2020 2.0, the new normal and what's next for brands

By Jessica Tennant

13 May 2020

M&C Saatchi Abel recently held a webinar on Microsoft Teams where colleagues and heads of strategy Diana Springer (Black & White, an M&C Saatchi Company) and Robert Grace (M&C Saatchi Group South Africa) shared their points of view on how consumers might respond in a post Covid-19 world, and gave brands a slightly more pragmatic, practical and useful lens to inform what they do next.

Springer opened the conversation, saying that it feels like we started this year in January with huge excitement and goals. “Kids went back to school, we got on with work and before we knew it, we kind of had to stop again and our path has completely altered. So, really, it’s about what’s next and how we reboot and get back into 2020, our 2020 2.0.”

Is Covid-19 sponsored by banana bread?

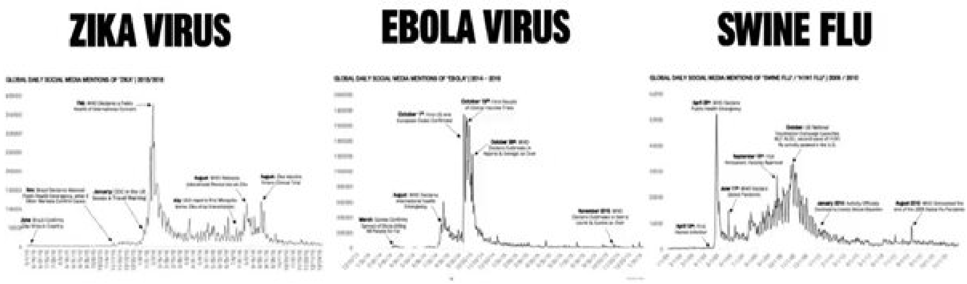
And then, of course, she talked a bit about banana bread.

> *“Isn't it strange that banana bread has become somewhat of a mascot for the Covid-19 pandemic? It was when I was sharing banana bread recipes with my family WhatsApp group and then sharing pictures at making perfect banana bread that I had this realisation that actually this is a brilliant metaphor for the way that we are feeling and for the way that brands should be responding.”*

What makes banana bread unique, she said, is that it’s one of the most authentic types of cake, it’s reliable, it has these especially strong memory paths associated with it and it gives us comfort, probably more than any other baked good. “It’s in that that I thought this message was so powerful because isn’t that what we’re all feeling right now? That desire for something that doesn’t get us down. It’s not flashy but it certainly is very true to itself. It’s incredibly authentic.”

As marketers and in the industry of communication we’ve already seen some very powerful insights and reports about how we’re feeling right now, how consumer spending has changed and how media patterns have adjusted. Here, however, the focus is on the future of marketing and what’s next for brands.

Although no one knows the answer, looking at social media conversations over fairly recent pandemics with their partners at M&C Saatchi Intelligence based in London and New York, Grace has an inclination as to what the response is going to be. “We always say the best predictor of the future is past behaviour and, I guess, as human beings we do have an unbelievable ability to pick up the pieces.”



According to these graphs, people have been reacting in the same way for quite some time, albeit at varying degrees depending on the intensity of the outbreak, and the behaviour is mostly consistent across all three.

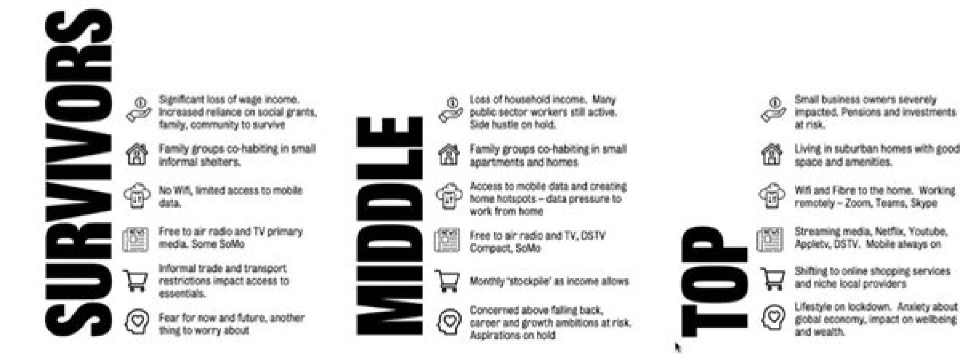
There are familiar ups and downs and what’s particularly interesting is that across these pandemics, while there’s an initial fear and anxiety, as vaccines are developed and the viruses start to die out, people tend to get annoyed with the conversation. “I think we all have felt this fear and anxiety around the unknown. Then it sits in this crisis fatigue. I certainly know three weeks into working remotely, you’re kind of like, ‘Can we just get back to normal?’, but we know that that normal isn’t going to be how it was. There is going to be some adjustment, and that’s what we want to focus on.” So, it’s not about what now for brands, it's about what’s next for brands, he clarified.

A day in the lockdown life of M&C Saatchi Abel's Robert Grace

Jessica Tennant 17 Apr 2020

Not all lockdowns are created equal

Looking at research undertaken in partnership with the UCT Institute of Strategic Marketing, into the South African consumer landscape, Springer noted that not all lockdowns are created equal, explaining that different segments of the local market are experiencing the lockdown in very different ways. “Looking across these segments, we certainly know the experiences of lockdown are going to be very different for different parts of our market.”



“Just this week I saw data that said that less than 60% of students in South Africa don’t have access to technology, so while the top end kids might be studying from home, having Zoom engagements with their teachers, what we know from the bottom end of our market is that that experience is incredibly different.

“Our ‘Survivors’ will have lost income, more than ever they are now dependent on the State, dependent on their communities and dependent on family just to survive. They certainly aren’t going to be sitting on their mobile phones all day using data. They have limited access to paid media, relying on the free media environment. So, really a lot of fear for now and in the future."

Many of our middle income market are probably on the frontline, still going to work, she continued. “We know a large proportion of this segment is public sector, nurses and teachers, definitely a lot of call centre agents and a lot of people working in retail, so huge adjustments in this market as well, loss of income and maybe, most significantly, loss of that side hustle, that extra, the gig economy that was letting this market really start to feel like they were making a little bit of progress. So, really now overwhelmingly this incredible fear of falling back and my aspirations being put on hold.”

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For the top tend market, it’s about their lifestyle having gone on lockdown. “Family holidays have been cancelled, small businesses, entrepreneurship has really been put under threat, huge concern around investments, pension funds, the economy, the exchange rate and the impact that has on our plans for our future.”

What’s important here is to bear in mind these segments and consider your audience. So, to summarise: “Survivors: really more than ever needing support to survive. Our middle segments: this incredible fear of their aspirations being halted, this huge barrier to progress; and on the top end: this feeling that their lifestyle has gone on lockdown.”

For the purpose of the presentation, Springer and Grace focused on the top end of this audience. “The top end and middle-market are responsible for far more than our consumer spend in South Africa, so as brands that really is where our primary orientation is at the moment,” Springer explained.

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Isolation tensions

What's particularly interesting is these ‘isolation tensions’, that I can certainly identify with, except for feeling like I have time. “There’s this amazing kind of tension that is going on – the negatives and the positives pulling against each other to give us a real sense of our world-changing.” Springer talked through these:

- ***Boredom vs quality time***: “On the one hand, oh my gosh, boredom, it’s just Groundhog Day, and on the other hand, this feeling of ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve got time. I remember January and February so well and so many friends sending me messages that were nagging and moaning about no time to do anything and constantly busy, well now we have that time.”

- ***Shortage vs simplicity***: “On the one hand, a shortage, I can’t just pop out and get something that I want from the shop, but on the other hand, amazing simplicity that says, ‘Well, I’ll just use what’s in the pantry,’ and we’ve seen brands like Woolworths really playing into that, sharing ideas around how to use your pantry goods and how to make the most with what you have.”

- ***Isolation vs intimacy***: “So, on the one hand, while I feel isolated, I’m on my own, on the other hand, an amazing intimacy that has been built with close family members, whether it be playing charades or sitting around the dinner table for the first time in a few weeks and having a conversation, actually a new intimacy, in fact almost an intimacy we created with one another across our virtual networks where we sit and really look at each other on our Zoom calls and engage.”

- ***Media empowers vs media overwhelms***: “On the one hand media has been incredibly empowering. We have all sat on Twitter, sat on CNN, really looking at the global news, but on the other hand, incredibly overwhelming. We’re not sure what to believe, what to read, there’s almost too much.”

- ***Keep working vs always working***: “On the one hand, aren’t we grateful that we can carry on working? Every day I’m grateful that I can continue to engage in a meaningful and stimulating conversation with my colleagues. But on the other hand, we have moved very swiftly into an always-on working environment where there isn’t even traffic to give us a break from our work schedules.”

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- ***Individial vs community***: “And then lastly, I suppose this feeling of the individual, our personal concerns, our personal fears, but a greater, much greater sense of our communities, our neighbours that we are sharing products with, parsley being handed over walls, coming out onto our driveways and clapping or banging pots at 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening.”

Important to keep in mind as we predict the way consumers are going to respond as we come out of lockdown, which we’ll look at in part two. To be continued…

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