

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

AMIDST THE PANDEMIC, AN ADVERTISING PANDER-DEMIC

Pander to someone, vb. To please other people by doing or saying what you think they want you to do or say.

"Sean Haney, a digital marketer at a software company, made an ad compilation called 'Every COVID-19 Commercial Is Exactly the Same' after noticing similarities as he worked from home with the television on in the background. 'Within about a week, ad nauseum I heard the same things, the same piano music, and felt like these were all derivative.'"

Nat Ives, WSJ, April 20, 2020

Not surprisingly, articles about advertising during a time of pandemic are now rather topical. Our most recent DISPATCHES offered instances and rationales that make sense for marketers choosing to invest in advertising during a pandemic. And, as you can see from Mr. Ives' quote above, the Wall Street Journal CMO section has chimed in citing current surveys that overwhelmingly find most COVID-19 ads cookie-cutter and patently insincere. The WSJ article doesn't go so far as to label these look-alikes as pandering, but we will. We do so with one important qualification to the definition of pandering above: what's unstated but always understood regarding pandering is that "saying what you think they want to hear" has no bearing on what the speaker-communicator believes or sincerely means himself or herself.

You may be thinking we're too hard on marketers and their creative partners in accusing a good many of them of something as self-serving as pandering to us all during "these uncertain times." Perhaps. But despite what good intentions (supposedly to make us all feel a little better) some of these advertisers might have, the fact that eight of ten COVID-19 spots look pedestrian and regurgitate identical copy begs the credibility, the sincerity of the whole gestalt. Said another way, if as a pandemic advertiser—cars, burgers, tires, floor cleaners, whatever—one is content to blend into this sappy, ever-looping "we're here for you wallpaper," how thoughtful and sincere can the brand possibly come across—really?

In fairness, though, let's put ourselves into the shoes of advertisers desiring to invest in TV spots right now, and make some assumptions about how they might have "settled" for derivative stuff:

- 1. No time to lose:** In the U.S., we went from 15 COVID-19 cases to thousands in a matter of days. Any brand wanting to be empathetic with our collective plight had

- to move at light speed. No weeks or months to come up with Olympics-like, heartwarming individual stories of unbelievable obstacles overcome. Better to “grab and go” with what’s commonly being heard and said (i.e., the equivalent of elevator music).
2. **No studios to film in:** With virtually all production facilities under lockdown, even if a brand wanted to make a Spielbergian film, it’s just not possible.
 3. **Any attempt at comfort is better than none:** No need to overthink a fundamental brand expression of empathy (which, by the way, isn’t messaging most brands do with any regularity, or when they do try, not all that well). Much like expressing sympathy at a funeral, when the right words escape you, it’s better just to copy someone else’s “our thoughts are with you at this sad time” in the condolences book...as opposed to risk being invisible by expressing nothing at all.

These would seem to be the most apparent, ready-made excuses for airing advertising with roughly the same look and sound as all other ads—and not just within one’s category, but across many categories. Even admitting the legitimacy of excuses like these; however, our take is they still amount to “soft-core” pandering at best. Assuming we’re right in our assessment, the question it begs is, “What’s the harm?” Pander-demic advertising, in its all-too-familiar insincere form, may not be very effective, but so what? What’s the worst that could happen?

If you consider that any investment in advertising during a pandemic seeks—at the very least—two “return-outcomes” (holding sales losses to some acceptable level until normalcy returns; and, keeping as many loyal customers feeling good about the brand/staying loyal to it as possible), there actually **is** some potential harm resulting from transparently humbug sentiments. This harm is probably not the kind that will significantly affect immediate sales volume, but it could well affect customers’ on-going affinity for the brand. The WSJ article makes this point indirectly by citing some recent research among 2,200 American adults, asking them what they expected, wanted from pandemic advertising. Here’s what they found:

“When people were asked what they preferred in advertising during the pandemic, only 10% said they wanted marketers to acknowledge the situation or express concern...”

“The most popular response, from 44% of respondents, was for ads to include information on companies’ service adjustments and updates, including store closures or new on-line options. Indicating what the advertiser is doing to help during the pandemic ranked second, at 24%.”

While customers in the cited research weren’t asked how expressions of concern about the pandemic might influence their future relationship to a brand, we can make an inference or two from the data above:

1. If 90% of respondents *don’t* expect expressions of concern, you can bet such attempts bring nothing to the longer-term stay-loyal-to-me party (even less so when you see that most attempts at “expressing concern” underway are, as duly noted, wallpaper and elevator music anyway); and

2. If 76% of respondents *express no interest* in knowing what the brand is doing to help in the crisis--well, ditto!

More than anything else, though, it seems to us that by settling for pander-demic advertising, brand-builders are wasting a bonafide opportunity. Being subtle, being honest while referencing the seriousness of the pandemic offers a wonderful chance to bolster sales **and** make the brand genuinely appealing. Take Omaha Steaks, not a typically heavy TV advertiser. But by merely featuring appetizing shots of their ruby-red cuts and saying, "There's never been a better time to stock up on steaks," they not only incent a multiple-purchase occasion (within a potential meat shortage), but they tastefully acknowledge the predicament we're all in—without overkilling it, or worse yet, insincerely exploiting it. Thankfully, a pandemic ad you won't get sick of!

Learn more about how to make your marketing matter more. Embrace SMART Marketing. Check out Richard's new book: <http://bdn-intl.com/avoiding-critical-marketing-errors>

Stay safe and be well,
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