



A SHARED LEARNING CURVE

Insight professionals share their top survival tips for COVID-19

Becky Miles | Research Director | becky.miles@walnutunlimited.com



A vibrant rainbow is drawn on a dark, textured asphalt surface. The rainbow consists of several parallel bands of color: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The colors are slightly blurred and mixed together, giving it a hand-painted or chalk-drawn appearance. The background is a dark, granular surface of asphalt with small stones and pebbles.

A shared experience

Given the turbulent few months we've all been through, we reached out to over 30 professionals from financial services to retail, from insight to marketing, to discuss how the pandemic had impacted them – at a personal level but also on a business level.

Here at Walnut, we love to get to the heart of consumer decision making – Human Understanding is more than just our business, it's our passion. You might find their experiences resemble yours, but do their answers and reactions, as well?

Here are their top shares on what's helped them to survive the experience so far...

O N E

Be proactive – but don't forget your customers!

A universal truth that insight professionals shared was that the current speed of decision-making is quicker than they'd ever dared to try previously, with traditional processes being over-ruled. It's important not to forget what has been experienced and learnt – that if you have a vision, you can likely make this come true sooner rather than later. Rather than perfecting and refining a concept or proposition, as the pandemic hit, marketing and operations teams were left with no choice but to make changes quickly and then find out the impact on experience later. The adoption of a trial and error approach was daunting, but many have found this liberating.

However, for many companies, this goes against their usual customer-led approach to strategy, and category leaders, including Tesco, expressed an appetite to bring the customer voice back to life. Similarly, Aviva agreed that *"Voice of the customer is a priority"*, now more so than ever, in order to adapt touchpoints accordingly (particularly in a service-led category).

It continues to be vitally important to understand (and be able to react as quickly as possible) to how consumers' perceptions and needs change. With a drastic change in market factors and social influences, we see a shift in individual factors. We know from Behavioural Science that people have an underlying need to feel autonomous and in control. This is especially important now as consumers face higher levels of anxiety due to instability and a dramatic change to their way of life – so any company that can provide this stability will excel under these conditions.

Organisations that are *agile* in adapting to evolving customer needs will be more successful than those that stick to the 'same old' without understanding how customer needs have changed. The extent that new skills and confidence around a brand or service is established now will be key – this will inform the strength of the brand relationship post-lockdown as the discrepancies in market and social factors likely diminish.



"You must create more constant feedback with consumer... and check things on an ongoing basis"



T W O

Embrace a digital world

In a lockdown world where we've been unable to visit our local high street, a shift to online has had a ripple effect across every category – and has often been a change for the better. For financial services, digital transformation has accelerated, with the team at Aviva sharing the wisdom to *"Make sure everything digital works"*, and Lowell commenting *"Digital demand has gone through the roof"*. Other insight teams have also shifted focus to digitising elements which were much longer-term priorities.

Whilst businesses have had to speed up digital development, the same is also true of customers, who may never have interacted with businesses online before (or at least done so infrequently), and so are adopting new touchpoints. We know from Behavioural Science that humans have a 'Status Quo Bias' – an internal preference for things to stay as they are. Now that pressure to change behaviour has been applied, new 'status quos' will develop, and organisations who are well-established digitally will reap the benefits well after the lockdown has ended. With the reduced social contact that arises from digital solutions, closing the gap and making the experience feel personalised is important. Online services will need to continue to impress and cope with sustained, increased demand.

"Digital demand has gone through the roof!"



T H R E E

Strike the right tone

For businesses who have seen demand soar, lockdown throws up some different challenges. This was a commonality across supermarkets and FMCG brands, including frozen food and personal care. At a tough time for the whole nation, the balance of driving visibility, showcasing initiatives to build equity, and being careful not to be perceived as profiteering is tricky to navigate. Given the prevalence of the grocery sector at this time, there is a real challenge in communicating new initiatives (e.g. donating food boxes to the NHS) in a way that feels authentic rather than advantageous.

Tone is clearly important here. One insight team described this need for relevance as "Stop now to move after" – expressing the need to maintain a clear vision, and not diverge too far from the core purpose. Indeed, brands need to remain recognisable to benefit from existing equity and emotional connection. Given the dramatic change in our way of life, it may be tempting to reflect this in the way that businesses conduct themselves. Although responsiveness and flexibility are key, it is important to remain 'on-brand' throughout.

Customers are incredibly sensitive to authenticity and will have internalised perceptions of each brand they interact with. Any comms that seem at odds with this existing brand image will lack 'fluency'. The idea of fluency is understood in Behavioural Science as the ease of processing in the brain. The more fluent something is, the faster it is understood, and importantly, the more it is liked and trusted. Any messaging which is complicated or inconsistent will be at best ignored, and at worst will cause confusion, distrust and disengagement. Multiple channels delivering the same messaging will increase not just familiarity, but also clarity and in return credibility of the message.

F O U R

Be prepared to change up campaign planning

Campaign planning has been turned upside down across industries. As the pandemic escalated, planned content was pulled across sectors, and in some instances new content needed to be produced at record speed. For some, this meant bringing marketing in-house to speed up turnaround – a common move that enabled brands to communicate with agility. The added benefit for sectors that have seen a decline in sales is that this is a more economical approach and avoids going 'dark' completely.

At the same time, the professionals we had conversations with were almost universally communicating with a slightly different audience to their typical consumer, as the pandemic shifted behaviour. The attraction of a new audience, whilst positive commercially, also requires a new route of engagement to maintain a dialogue and foster loyalty.

For some brands, social media content was re-purposed to produce relevant, up-to-date campaigns – providing an endless pool of anecdotes, real customers and perceptions to tap into. Humans are hard-wired to look to others for information on how to behave, especially in new and uncertain circumstances. As social creatures, we rely on the behaviour of others to guide our own, and this has never been more relevant than now, with the high angst of the pandemic, and the lack of any protocol or preparation for times like these. Knowing that our behaviour conforms to the group, and learning from others, is key to alleviating some of our discomfort. Satisfying this need for reassurance is easier in the digital era with the accessibility of information, and the culture of sharing and cooperation that has come to the fore over the last few months.

"Comms testing is going to be in demand in the near future"





"Customers are saying
how impressed they are"

F I V E

Learn from improved service interactions

Whilst customers and businesses alike are having a very tough time, a silver lining is the improvement in dialogue between the two. The sincerity of empathy from customer service providers combined with customers' patience and shift in expectations has created a harmony for many businesses. This is underpinned by a growth in call centre productivity as most handlers now work from home and can give customers their undivided attention.

At a time when services and purchases were thrown into disarray, many companies faced an influx of customer service enquiries. Whilst this could have damaged brand trust, in many instances, businesses we spoke to reported a rise in customer satisfaction - *"Customers are saying how impressed they are"*.

A heightened sense of community and cooperation has been an interesting side-effect of the current climate, and businesses need to follow suit to build a positive emotional connection and closeness with their customers. There is strong evidence from psychological science that a sense of familiarity leads to increased liking and trust. Whilst customers are feeling distanced from others, they will be searching for, and more open to, close relationships with businesses and brands. By investing in this relationship now, brands will endow themselves with increased liking and trust in the long-term.

S I X

A simpler future

At a time when extra demand has been felt across product lines and services alike, a final consistent theme and pointer for the future, was to be less afraid of rationalising ranges and providing fewer choices. To focus energy effectively, many businesses have streamlined their output to prioritise what the nation really needs, with some seeking to make this a permanent change. The key here is simple and clear communications.

We are drawn towards what is easy; people follow the path of least resistance, so prefer options which require low cognitive or behavioural effort. We are bombarded with new and potentially contradicting information every day, and are thrown into new and unfamiliar scenarios to make decisions in. Organisations with a simpler range or service portfolio will undoubtedly speed up decision-making for their customers and make life easier.

Beyond just product lines, there is a need for simplicity within organisations too! Above all, those we heard from universally spoke of their desire for more succinct communication. In a world of seemingly endless video calls, described as “web fatigue”, nobody wants to extend meetings for longer than needed. Set up a clear agenda and be strict on time to allow breaks between calls, or even schedule meeting-free days. Leadership should be clear and efficient to cut through with important messages, and of course, to lead by example.



A hand holding a dandelion seed head against a sunset background. The dandelion is in sharp focus, with its seeds clearly visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus gradient of orange, pink, and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The hand is dark and silhouetted against the bright background.

Moving forwards

Don't stop now!

A consistent theme that emerged from our conversations, was that innovation and creativity have reached new heights in the last few months. One insight professional articulated this as learning the "*art of the impossible*" in order to thrive. Whilst often this came about through necessity, as a reaction to the market changing around us (i.e. we need to tell the UK how to do their grocery shopping in a new way) – the renewed energy behind solution creation and transformation should be protected and maintained. "*Empower teams to share and collaborate*" advised Head of Insight at a not-for-profit organisation; echoed by a leading automotive player, who championed "*joined up thinking with collective purpose*".

Facilitating collective problem-solving and reflecting on progress that has been made in recent months are key. The Optimism Bias in Behavioural Science dictates that we will overestimate the odds of our own success compared to others. Your company can play to this - celebrate what has been achieved to inspire and fuel future momentum within your businesses. Close the present-to-future gap, by setting the long-term expectation that the future will be even better than before. Spread the hope you want your customers to feel within your own company.

Thank you!

We'd like to extend a massive thank you to everyone who contributed to this work. We had open and honest conversations with over 30 professionals from retail, financial services, automotive, tech, media, FMCG and charitable organisations.



Thank you.

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