

06 / |
MORE THAN A TAGLINE |
Who are you?

11 / |
TALK THE RIGHT TALK |
Guide don't divide

14 / |
CREATIVELY DIFFERENT |
A new kind of brand image

THE knowledge

Navigating the modern B2B marketing landscape

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THE
BRAND
ISSUE

EDITOR'S NOTE



In the last edition of The Knowledge, we explored how the B2B landscape has quickly changed against the backdrop of COVID-19 and offered our humble opinions on how businesses can move forward during these uncertain times. In this issue, we take a closer look at what the current pandemic means for brands.

As B2B marketers, we are wired to think about how to build authentic, valuable brands that stand out in the market. But frustratingly, in the space of a few months, all the careful planning and important brand work that was set in motion has, for many, gone out of the window. Panic has set in, priorities have shifted, and marketers are not sure on how to make their next move. For some, branding has been brushed under the carpet. After all, we're now navigating new and unknown terrain, so it's best to keep quiet, right?

As appealing as it sounds, burying our heads in the sand isn't an option at the moment - brands must remain present and show resilience and strength during tricky times. Businesses need to adapt and acknowledge that any decisions they make now need to be well considered, as they will impact how their brands are perceived in the long-term. While it may seem unlikely given current challenges, there are ways for businesses to maintain their brand visibility and strengthen their reputation in times of crisis.

Francesca MacKenzie
Editor

1/2

PRODUCTS
ARE MADE IN
THE FACTORY,



BRAND PRESENCE IN A TIME OF CRISIS

This quote from acclaimed designer Walter Landor feels fitting as we look to discuss the concept of 'brand' and its place within the changing climate we're now faced with as a result of COVID-19.

It is possible to take a product and assess it based on its physical value. Perception and opinion, however, can be harder to measure, and it is these key drivers that determine a company's real value in the marketplace.

Brands are faced with a dilemma; with no one able to predict what comes next and any move they make likely to be remembered forever, they must act both quickly and with insight. They need to understand their customers better than they ever have before and focus on the things they care about in order to reach them in an effective way.

And this goes for the most established brands too; customers are turning to the brands they love the most and judging their actions in the current crisis to see if they are worthy of continued support. As we've discussed in previous issues, the demand for brand authenticity is high and in the time of coronavirus this has and will only continue to increase.

Whether through strengthening something you already have, changing it temporarily or starting afresh, brand presence is the key to weathering this storm.

2/2

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but brands
are created
in the mind.

Walter Landor

MORE THAN A TAGLINE

Who are you and why should they care?

A brand is more than what we see and hear, more than a slogan or an advertising campaign. It is the essence of a company, a core set of values, the connection they make with customers – both logical and emotional. It's a lasting impression and should run through everything you say and do.

“While marketers – and customers – may differ on the details, most would agree that ‘The Brand’ is made up of tangible attributes and intangible emotional connections.”¹

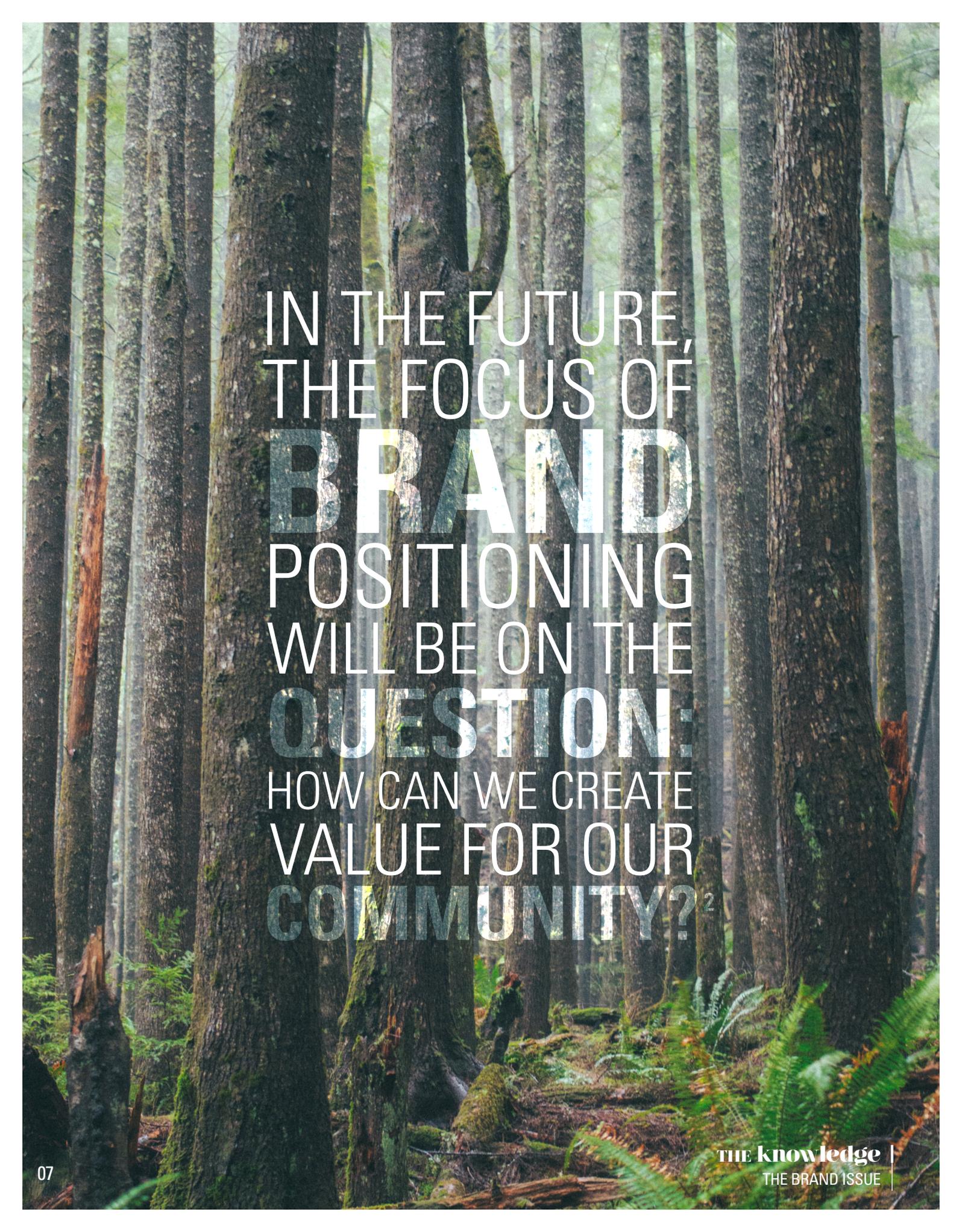
Making this connection with the customer goes beyond the visual, beyond the use of clever language – it must resonate on a deeper level. In the current climate we are faced with, this is even more important as consumers look to brands for comfort and reassurance. The message you're putting out there must be appropriate, relevant and sensitive to the situation.

One thing is for sure, going silent is never the answer. Companies must get creative and channel that creativity into either building and honouring the values set out before the crisis or making a change and repositioning their brand.

The common theme running through both of these scenarios is being present. Whatever you decide about your brand, it must remain present in the community it serves and be seen to contribute to the common good. People don't care about trivial things right now - they're looking for real meaning and value.

When you work with an agency, one of the first questions they will ask is - what is something only you can do? And, in the time of coronavirus, what is the one thing you can do right before anyone else that adds value? This will guide every decision made there onwards.

1. Medium, Why your brand is more important than ever, [online], <https://medium.com/ama-marketing-news/why-your-brand-is-more-important-than-ever-4d7995a24188>, [accessed 3rd June]
2. Forbes, How to adjust your brand strategy in the time of coronavirus, [online], <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccavogels/2020/03/30/how-to-adjust-your-brand-strategy--in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>, [accessed 3rd June]



IN THE FUTURE,
THE FOCUS OF
BRAND
POSITIONING
WILL BE ON THE
QUESTION:
HOW CAN WE CREATE
VALUE FOR OUR
COMMUNITY?²

VALUE FROM WITHIN

Working from the inside out...

So, how do you ensure optimum brand presence or positioning as we all navigate our way through the unknown landscape of the virus?

In the B2B market, how do you ensure your company is seen as valuable?

Firstly, ensure all areas of your business demonstrate value to the customer. Across the board, your staff should embody the business values, mission statement and purpose you set out.

Today's mindful customer is thorough – conducting research, looking to peer recommendations and judging every brand they interact with – so from customer service to senior management, happy and informed staff add value to your overall brand. They must live and breathe what you stand for, collectively giving new energy to your brand offering through the way they conduct business.

This also goes for any of the content or collateral you roll out – consistency is key, and your brand must be strong and aligned. Your customers will remember you for what you say, produce and how you come across at this time.

“A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well.”

Jeff Bezos

TIME TO LEARN

Let your customers guide you.

Whether through social listening, competitor research or customer surveys, look at what your current and potential customers are interacting with, saying and caring about in the B2B space.

Measuring sentiment and buying behaviour will help you to adapt your messaging accordingly and offer a relevant, valuable service.

Become a respected resource for your customer – a place they need to go – and ensure your brand remains front of mind throughout these changing, challenging times and beyond.

“Use your positioning strategy to alleviate customer fears and build deeper relationships”.³

Many companies are questioning how to pivot effectively, both for their customers and their bottom line, in the current climate – but with any move you make, it’s crucial to be aligned across all areas of the business and respect the history you have shared with customers.

Remember, your customers are facing some of the same challenges and will be looking to brands they know and trust to remain strong and consistent.

3. Fabrik, Brand positioning and brand response in a pandemic, [online], <https://fabrikbrands.com/brand-positioning-and-brand-response-in-a-pandemic/>, [accessed 3rd June]

"THERE ARE **WINNERS AND LOSERS**, AND THE **INTELLIGENT BRANDS**, THE **COMPETITIVE BRANDS**, ARE THE ONES THAT REALISE THEY NEED TO **ACTIVATE THEIR PURPOSE** NOW.

THEY NEED TO **COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY** AND BE **AUTHENTIC**. IN THE LONG TERM **THEY WILL GAIN.**"⁴

TALK THE RIGHT TALK

Guide don't divide!

Let's talk about tone of voice. It's something you probably set out early on in your brand development. But is it right for the current times?

Think about the language you're using, whether it be in advertisements or on social media; now's not the time for hard hitting sales, but instead for empathy, care and transparency.

Having said that, changing your voice too much can be detrimental and affect overall brand consistency. Many brands are identifiable by the language and tone they use, so "ensuring that your output shares the same tone and opinions removes any confusion, allowing your audience to form easy associations with your content."⁵

Perhaps now is not the time to change tone, but instead how your company communicates. This takes us back to the question of authenticity and clarity; with all the uncertainty your customers are currently faced with, along with the changes everyone has made to their buying habits, it's important to communicate your position clearly and show your business is willing to adapt in order to best serve its customers.

4. Marketing Week, Are brands living up to their purpose during the coronavirus crisis? [online] <https://www.marketingweek.com/brand-purpose-coronavirus-crisis/>, [accessed 2nd June]
5. Articulate Marketing, How to strengthen your brand with your marketing strategy, [online], <https://www.articulatemarketing.com/blog/strengthen-your-brand>, [accessed 3rd June]

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

It's clear. We've spoken about the importance of storytelling in previous issues and nothing has changed. If anything, now it's more important.

Think about the story you want to tell – yes it needs to be relevant to your company and its offering, but it also needs to be relevant to the business community you are a part of, how your customers already see you and how that may have changed in recent times.

Effective communication - not just in what you put out into the world - but with those internal and external stakeholders crucial to your business' success should not be forgotten about. Talk to employees, managers, your investors, and work with them to make sure any story you tell or claims you make aren't just for commercial benefit. Together, you will need to listen and learn from what's happening in the wider landscape and adapt your service offering to try and solve the pain points people are currently facing.

Take Time Out Magazine as an example. Their temporary rebrand to 'Time In' was prompted by a customer need for entertainment while in lockdown. They listened and took action, helping people in the way they need during this time.

Your brand may need to adapt to the pandemic, but any changes made will still need to be relevant post-crisis. So, embrace new ways of working “and connect with customers, knowing that this will likely have lasting effects.”⁶

6. Harvard Business Review, Brand marketing through the coronavirus crisis, [online] <https://hbr.org/2020/04/brand-marketing-through-the-coronavirus-crisis>, [accessed 2nd June]

BE THERE DIGITALLY

The importance of being digitally savvy isn't a new thing and has become crucial to create solutions for the aspects of B2B marketing that have been rendered impossible due to the pandemic, like face-to-face tradeshows and factory tours.

As we navigate our way through today's changing landscape, the most successful, future-facing companies are starting to build out their digital capabilities and strengthen their online presence.

Take the personal care industry for example; while customers can no longer go to the shop to buy their products, many companies have invested in digital technology that allows people to explore a product range or 'try on' products virtually at home. While this may not be a direct form of advertising, it appeals to a current need for helpful and value-driven service.

Businesses are no longer directly selling, but guiding. In the B2B world, these digital advancements mean that you can still give your brand presence, without the need for a hard sell.

"The pandemic has impacted businesses worldwide but also presented [...] a sense of urgency for brands to build up their digital capabilities. Those prioritising digital transformation will be nimbler and better equipped for success."⁷

7. Alizila, How brands have embraced digital transformation during covid-19, [online], <https://www.alizila.com/how-brands-have-embraced-digital-transformation-during-covid-19/>, [accessed 3rd June]

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a grey hoodie and black leggings, is sitting on a large, weathered rock ledge. She is looking out over a vast, calm body of water under a soft, overcast sky. The rock she is sitting on is a mix of brown and grey tones, with some darker patches. The water is a pale, muted blue-grey color. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

“The winners are the brands who’ve created campaigns that *bridge the gap*, are designed to work for lockdown or let-out, and are *still relevant no matter where we find ourselves* in three weeks’ time.”⁶

CREATIVELY DIFFERENT

A new kind of brand image

“At the best of times, creative comms campaigns no matter how much data or solid insight we have, can fall short, miss the point or get it totally wrong.”⁹

So, what happens when you add a global pandemic to the mix? Brands are pulled in opposite directions as the customer craves both escapism and informative, straight-talking content.

As previously mentioned, triviality is no longer welcome and should a brand be deemed silly or insensitive or even ‘too inventive’, it runs the risk of losing customer interest rapidly. But should a brand change its tact, tone of voice or image to reflect the seriousness of the current situation, it also risks being called insincere, irresponsible or misinformed.

What we have seen in recent months, however, is the emergence of what John Harrington from PR Week calls ‘less obvious creativity’ – in other words, meeting the customer where they’re at.

Take Deliveroo for example, following the news that restaurants would be closed for the foreseeable future, they stepped up as the first to offer contactless delivery, so people could still enjoy their favourite food from the safety of their homes.

Deliveroo’s creative branding didn’t see many changes, but their #heretodeliver message cut through and made customers feel supported.

Creativity is undoubtedly still important – “we are tasked with being more creative than ever because the narrower the constraints the greater the creativity needs to be.”¹⁰

For the B2B world, it might not be that your brand needs to be more creative, but instead how you get it out into the world and to the relevant people.

Wherever we find ourselves in the coming months, the brands that are going to emerge stronger will be those who are building on their core values, maintaining their brand essence and are willing to flex and adapt when necessary to suit customer needs. The brands that are making sure that they remain relevant and present.

8. PR Week, Covid-19 had transformed creative campaigns, but is now the time to take more risks? [online], <https://www.prweek.com/article/1681157/covid-19-transformed-creative-campaigns-time-risks>, [accessed 3rd June]

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

BRING PRESENT AND VALUABLE

Working from the inside out...

Strengthening brand presence during a crisis? Essential for survival. As we've discussed, this doesn't necessarily mean starting from scratch – for many, quite the opposite – but instead building on what you already have and flexing it to answer both the logical and emotional needs of your customers.

To summarise, we've pulled together a few final points to help your brand stay present and serve your customers in the most effective way.

1. Maintain visibility.

Being silent isn't an option right now. Your customers, despite faced with new adversities are still looking to spend money, and in the B2B world your products or services remain essential.

So, continue building brand presence through regular updates and new, high-quality content – making sure you are there at every stage of the buyer's purchasing journey.

2. Invest in customer experience.

Whether it's the experience they have while talking to your staff or on your website, ensure there is alignment across everything you put out into the world. In a time of uncertainty, buyers will be looking to you to provide answers.

“If you don’t measure, then you can’t manage. And if you’re not managing, then you could be pouring money down the drain.”¹¹

3. Start conversations.

Utilise the new and expanding digital world to talk to your customers. Face to face may not be possible right now, but personalised content and engaging social media is.

It’s not about changing the way your brand speaks, but it is about changing how its words reach your audience. Your brand is your voice, keep sharing it.

4. Evaluate as you go along.

Any changes you make to your marketing activity should be regularly measured and analysed for effectiveness. This could mean running customer surveys or getting real time responses on social media.

As mentioned earlier, it’s also important to maintain dialogue with external stakeholders, who can be an essential voice in the decisions made about your company’s brand direction.

Remember that quote from the beginning, that brands are created in the mind of the consumer?

In a time of crisis, your customers are less likely to look for shiny, new and exciting – instead they look to what they can trust; authentic and reliable brands that provide real value in the market.

Brands that are sure to be there tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that...

11. The Drum, Preparing your marketing plans for the coronavirus downturn, [online], <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2020/03/18/preparing-your-marketing-plans-the-coronavirus-downturn>, [accessed 4th June]



"A brand is no longer what we tell the customer it is -

- it is what customers tell each other it is."

Scott Cook