

# Brand Sustainability During Crisis

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**Article Type:** Article

**Article Citation:** Sanjeev Chinnamanthur. Brand sustainability during crisis. M.S. Ramaiah Institute of Management. 2020; 11(01), 23-29. DOI: 10.52184/msrmr.v11i01.26

**Received date:** October 25, 2019

**Accepted date:** January 28, 2020

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## Abstract

SARS-Cov-2 virus, popularly known as Covid-19 pandemic has spread farther, wider and faster than any wild fire has ever spread in the history of human kind. Covid-19 is a deadly virus that has infected more than a million in India and more than 10 million across the world. Caused over 28,000 deaths in India and over half a million deaths across the world and continues to cause deaths on a daily basis with no respite. The virus spreads human to human via droplets and also spreads airborne as confirmed by world's renowned scientists and WHO. There have been series of lockdowns across the world where all businesses are shut. All industries are shut down affecting all sectors of businesses. In India, lockdown was announced on March 22nd. Lockdown has all the public transport, malls, cinemas, airports, retail, sabzi mandis and markets were shut. No public gathering of any sort allowed during lockdowns. Except the essentials like chemists and hospitals, basic groceries, fruits and vegetables vendors. And no individual is allowed to step out of the house. This certainly has economic impact in terms of consumer spending and government spending besides several job cuts, pay cuts. Even though the lockdown is being implemented intermittently by the authorities, essentially the markets and the human lives are largely in statue mode. This paper focuses up on how brands sustain such statue mode. How brands survive such a crisis. What brands must do to move across the silent lanes and bylanes of human entitlements and lives. Come out successfully out of the crisis and continue to succeed even long after the crisis is over. As covid-19 pandemic crisis is the first of its kind, this paper presents some little research done in relation to a crisis like this and lays down the approach the brands should adopt in order to overcome such crisis successfully.

**Keywords:** Brands, Crisis, Consumer, Customer, Marketing

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine what an economic crisis or a pandemic had done to the business, brands in particular. How did brands sustain a crisis, be it economic or otherwise. Did brands sustain at all, if yes how did they. What brand marketing activities did big brands do to survive the crisis. As we are currently facing Covid-19 pandemic crisis, it becomes all the more difficult to gauge the happenings around any brand as this crisis is first of its kind the world over has seen. Last pandemic the world witnessed was way back during 1918 when Spanish flu hit the world. Spanish flu was deadly in the sense the number of lives it took away. The estimated number is around 50 million lives lost. During world war 1, companies did not focus much on brands. There was hardly any detailed research available on brands and their impact on the minds of consumer. Essentially there was no pandemic like this Covid-19 before. And there was never stronger focus on brands as it is during this decade. Therefore, we will see what brands have done to sustain any crisis pertaining to economic or any other crisis and take forward the learnings to arrive at what brands need to do to sustain this Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Before we get to see what brands need to do, let us understand what a brand means.

## 2. Literature review

Brand is one of the most valuable assets for many firms. What does a brand mean? As per **Phillip Kotler (2002, p. 593)**, a brand is “a seller’s promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistent to buyers”. As per American Marketing Association, “A brand is a name,

term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. A brand is a means to differentiate from the competitors. Which means that a brand in it self can act as a unique talking point for any given product. That can happen only when a brand walks that extra mile to earn the requisite advantage over the others. So from the above, we can say that a brand is a promise to deliver, brand is a name, term, design symbol to differentiate. What else constitutes a brand? As per the framework suggested by **de Chernatony and Riley (1998)**, there are 12 themes under which a brand can be defined. It is imperative to see what brands need to do in order to stay relevant in the backdrop of these various themes. And then see what brands need to do to stay relevant and sustain a crisis.

### 2.1 Brand as a logo

American Marketing Association defines (1960) brand as “A name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, intended to identify goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors”. Any brand will put consumer in the centre. And every brand marketing activity will revolve around the consumer in the centre.

### 2.2 Brand as a company

Corporate identity is vital as favorable corporate identity gives competitive advantage to organizations (**van Reil & Balmer, 1997**). This has been emphasized by **Simonin and Ruth (1998)** in their article “Is the company known by the company it keeps?”. Scholars have also argued “a company is known by its brands” (**Varadarajan et al., 2006**).

## 2.3 Brand as a shorthand

Brands simply refer to an offer or service or a product. According to **Brown (1992)** “a brand name is nothing more or less than sum of all the mental connections people have around it”. Consumers under time constraint are more likely to buy brands with names they recognize (**Chevan, 1992**).

## 2.4 Brand as identity system

As per **Kapferer (1992)**, a brand has an identity structure with six integrated facets of culture, personality, self-projection, physique, reflection, and relationship. Product features and symbols constitute the physical part of the brand, while character and attitude constitute the brand personality, set of values for the culture, and so on and so forth. A brand is much more beyond just a symbol or a label. It is positioned as an identity of its own in the minds of a consumer.

## 2.5 Brand as an image in the consumer’s mind

“A brand is a consumer’s idea of a product” (**Pitcher, 1985**). This image is not-so-easily-erasable one in the mind of a consumer. Image can be positive or negative depending on the kind of brand marketing activity and the brand’s delivery system against its’ promise.

## 2.6 Brand as a value system

As per **Clark (1987)** consumers associate not just value with the brands but also heritage and relate their personal experience with themselves. According to **Sheth et al. (1991)**, a brand is a value system. It represents five essential values. They are functional values (Product features), social values (acceptability and aspirations),

emotional values (feelings and aesthetics, epistemic values (novelty or knowledge-seeking behavior), conditional values (seasonal & situational).

## 2.7 Brand as a personality

**Aaker (1996)** defines brand personality as metaphor which “can help brand strategist by enriching their understanding of people’s perceptions of and attitude toward the brand, contributing to a differentiating brand identity, getting the communication effort and creating brand equity”.

## 2.8 Brand as a relationship

**Duboff (1986)** and **Woodward (1991)** say that brand personality is infact a prerequisite for a relationship between consumers and brands. **Kapferer (1992)** and **Blackston (1993)** are of the view that if a brand can be personified consumers would not just perceive them, but would also have relationship with them.

<sup>1</sup>This paper enlists 8 e’s approach for the brands to follow in order to not only sustain but also successfully nourish the brands. Not only during the pandemic but also long after the pandemic is over.

## 2.9 Empathize

As per Oxford dictionary, empathize means to “understand and share the feelings of another”. Essentially as a brand you must make the customer comfortable and build the trust and faith in him or her. How do brands empathize? Take banking sector or retail sector, brands must make sure that the customer is safe as long as he or she is in the premises of the bank or the retail shop. Another way to empathize is to ensure product distribution and availability at an

arm's length. Remember brands should not only empathize with their customers but also with their partners. Which brings us to the point of regular and timely service to trade. Volvo's new digital initiative called "Contactless Programme" is a classic example in this case. It is online car buying and servicing. Prospective buyers are asked to fill in an E-book with the required details and Volvo reaches out to the customer, enables the customer to pay online with digitized finance offers and an online channel to buy the car and get a contactless delivery. Existing customers can go online and book their car for servicing at the nearest dealer location. Volvo cars is known for safety technology and they live up to their core value by empathizing with

their customers via their new "Contactless Program".

Empathize by going digital. Empathize by renewing your delivery system. Go digital now if you have not. All in all, brands need to love what the customer loves. Respect what the customer respects. Fear what the customer fears.

## 2.10 Enrich 1+1 = 11

Enrich the brand with strong and strategic alliances. Alliance with an NGO. Alliance with a Government establishment. Create a collaborative and energize your customers with much required information. Spread knowledge. Spread awareness. Financially and technically brands may not be equipped



**FIGURE 1.** Source. [www.volvo.com](http://www.volvo.com)

to energize as a single entity. Therefore, alliances become crucial. Brands need to be agile in formulating the alliances. You need to identify the right partner and the right brand to associate with. NDTV alliance with Dettol adds more value to and makes a bigger impact on the life of a consumer. Recently, Lego worked with UK government and made an educational video for the customers which highlights the significance of social distancing. Alliances need to be made on a long-term basis and not short term. And customers will look up to a positive alliance that brings cheer to their lives.

## 2.11 Empower

During the pandemic, your customers are constantly looking for information and knowledge and awareness. Majority of them are. Empower your customers with information. Content is anyways king. So carpe diem. Provide your customers very relevant information. Make content in the form of videos. The other type of empowerment the brands must focus up on is Psychological Empowerment. A positive story to light up the mood will certainly help. Will certainly raise positive emotions in the minds of the consumer. Psychological empowerment is not everybody's art but a great soother at the time of pandemic a brand can provide to the customers. Therefore, brands must pursue it.

## 2.12 Engage

The right message to the right customer at the right time is the key. In today's Digital era brands have the technology to know their customers in and out. Engaging with your customers must be two-fold. One is "Plan and Engage" and the other is "Moment-based Engaging". Both are important. Spotify created a story (Figure 1) that revolved around the customer at

that moment. It is moment-based engaging in action here. Spotify spotted a tweet by a random customer mentioning how the biscuit in his hand reminds him of Spotify logo. On real-time basis, Spotify responds to his tweet in a witty and cheerful way. It is instantaneous. And it became an instant talking point on Twitter and all online social media platforms. Do not intrude. Create a story and do not tell a story. Spotify created one (Figure 1). Brands must make customer's story your story and not the other way round. Engage by creating stories that is customer-centric. Ensure the story you create is consistent with your brand core value. There are abundant data on the time consumers spend on social media, mobile apps and so on. Remember consumers are multi-dimensional. So is the social media platform. These apps give real-time messages by the customers. Remember not to forget the fact that brands need to engage with customers only to drive business and nothing else as the end objective.



Source: *Twitter.com*

### 2.13 Enlarge

Brands need to have a big heart for not unnecessarily raising the prices of the products during the pandemic. So brands need to enlarge their hearts. Endure the loss in profits or rate of profit for a bigger gain. Organizations hardly defocus from their revenue targets. Management must set a precedent in such crisis times in particular and prioritize customer over revenue. And that is being sensitive to the pandemic situation. Customers will appreciate it. And do not forget that the customers will remember the brands who exploit the situation and take undue advantage of the situation and they will remember not in a good light and not on a pleasant note. On the other hand, extend extra offers and services to the customers. The offer may be in terms of pricing or in terms of service or in terms of gift coupons and so on and so forth. It doesn't matter in what form they come, it will be welcomed. Only under the circumstances where your cost goes substantially high and becomes impossible to absorb the cost within, only then price rise as an option can be considered.

### 2.14 Embrace

What is heart to the body is employees to the organization. Embrace them. Do not just lay them off. Customers will respect the brands or organizations which take good care of their people. Remember happy employee's happy partner's happy customers. You cannot afford a disgruntled employee treating the customer with slightest disrespect during a pandemic at the least. American grocery chain Trader Joe's initiative of telling their employees who are not well to stay home gained accolades from the customers. Essentially keep the

employees with you and keep them engaged and happy at the time of a pandemic. Bring in renewed focus upon existing subscriber base and reduce focus up on getting new acquisitions. Customers may not like it in the midst of the pandemic answering the calls by the tele-calling agencies pushing for a sale. Instead, leverage your existing customers and delight them and turn your existing customers as "Promoters" who will turn into strong brand ambassadors for you during the crisis and remain so long after the crisis is over.

### 2.15 Erase

Any crisis is an opportunity for the brands to erase bad memories and create new pleasant moments that can be cherished by their customers. This is the time when the customers will respect and remember the brands that touch upon their lives. So brands need to walk that extra mile and reach out to the customers. Especially, the brands that made mistakes in the past, this is your golden opportunity to revive and regain.

### 2.16 Enhance

Don't go dark during a pandemic. Instead enhance over all branding activity online, offline, OOH and so on and so forth. Make your brand Omni-present. This is the time to invest in your brand as a long-term brand initiative. There have been a number of studies which show a clear advantage in more investments and a clear disadvantage for those who go dark during any crisis. Customers expect brands to advertise and flourish ahead with branding activity during the crisis. Out of sight out of mind can't be more apt than it is in this situation. Customers will not like it if they don't hear

from you. So brands need to shout out. Follow them and ensure you create the right buzz. On the traditional side, ensure regular retail presence in terms of enough POS material in the form of posters, danglers, flyers and so on. On the digital side make videos and be present on YouTube. Brands like Dyson and Lego are making video content and gaining eyeballs. Back home in India Durex has launched a new brand campaign that signifies wearing a mask. The campaign is witty and focuses upon the Durex brand core values. Coca-Cola launched an innovative brand initiative in Philippines where it ran an advertisement that all future spending on advertisement is being shifted to public service announcements linked to fighting the pandemic. So brands wake up and please don't go dark.

### 3. Conclusion

Brands need to adapt to the new business environment and formulate a new marketing strategy in order to bring in a positive change in the lives of their customers. They need to ensure that all the e's listed above are in sync with only one objective and that is drive business better for the betterment of their customers. While doing all this, it is imperative to keep the core values of the brand intact. Remember revenue takes a back seat and the customer takes the front seat. This, as a policy, all brands need to quickly adopt during the pandemic and long after the pandemic is over and also on a continuous basis, regardless of any crisis, in letter and spirit. Remember Rome was

not built in a day. Neither were brands. But there is always a fast-track approach or a crash course or a quickie in every sphere of life. And a crisis is such an inflection point in the life of a brand. If utilized in a wise manner, it will not be exaggerating to say brand-building can indeed be fast-tracked during a crisis.

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