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Practical guidance for an ever-changing world

The Importance of Including Social Distancing in Marketing Campaigns

Even after the coronavirus crisis has subsided, social distancing will have left its mark, most notably on the advertisements we watch on TV and see on the Internet. Can anyone honestly say they could watch Coca-Cola's iconic "Hilltop" commercial now without urging the singers to stand six feet apart from each other?

A Change in Tone

A poll conducted by [Morning Consult](#), found that 57 percent of respondents thought that an ad showing people shaking hands was "inappropriate" due to the coronavirus, while 55 percent of respondents found hugging to be inappropriate. The majority of the respondents who found shaking hands and hugging to be inappropriate said that they would be less likely to purchase the product or service featured in the advertisement.

On the opposite side, 70 percent of the respondents believed that ads which showed people practicing social distancing were appropriate, with the majority of them saying that they would be more likely to purchase the product or service featured in the advertisement.

Some marketers have learned the importance of social distancing the hard way. For example, Hershey's pulled two spots that featured hugs, handshakes and other human interaction, including 94 year old Bob Williams handing Hershey bars to strangers. Hershey replaced the spots with ads that did not include people.

Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) suspended its "Finger Lickin' Good" campaign in the United Kingdom, which featured people sticking their hands in their mouths (or their friend's mouths) and licking their fingers. KFC pulled the campaign after 150 people reportedly complained to the U.K.'s advertising review board.

The Bottom Line

Marketers need to tread lightly when showing advertisements of people going back to their daily lives, even if the advertisements show social distancing, as these ads may not reflect the reality for everyone in this country.

If marketers do show people going back to their daily lives, depicting appropriate social distancing and avoiding close personal interactions will be of utmost important since consumers want to see advertisements that promote social distancing and, failing to do so, could result in public criticism and negative PR.

Similarly, GEICO pulled its “Perfect High Five” spot, which compared a woman switching to GEICO to the feeling when you give “a co-worker a really good high five” after people on social media complained that showing high fives sent the wrong message during the pandemic.

Coronavirus-Conscious Advertisements

For many marketers, social distancing and social responsibility have become a focal point of their campaigns.

Recently, Nike launched a social media campaign with Tiger Woods and other athletes that encouraged everyone to “Play inside, play for the world,” while Coca-Cola ran ads on a Times Square billboard stating, “Staying apart is the best way to stay connected.” TD Bank remade its successful “Dancing Man” spot to move the dancing employee from the bank to the safety of his own home. Even McDonald’s redesigned its iconic logo to separate the golden arches to encourage social distancing.

As businesses start to come back to life and employees return to the office, marketers may decide to shift their messaging from staying at home to getting back to business and daily life. Notably, such messaging still carries public relations risks because, while certain parts of the country may be open, other parts are not. As such, showing people out in the public — even with social distancing — may come off as insensitive to those who can only leave their homes for essential items. In addition, as areas of the country begin to re-open, those areas may quickly shut down again so there is no guarantee that this messaging will reflect most people’s reality.

Situations to Avoid in Advertisements

If marketers want to show people going back to their daily lives, they need to tread lightly and be flexible with their messaging in case local, state or national rules begin to tighten up again. However, if marketers do go forward with this messaging, they should incorporate social distancing into their campaigns in accordance with the guidelines set forth below.

Interactions and Mannerism

- >> People standing less than six feet apart from each other. At a minimum, people should stay at least six feet away from each other.
- >> Close human interaction, such as hugging, kissing, handshakes and high fives.
- >> Handing items to other people. To the extent applicable, focus instead on no contact delivery and other no contact services.



- >> Licking fingers or including fingers in your mouth or anyone else's mouth.
- >> Touching your face or placing any objects on your face (except for face masks — of course).

Environmental

- >> In-person meetings. Consider showing video-conference meetings instead.
- >> Sit-in dining at restaurants. It still may be best to focus on take-out and delivery, but if you choose to show sit down dining, make sure tables are at least six feet apart, restaurants are not at full capacity and employees are shown wearing gloves, masks and appropriate safety gear.
- >> Crowded venues, such as concerts, athletic events, parades and other large public gatherings. Even in the areas of the country that have opened up, people may not be ready to venture into large crowds anytime soon. However, you can incorporate pre-COVID-19 crowd footage into your advertisements, but if you do so, a disclaimer noting that the footage was shot prior to COVID-19 is recommended.

For More Information

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