Keys to Building Your Post-Pandemic Brand

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Brand building is about defining and staying true to your company's mission and values. For brands large and small, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world, led to great volatility and uncertainty, and altered consumer and business behavior. While the fundamentals of brand building have not changed, CEO's and CMO's across the globe are reflecting on what occurred over the past year and a half and planning for the next phase. What trends are here to stay and how will they impact brands and brand building?

During the pandemic, consumers demanded more and the strongest brands delivered. In fact, many brands and businesses used the crisis as inspiration to make changes, with focus on DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) and corporate social responsibility, climate awareness and sustainability, and cybersecurity and digitization.

Digital Drives Everything

Before the pandemic, we were already moving toward digital-first, where the first touchpoint a brand has with its audience is digital. Pre-pandemic, leading brands like Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Google were already essentials. As COVID-19 drove people online, their importance escalated. Customer engagement with brands across categories evolved rapidly, from virtual showrooms and tours, to digital apps and online services.

Per Salesforce's State of the Connected Consumer Fourth Edition, since the pandemic, 60% of consumer interactions with companies have been digital, compared to 42% pre-pandemic. All brands should comprehensively assess their digital presence, regularly reviewing and analyzing:

- website content, desktop, and mobile (i.e. case studies, ordering, blogs, white papers)
- social media (i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube)
- physical location listings (i.e. Google Maps, Waze)
- paid advertising (i.e. Google, LinkedIn)
- email marketing (i.e. Newsletters, Campaigns)
- online reviews (i.e. Yelp, Google, Glassdoor, the Muse)

According to Felippe Lara, Managing Partner of IMSA Search Global Partners Brazil, "Digital footprint is more important than ever. In order to attract top talent today, it is absolutely essential to have a well-branded digital presence. Candidates throughout the world are keenly aware of how each company presents itself online, and expectations are high."

Brand Trust Built on Relationships – CX is Key

Right now, with fewer in-person experiences, brand trust is critical – and trust begins with positive relationships. According to the State of the Connected Customer report, the most important factors in establishing strong customer relationships are: empathy, personalization, convenience, and digital transformation. These factors help define successful customer experience (CX).

To nurture relationships and build trust, it is also critical to map your customer journey – to understand brand touchpoints and customer interactions, motivations, and expectations. Ask: How easy is your website to navigate? What messages are communicated on your blog? How friendly and informed is customer service? What does your customer actually experience during delivery of your product or service? How personalized is your marketing message?

Microtargeting More Important

With so many channels and choices for everything, from search to social to shopping, people graze and switch and mix more than ever before. Nevertheless, brand relevance remains high as brands help your customers and clients focus on what is most important to them.

In Harvard Business Review's "10 Truths about Marketing After the Pandemic" (3/10/2020) based on an EY Future Consumer Index conducted with 14.5K consumers in 20 countries, 5 types of consumers emerge based on their primary focus:

1. Affordability (32%) – Care about product functionality and less about brands
2. Health (25%) – Focus on safety
3. Planet (16%) – Concerned about the environment
4. Society (15%) – Care about company behavior and values
5. Experience (12%) – Open to new brands, products, and experiences

Think about which segment(s) your brand is targeting, what about your brand will resonate with them. Consider your current communications. Are they aligned with microtarget interests?

Security Concerns Escalate

Another aspect of brand trust requiring heightened attention is data security. Consumers are more concerned about personal privacy with 85% saying they prioritize personal data more than they did one year ago, and 91% of respondents saying they would be more likely to purchase from a brand online if they feel that brand is trustworthy and has transparent data practices, per Smartly Social Media Trends Global Report, July 2021.

Attention to Purpose and Values

During 2020, as many quarantined, people searched for grounding and stability, community and purpose. Many brands expressed empathy in their advertising and promotion, supporting health care professionals and essential workers. Today customers expect brands to care about societal issues, demonstrate empathy, reflect strong values, and take action. According to EY's 2021 Future Consumer Index, consumers will continue to prioritize affordability and health, yet 49% will prioritize the environment and climate change in how they live and the products they buy and 56% will be more likely to buy from companies that ensure what they do has a positive impact on society.

Brands that reinforce their missions and values in an authentic way will be most successful at building relationships and trust with customers. Brands which understand CX across multiple platforms, via digital and in-person touchpoints, will continue to benefit in both the short and long term.