale, donating a free pair to any healthcare heroes who request them - reminding us that utility is Crocs ultimate RTB. Taken together, the brand's response to Covid-19 strengthens the message they've been building about the real cultural meaning of "comfort" all along.



Crocs Shoes @Crocs · 25 Mar

Now and always, we need to take care of each other. Sending love to you, #CrocNation 🍷 And sending free shoes to our frontline heroes in healthcare. Visit crocs.com/freeforhealthc... to request your pair. #CrocsCares

WE'RE SHARING A FREE PAIR FOR HEALTHCARE

Our goal has always been to keep people comfortable in their own shoes and now, in the face of adversity, there are certain individuals who need that feeling more than ever.

Crocs is donating a free pair of shoes (with free shipping) to healthcare workers on the frontlines of COVID-19.

If you're a healthcare professional in need of our easy-to-clean, comfortable Crocs shoes, we've got you taken care of.

crocs

323 1.5K 5.7K

During Covid-19: Crocs pair serious philanthropy with creative surprise - not unlike the 'business-meets-fun' message of their WFH campaign.





2. BrewDog

In the wake of Covid-19, BrewDog put their 2020 activism-focused rebrand to the test, producing 'Brewgel' hand sanitizer at their Scottish distillery. The PR image accompanying this announcement reveals some subtle changes to their new Punk IPA pack design, adapted onto pump dispenser bottles. These savvy visual alterations have allowed BrewDog to imbue their hand sanitizer initiative with culturally & category-relevant codes, while building on their rebranded identity in an unfamiliar category.

Before Covid-19: From Anarchy to Activism

In early 2020, BrewDog, the 'punk' brewery, underwent a rebrand resulting in cleaner, simpler pack visuals and the launch of BrewDog Tomorrow – an initiative with a six-step sustainability plan. This marked a brand evolution, from BrewDog as a rebellious, anarchic disruptor – known for its publicity stunts and shock tactics (e.g. their 'sober as a motherfu' campaign) – toward BrewDog as a more considered, yet still radical, activist for good, promising to protect the planet through demonstrable action.

During Covid-19: 1. Credibly Clinical

For the hand gel shown in their PR imagery, BrewDog's teal-blue brand livery has been lightened to create a cooler, clinical blue, which connotes pharmaceutical and medical contexts (think hospital scrubs, latex gloves, etc). This change in tone legitimizes the beer brand's new venture by coding Brewgel as clinically sterilised, at a time where building trust in product safety is increasingly vital.

Brewgel's legitimacy as a viable disinfectant is enhanced by the cropping and complete delineation of the blue-silver shield on-pack. Whereas the shield of BrewDog's Punk IPA beer refers to a heraldic emblem, it has here been accentuated in order to evoke the shields used ubiquitously on flu medicine, coding medical protection and defence against viruses. ►

Before Covid-19: BrewDog rebrands, from rebellious disruptor to radical activist (below)



During Covid-19: cues of clinical protection naturally intersect with BrewDog's VI





Antibac category conventions: standard functionality



NHS hand-washing posters: urgent, solemn & instructive



BrewDog website.



WW2: national pride in industrial production.

During Covid-19: 2. Playful Irony

The juxtaposition of medical cues usually associated with serious authority, with references to beer and “punk” (connoting rebellious counterculture), help elevate Brewgel above the standard, functional monotony of antibacterial category. By contrast to the straightforward impact signaled by most antibacterial gels (think Purell and Cuticura: transparent packs foregrounding the purity of the gel within, medicinal iconography, repetition of the word “kills”), as well as the urgency of hand-washing posters, which are solemn and instructive - BrewDog’s sanitizer for “punks” repositions cleanliness and healthfulness as relatively fun and irreverent while also upholding the brand’s distinctive, countercultural voice.

During Covid-19: 3. Rallying behind Industry

Finally, in featuring identical bottles in a horizontal line on a diamond plate surface, BrewDog’s imagery has tapped into the changing cultural meaning of industrial mass-production in the wake of urgent crisis. Just a month ago, factory visuals would have coded brands as environmentally unfriendly, and lacking artisanal authenticity. Today, they are a reminder of the new-found value and appreciation we have for national industrial production, and its ability to keep supply chains turning, while also furnishing market niches of scarce essentials - whether that’s ventilator parts, medical scrubs, or indeed, antibacterial gel. As a result of this changing cultural context, BrewDog’s assembly-line visuals of hand-gel represent the brand as a strong and stable industrial force, one that bravely continues to operate in order to keep the British nation going.

**LET’S ENSURE WE
HAVE A PLANET
TO BREW BEER ON.**

BrewDog statement of purpose.

In all, BrewDog has built on its existing ‘punk’ equity whilst authentically putting their re-brand manifesto into action (“let’s ensure we have a planet to brew beer on”). They’ve also overcome a dominant opposition between ‘beer’ and ‘health’, by combining cues of sanitation and protection with cues of beer as national spirit and strength - alongside their signature brand voice. BrewDog is thus distinctively repositioned as a ‘rebel with a cause’ - a brand that understands both pleasure and functionality - while establishing itself as a vital, credible cog in the nation’s fight against Covid-19.

*BrewDog has released an alternative pack design to the visuals circulated via press. The PR image remains on their social media as a showcase of the ‘Brewgel’ concept.



3. Oatly

*Plant-based disrupter Oatly's characteristic 'we don't mind if you like our product or not' brand rhetoric (think back to the print ad that led with: "This tastes sh*t!") has found a natural footing at a time of crisis, in which brands are connecting with people, rather than trying to sell. Responding to Covid-19, Oatly have dialled up their communication of down-to-earth relatability and empathy, exemplified in their Instagram strategy.*

Before Covid-19: Ecological Impact

Oatly has long used pack iconography & comms to highlight the gentle impact oat milk production has on the planet. This emphasis on ecology gave consumers a sense that they were participating in wider movement, as implied by such language as "The Oatly Way", indicative of a shared manifesto. Using this language of purpose almost made buying Oatly feel like a climate change pledge – a small switch to help consumers do their bit for the planet. In the light of Covid-19, Oatly has changed their comms focus from the health of the planet, to staying healthy at home.

During Covid-19: 1. Down to Earth Domesticity

With consumers stuck at home, Oatly has deftly shifted from the importance of doing more, to doing less. Oatly's Instagram visuals and captions resist the tendency to depict home life as an overly-perfected sanctuary, recognising that the pretence of perfection in social media has negative consequences for mental health. Numerous posts feature an individual resting on their couch, doing absolutely nothing in particular – no need for exercise bikes or dazzling homecrafts. Home-dwellers are surrounded by natural, ▶



Before Covid-19: Oatly's focus on carbon-labelling, uniting consumers in a collective effort to protect global resources.



During Covid-19: Domestic downtime, and a candid perspective on being 'alone together' at home.

“[our copywriter] is staying at home to help others even though his current copy skills are diminishing by the hour.”



oatly: '[this copywriter] is going crazy staying indoors so will write anything to any image as long as it doesn't demand too much analytical or emotional or logical brain power because there isn't any analytical or emotional or logical brain power available at the moment'



The Outline, March 26, 2020.



During Covid-19: Oatly call attention to the difficulty of working out what to wear in lockdown.

....non-filtered light, typically shot at an askew angle, further connoting offhand relaxation.

Oatly's IG captions (e.g. above) mirror this down-home visual approach. The humour is low-key and intentionally monotonous, the text repetitive, all reflecting a resistance to pretending that home life is fantastically exciting or adventurous.

During Covid-19: 2. Productivity & Transparency

While Oatly develops its focus on individuality and idiosyncrasy - relating these quirks to the realities of isolation at home - it also makes a candid admission about the difficulties of creating great work during social distancing.

With modest admissions of deficiencies (e.g. one photo captions refers to "point this post is trying to make which is - nothing really") Oatly offers strength and solidarity by showing vulnerability. Posts directly address the writer's block facing their copywriter, and such captions as "going crazy staying indoors" align with emergent cultural discourse challenging the need to be hyper-productive during this estranged, newfound reality of working life.

During Covid-19: 3. Empathy & Authenticity

This all cements Oatly's position as a brand that provides reassurance and strength through acknowledging human fallibility, during a time when customers are emotionally vulnerable or fragile.

Oatly's long-held claim to be "like milk, but made for humans" has taken on new significance in this human-focused social media campaign, which reminds us that every human can do their bit by doing nothing at all - staying home & staying safe.

Key take-outs: guidelines for comms in Covid-19

1 Playfulness works when purposeful brand action is shown (not just told).

Brands don't need to avoid humour, or even levity, in difficult times. However, this 'feel-good' factor must be anchored in practical initiatives tackling (physical or mental) health during the pandemic.



Crocs' philanthropic outreach gives the brand license to communicate lighthearted fun in their WFH comms.



BrewDog turn their 'punk' irreverence into a strength, while delivering a serious message about cleanliness.



Oatly's offbeat humour & wit is rooted in human-centered empathy – a playful take on distraction as a public service.

2 Adapt to the changing cultural meaning of your brand values.

Instead of focusing exclusively on product attributes & functionality, brands can create relevant comms by aligning themselves with the wider **cultural** meanings of their brand values & assets – innovating in a meaningful way, while staying faithful to brand equity.



Crocs carry forward their holistic understanding of 'comfort' as both physical care and light comic relief.



BrewDog have communicated the changing cultural meaning of national industry as a source of strength & solidarity.



Building on their slogan "like milk, but for humans", Oatly have adapted to the current meaning of 'human' as showing vulnerability.

3 Address the challenges consumers face IRL.

More than ever, communicating authenticity is about communicating empathy, and addressing the difficulties of daily life in the 'new reality' head-on.



Crocs donations directly help healthcare workers, while also helping consumers who donate to feel a little more connected...



...while their comms tap into the struggle of keeping up grocery levels during the crisis.

oatly: '[this copywriter] is going crazy staying indoors so will write anything to any image as long as it doesn't demand too much analytical or emotional or logical brain power because there isn't any analytical or emotional or logical brain power available at the moment...'

Oatly 'breaks the fourth wall' to give a candid nod to the difficulties of productivity while WFH.

A dark purple circle containing the text "SIGN SALAD" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, arranged in two lines.

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Thank you.
We hope you're staying safe and well.

Please feel free to get in touch with us at hello@signalsalad.com.

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