

BRAND VALUES IN TIMES OF CRISIS: THE BRAND WORK MANIFESTO AND THE CORONA PANDEMIC



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1. Brands in times of crisis

Strong brands shine, successful brands receive awards and brand managers use platforms to craft and share their success stories. But this sparkling, beautiful and glamorous facade is starting to

2002), is increasingly reaching its limits in times of customer engagement, digitalisation and ever more frequent crises. This new world has been described as VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (Bouée 2013), reflecting the realities of the world in which consumers and businesses find themselves as a result of digital and social transformation. In the VUCA world, all frameworks, beliefs and guiding principles are put to the test. Markets change faster, reaction times are shorter than ever before, communication channels are more diverse, and all brand management measures require more responsibility from their instigators. Standardised processes have been supplanted by experiments and a learning-by-doing tolerance to mistakes. The pace of change is accelerating and the level of complexity is rising, both of which will require brands to overcome a growing raft of bureaucratic restrictions.

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disintegrate. Increasingly, the fundamentals of brand management are being called into question (e.g. Rutschmann 2012) or, at the very least, a more dynamic and innovative approach to brand management is being advocated (e.g. Baumgarth 2018). Traditional brand management, with its strict and rigid rules based on the school of thought propagated by Domizlaff’s textbook of brand technology (1939) and the corporate identity and corporate image philosophy (e.g. Brikigt et al.

The coronavirus crisis is not only a Herculean medical and economic task, or an accelerator of digitalisation, it is also a catalyst for a new brand management paradigm.

This paper begins by proposing a revolutionary framework for strategic brand orientation and action. This is followed by an examination of the coronavirus pandemic, which serves to exemplify the approaches implemented by brands who have

adopted this new brand orientation strategy as they deal with the current crisis. Because one thing brand scientists and practitioners have learned from previous crises is that strong brands not only survive crises, they flourish.

2. Brand management is experiencing a midlife crisis: The Brand Work Manifesto

Brand management is not at an end, although it is experiencing something of a midlife crisis. As with human midlife crises, this is the time to pose existential questions and consider a fundamental change of direction. As a reaction to this necessary

reorientation, we developed what we have called the Brand Work Manifesto in 2019 together with brand consulting experts and companies and presented our manifesto for discussion in early 2020 (Baumgarth et al. 2020). The term “manifesto” was chosen deliberately because manifestos are often published in situations of upheaval, are regularly supported by several people, and question existing ideas through new, sometimes revolutionary approaches, especially in politics (e.g. The Communist Manifesto), in art and culture (e.g. Bauhaus Manifesto, Dadaist Manifesto), as well as in economics (e.g. Cluestrain Manifesto, Manifesto



Fig. 1: Brand Work Manifesto

of Agile Software Development), and are framed to stimulate, if not provoke, debate. We do not claim that our Brand Work Manifesto is a work of science. Far more, we launched it to trigger a discussion. This conversation takes place on our website (www.brandworkmanifesto.org) and in a closed LinkedIn group consisting of brand experts from the worlds of academia and business. The Brand Work Manifesto (see Figure 1) is based on the structure and format of the Manifesto for Agile Software Development. Accordingly, the right side of each of the manifesto's paragraphs relates to the existing brand world, which obviously retains value and will remain valid for years to come. The items on the left should be assigned a higher value than the old rules they have come to complement (the items on the left). The two sides exist, to some extent, in a state of tension. The continuous balancing act between these poles, combined with the renunciation of seemingly simple established rules, is, at least initially, an exhausting process for brand managers, but has become the new paradigm of brand management.

From the authors of the Brand Work Manifesto's point of view, brands must be more open, agile, digital and authentic in everything they do if they are to deal with changes in the competitive market

environment. The coronavirus pandemic not only represents a challenge for society as a whole, it also functions as a stress test for every company's brand management.

“Brands must be more open, agile, digital and authentic in everything they do if they are to deal with changes in the competitive market environment.”

3. Brand management in the midst of the coronavirus crisis

Given the corona pandemic (which officially started on 11 March 2020), the fundamentals of the familiar, long-established brand landscape are shifting dramatically and rapidly.

Psychologists and consumer researchers have confirmed that consumption and media use patterns in Germany have undergone a marked shift



Fig. 2: Open to new networks: McDonald's and ALDI publicise their new personnel sharing agreement on Instagram ([mcdonalds.de](https://www.instagram.com/mcdonalds.de) 2020). Believe it or not: We even sell pasta. Because, as of today, we are helping our employees via a personnel partnership with ALDI. Thank you for your efforts! @aldinord @aldisuedde #keepingthestoreopen - together. Do your part: help don't hoard! @togetheritspossible

during the corona pandemic. Media consumption – both analogue and digital – is rising rapidly, while certain product categories, such as pasta and soap (not just toilet paper), are in greater demand, and other product categories, such as major purchases (e.g. furniture) and tourism are experiencing a sharp drop in demand. At the same time, e-commerce continues to gain in importance (e.g. appinio 2020). Studies are also already showing that the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on human perception, thinking and behaviour can be divided into different phases (e.g. eyesquare 2020; concept m 2020).

Interesting developments can also be identified in terms of individual brands. New brands are coming to the forefront in record time. The virologist Professor Christian Drosten from the Charité Berlin was already an established star in expert circles (e.g. he achieves an RG score of almost 50 on ResearchGate for his publications and is thus more influential than 97.5% of researchers on this global research platform), but it is only since the coronavirus pandemic that he has developed into a strong personal brand among the general population as well, thanks to his frequent television appearances and highly regarded podcasts. In the case of the start-up CureVac from the biotech sector, which was previously only well known in specialist circles, the company achieved recognisable brand status among the general population within a matter of days. Top medical universities, including the Charité and Johns Hopkins University, have suddenly been thrust into the limelight and have become instantly recognisable and highly valued global brands, even outside specialist circles.

There are, of course, other brands that have risen from their “hidden champion” status to become successful brands as a result of the corona crisis. Dräger, a medical technology manufacturer which was originally founded in 1898 and has become one of the leading suppliers of respiratory equipment and protective clothing, is appearing in the media on an almost daily basis. The U.S. web conferencing provider, zoom, has also increased its user base from around 10 million before the crisis to over 200 million in March 2020, despite ongoing and highly publicised security concerns, such as unauthorised data transfer and zoombombing. Companies in the United States have even started using one of zoom's features, which enables virtual backgrounds during web conferences, as a platform for placing their own brand.

Other strong brands are experiencing a second (or third) renaissance as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Germany's main centre-right parties, the CDU/CSU, scored 27% in the pre-crisis Forschungsgruppe Wahlen political barometer and 35% in the latest survey in

April 2020 (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2020). Likewise, Germany's time-honoured evening news programme, tagesschau at 8 p.m., has suddenly become a daily must-see for younger audiences. And even the less than glamorous Trigema clothing brand has been sharpening its image on the basis of traditional corporate values, as embodied by the company patriarch Wolfgang Grupp's promise not to lay off any employees during the crisis and by the much-publicised decision to switch production to face masks.

However, there are also multiple examples of management decisions that have severely damaged brands in the current crisis. For instance, the decision by adidas to suspend rental payments despite making billion-dollar profits over the last few years triggered a media onslaught. The company's subsequent public apology (adidas 2020) and its drawdown of a billion-dollar loan from the powerful KfW Bank have certainly damaged the brand's reputation, perhaps beyond repair.

“A brand management strategy that consciously or unconsciously follows the metaprinciples of the Brand Work Manifesto can help brands to emerge from this crisis stronger than ever before.”

The examples show that brand management in the coronavirus crisis can create both opportunities and risks, and that while brands can probably win much faster in this phase of the crisis, they can also lose much faster than in normal times. A brand management strategy that consciously or unconsciously follows the metaprinciples of the Brand Work Manifesto can help brands to emerge from this crisis stronger than ever before. The following examples show the Brand Work Manifesto in action.

4. The Brand Work Manifesto in action

A large number of brands have reacted to the coronavirus pandemic by adapting their communications (e.g. by incorporating references to social distancing in their logos), developing new services and changing business models (for an overview see e.g. Stylus 2020, Designboom 2020, Gorbach 2020).

(1) Metaprinciple “Open”

ALDI and McDonald’s announced a special relationship at the very outset of the crisis (20 March 2020). Under this personnel partnership, McDonald’s agreed to share its employees with ALDI Süd and ALDI Nord throughout the crisis (McDonald’s 2020). This win-win partnership was quickly agreed and was communicated extensively via a brand boosting PR campaign (see Figure 2).

There are a host of other examples to show the openness of certain brands to new networks and innovative approaches to customer participation. Three of Germany’s biggest drugstore competitors, Rossmann, dm and Müller, are cooperating with the joint #dasWIRzählt (#theWEcounts) campaign. The lingerie manufacturer Triumph and the automotive supplier Mahle are also working together to produce FFP3 standard respiratory masks for the medical sector (FAZ 2020).

films and at the same time shrewdly linked to a “better” future and the call to dream of the next outdoor experience (YouTube 2020).

In addition to agile communication, other brands have unveiled even more comprehensive changes. The Berlin start-up brand NAKT, which normally sells clothing for the techno scene, is now producing masks with buckles and chains for the same target group. The Austrian retail chain Billa has opened its stores between 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. exclusively for older people and high-risk groups (Billa 2020). The real estate planning and consulting company Drees & Sommer has been offering special services and checklists to help manage the shutdown and reopening of real estate (Drees & Sommer 2020). Berlin’s public transport authority, Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG), extended its “BerlKönig” service to support Berlin’s healthcare workers: while regular operations have been temporarily suspended, medical personnel can request the vehicles by phone, free of charge (BerlKönig 2020).

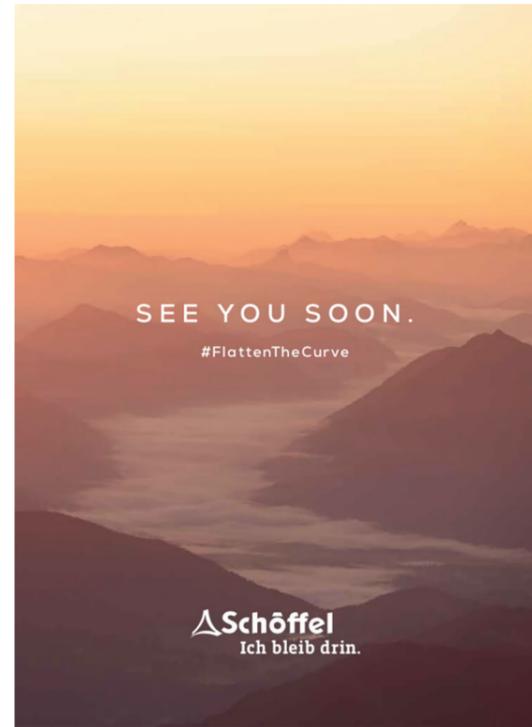


Fig. 3: Agile adaptation of brand communication: Schöffel (Source: Reidel 2020)

(2) Metaprinciple “Agile”

The medium-sized outdoor company Schöffel realigned its brand in 2012 with the launch of a new brand claim: “I’m outside” (YouTube 2012). As the coronavirus pandemic spread, the brand changed its claim to “I’m inside” and actively incorporated a reference to the fight against coronavirus (see Figure 3, Reidel 2020). In social media, the idea behind the hashtag #ichbinrausVorfreude (#imoutsideAnticipation) is further explored in short

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Fig. 4: Digital thinking and digital action: dm #füreinandereinkaufen (Source: dm 2020)

The British soap company Lush had extended the offer to everyone in England to come into the company’s stores to wash their hands in order to better support regular hand hygiene (Gorbach 2020).

(3) Metaprinciple “Digital”

There is no doubt about the increasing importance of digital channels in the current phase of the coronavirus pandemic. It is therefore not entirely surprising that a number of brands are successfully thinking and acting digitally. For example, the drugstore chain dm has developed a system that allows people to shop for high-risk customers (see Figure 4). Under the hashtag and slogan #füreinandereinkaufen (#shoppingforeachother), dm astutely combines offline channels (e.g. a poster in an apartment complex’s stairwell) and online media (e.g. publicising the campaign, online ordering).

On its website, the U.S. toy company Mattel has integrated an extensive catalogue of digital content free of charge to help entertain and educate children during lockdown. The offer includes ideas for virtual birthday parties, free books and colouring templates, together with online games and apps, and do-it-yourself ideas for popular brands such as Hot Wheels and Mega Bloks (Mattel 2020).

(4) Metaprinciple “Authentic”

Successful brand management is characterised by the fact that a brand’s behaviour and communication correspond to its core values and are authentic. This is more important than ever in periods marked by dramatic external changes. One brand that has remained true to its sustainability-based values for years, including during the coronavirus crisis, is the medium-sized company Werkhaus. Founded in 1982, Werkhaus offers connecting systems for the B2B and B2C sectors, primarily in wood. One of the company’s largest target markets is the retail sector, which Werkhaus supplies with standard or custom-made product displays, shelves and stands. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the company developed a cost-effective cough protection solution that chimes perfectly with its core values (e.g. regional, connecting system), to quickly and easily help retailers comply with legal requirements for the protection of employees and customers (see Figure 5).

The real estate investment company PATRIZIA did not develop any special new services or launch any extraordinary PR campaigns during the corona crisis, but continues to authentically pursue a serious, informative, and nevertheless human approach during the crisis. Information



Fig. 5: Authentic brand management: Cough protection solution from Werkhaus





about coronavirus is prominently displayed on the company's homepage and, on related pages, three pillars are used to represent the company's commitments to protecting health, enabling remote working and educating children. The company showcases employees and their approaches to dealing with the corona situation, alongside their support for regional communities to emphasise the human aspect of the crisis (Patrizia 2020). At the end of March 2020, the multinational brand Coca-Cola announced that during the corona crisis it would refrain from any advertising and instead donate \$120 million to support the fight against COVID-19 (Saal 2020).

“Given the current environment, brands and brand management strategies have no choice but to change.”

4. Conclusion

Given the current environment, brands and brand management strategies have no choice but to change. The simple recipes of the past are dead and buried. The need to embark on this transformation process is further heightened by the corona pandemic. Brands must become much more open to customer participation and new networks. They need to be more empathic and

develop a deeper understanding of customers through direct, personal contact with users and stakeholders. They need to constantly adapt their brands and judiciously link them to current events and hot topics. Flexibility, agility and a willingness to experiment (combined with a readiness to make mistakes) are all components of the new mindset. But this can only work if employees also know and love the brand and are given the freedom to make independent decisions. Furthermore, for all brands, including those traditional brands born in the offline world, the “digital first” philosophy is a central element of successful brand management. And finally, brand management needs to be seen far more in terms of value propositions, not profit maximisation. A brand's ethics are far more important than its quarterly figures. It is clear that this “new approach” to brand management is by no means easy and frequently collides with old world views and established corporate routines. Nevertheless, a brand that sticks with traditional brand management strategies will neither master the challenges of the current crisis, nor seize the opportunities that emerge as the new, post-coronavirus, future takes shape.

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