

# COVID-19: THE CREATIVE FIGHTBACK

How brands can help people to win the war to survive, then revive

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GAME CHANGERS



## A NEW TYPE OF CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most disruptive and challenging periods for humanity in a century. Not since the outbreak of Spanish Flu in 1918 has a virus presented the potential to impact so many lives, in so many places.

Though the context in which COVID-19 emerges is very different, with a globalised economy and interconnected travel system that is accelerating its spread with both severe economic and health effects for populations. Unlike other economic crises in recent times, people are not only worried about their livelihoods, but also their lives.

Rather than an economic slowdown, this has led to a life shutdown, with people in some countries not able to leave their homes, and those working in sectors such as the airline and hospitality industries not able to work and worrying how they will cover the next months' rent. And this is what COVID-19 represents, a war on the modern way of life we have.

National governments' response in this war has been varied in speed and severity, with some nation states such as Taiwan acting decisively to quarantine their populations and Western democracies like the USA and UK more slowly and incrementally until reaching a tipping point. With such a varied response and confidence in government to win this war, we see private enterprise stepping in and bearing arms, helping people with practical advice, products that can help them adapt and generally trying to lift peoples' spirits in these challenging times.

But the question is what should private companies and brands do in these times to help people and their own businesses, specifically as it relates to branded communication? Doubtless, many would think it insensitive to continue to deliver the same product messages in the same way in this new context, though should they stop communicating altogether, or use creative campaigns as a weapon to help fight the war against COVID-19, while also enabling their own survival for when the crisis ends?

In this paper we outline that brands do have a role to play in the fight, and people expect brands to step up and lead during this difficult time, both in helping them on a day-to-day basis by adapting their products and services, as well as communicating broadly about how they will work with them to set a path to a better future. We demonstrate this using our polling data with specific measures about what people need and expect from brands and their campaigns during this time, measure the creative effects of campaigns that have already reacted to COVID-19, and share Ipsos' perspective from more than four decades' experience in branded communication research to outline the steps we think brands need to take to help win this war to protect our way of life, and their long-term survival once we overcome the crisis.

Brands and creative have always had economic and social value, now the ideas and stories they tell may well be one of the things that helps win this war.

## WITH NEW CONTEXT COMES NEW BEHAVIOURS AND OUTLOOKS

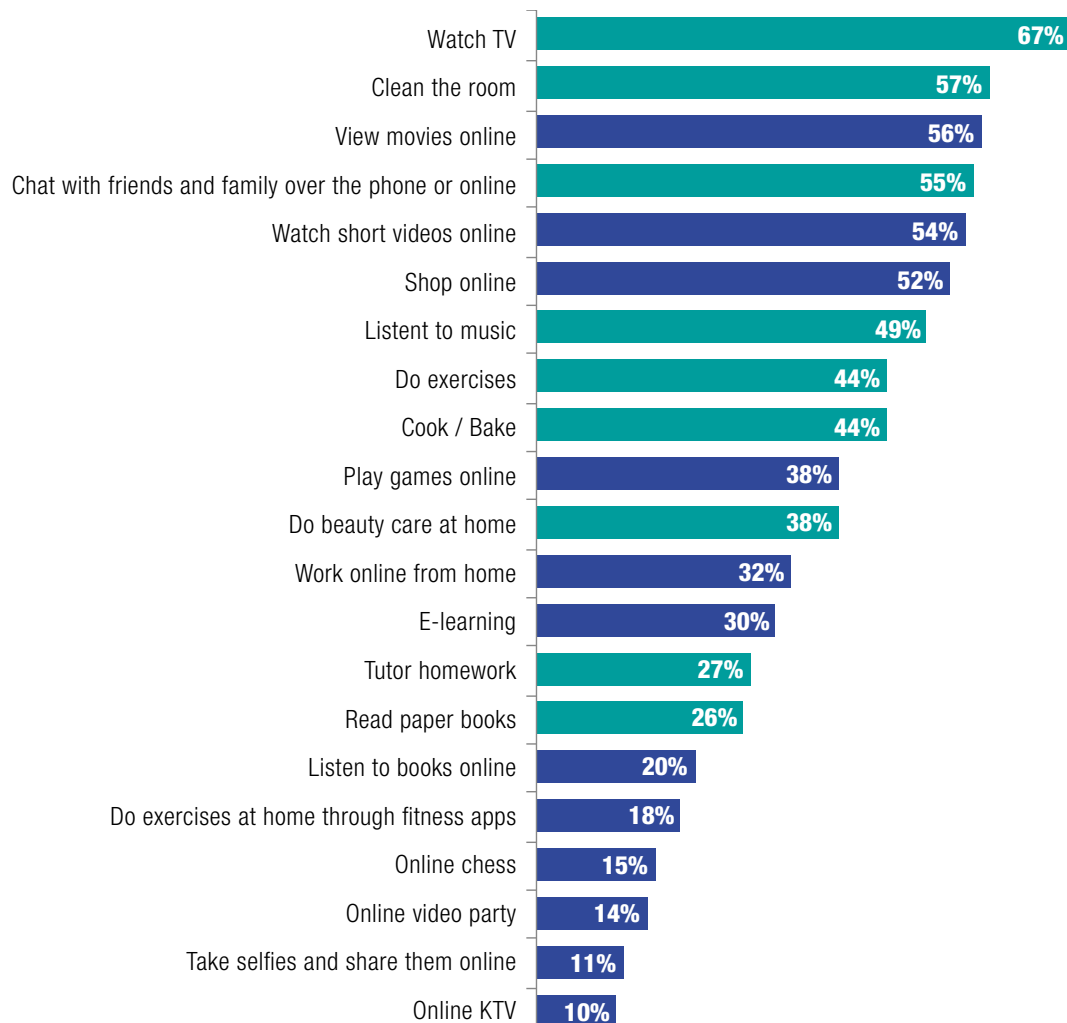
Where the spread of COVID-19 has gripped a nation, its impact has been more than an economic slowdown, it has been the shutdown of a way of life. In some countries, borders have closed, people are in quarantine, large gatherings are banned, and in a short time social distancing has become the norm.

In these very new environmental conditions, we see Darwinian principles at play, with people's behaviour quickly adapting out of necessity to become more virtual and isolated. This has thrown into doubt long established business models and has already led to a severe decline

for the travel, tourism sectors and many bricks and mortar operations like restaurants and retailers.

Examples of this change in behaviour have been first documented at the origins of the virus, China, with people at the height of the infection nearly twice as likely to buy the products they need via eCommerce platforms than shopping malls (46% vs. 25%). While people were under quarantine, they also spent a lot of time on screens viewing video content, with two thirds of people (67%) spending their time watching TV, and over half watching video content online (54%-56%).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1** Activities at home from the first to the 20th day of the new year



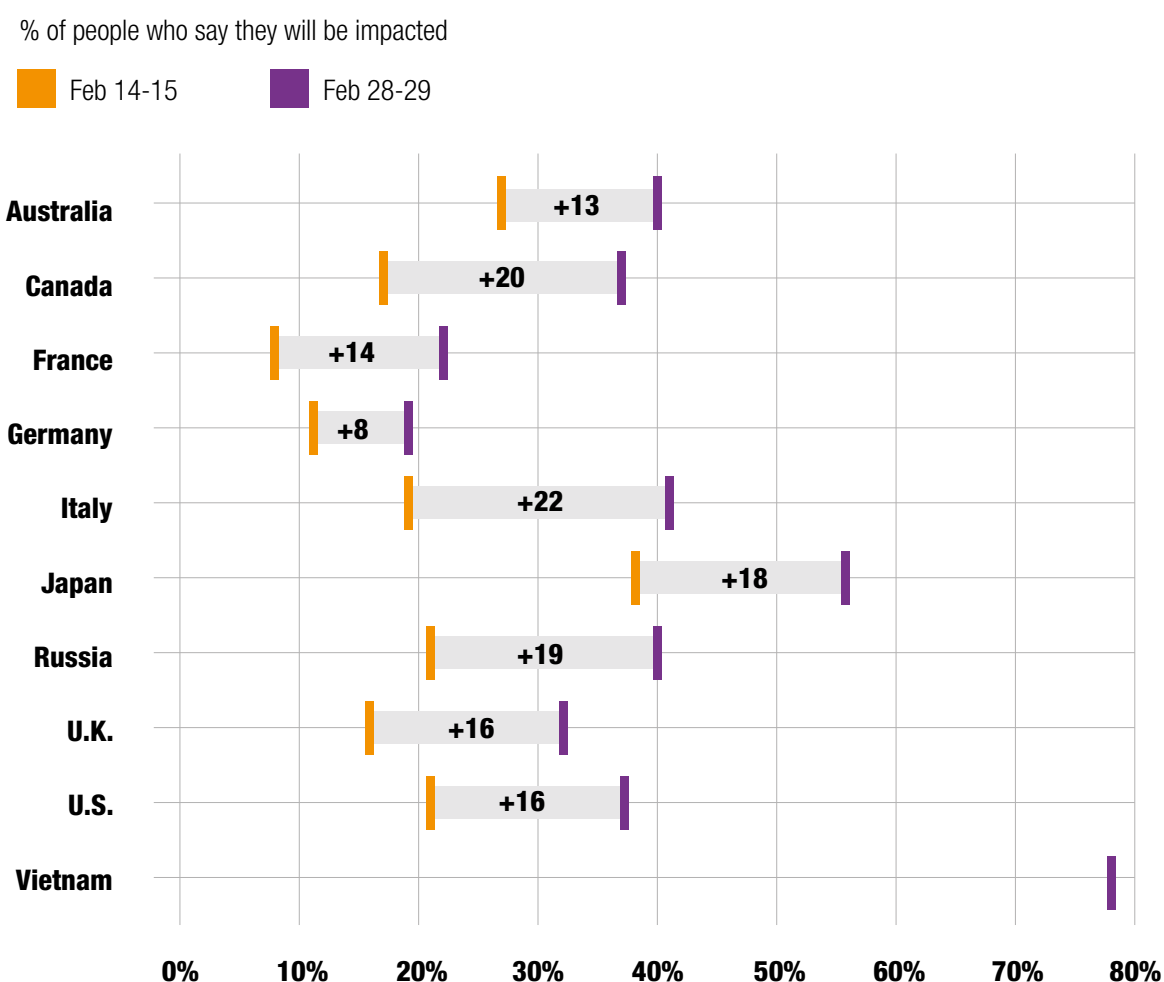
Source: *Optimism and anxieties during COVID-19 – Chinese consumers in difficult time*

Alongside this focus on virtual entertainment and purchasing, we also see changes in perception and outlook. In an Ipsos poll conducted between February 28-29, we observed a significant increase in the number of people who believe the virus will have a personal financial impact on their lives compared to the previous month.<sup>2</sup> With such an increase in the prior two weeks, we can expect at the time of publication this may increase further, representing a major threat to consumer confidence for economies and the brands they use.

Further suggesting the impact of the virus on perception and outlook is as much financial as it is to physical health, the volume of organic conversations online, tracked by our social intelligence tool, Synthesio, centre on economic, financial, and travel matters as much as they do in terms of health and prevention:<sup>3</sup>

- Economy and Finance: 722K organic mentions
- Taking Action and Prevention: 705K organic mentions
- Authorities and Politics: 705K organic mentions
- Travel challenges: 295K organic mentions

**Figure 2** Will COVID-19 impact you financially



Source: Ipsos online survey, conducted February 28-29, 2020, among 10,000 adults aged 18-74 in Canada and US and 16-74 in Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom and Vietnam.

## WHERE DO BRANDS FIT IN THE NEW CONTEXT?

With polling data suggesting a change in both behaviour and outlooks, it is clear the context in which brands are used and perceived has changed, and the question is how should brands adapt to help and survive themselves in these challenging times?

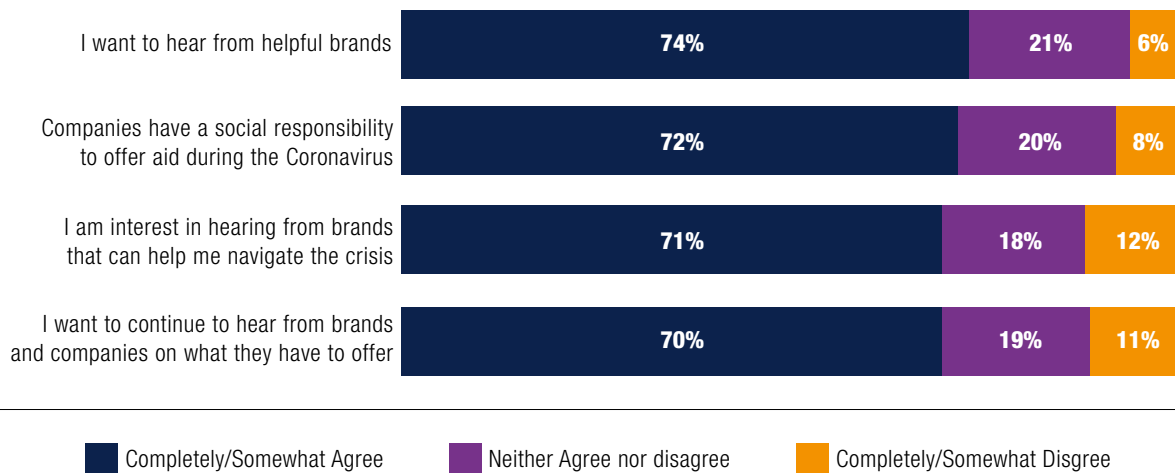
Before we turn to brands, we should start with the government institutions and agencies whose job it is to manage public health and infrastructure and, before the COVID-19 crisis, we see a relatively small 14% describing them as 'trustworthy'.<sup>4</sup> This is significantly lower than companies that provide products and services to people, such as food and drink companies (26%) and tech brands (39%).

With such a gap in trust before the crisis, we can see people generally looking to brands to help their lives, more so than the governments whose primary role is to do this through infrastructure and services. However, with a clear change in context, behaviour and outlook, do brands have a role to play in helping manage and overcome the COVID-19 crisis?

Ipsos ran a poll specifically focused on better understanding this issue. We interviewed n=999 adults aged 18-65 in the USA, asking questions about the role brands can play and what people want to hear from brands in terms of their communication during the crisis.

The responses overall suggest people want and expect brands to actively communicate during this crisis, with a majority feeling they have a social responsibility to offer aid and wanting to in general hear from helpful brands:

**Figure 3** What do people want from brands during the COVID-19 crisis?

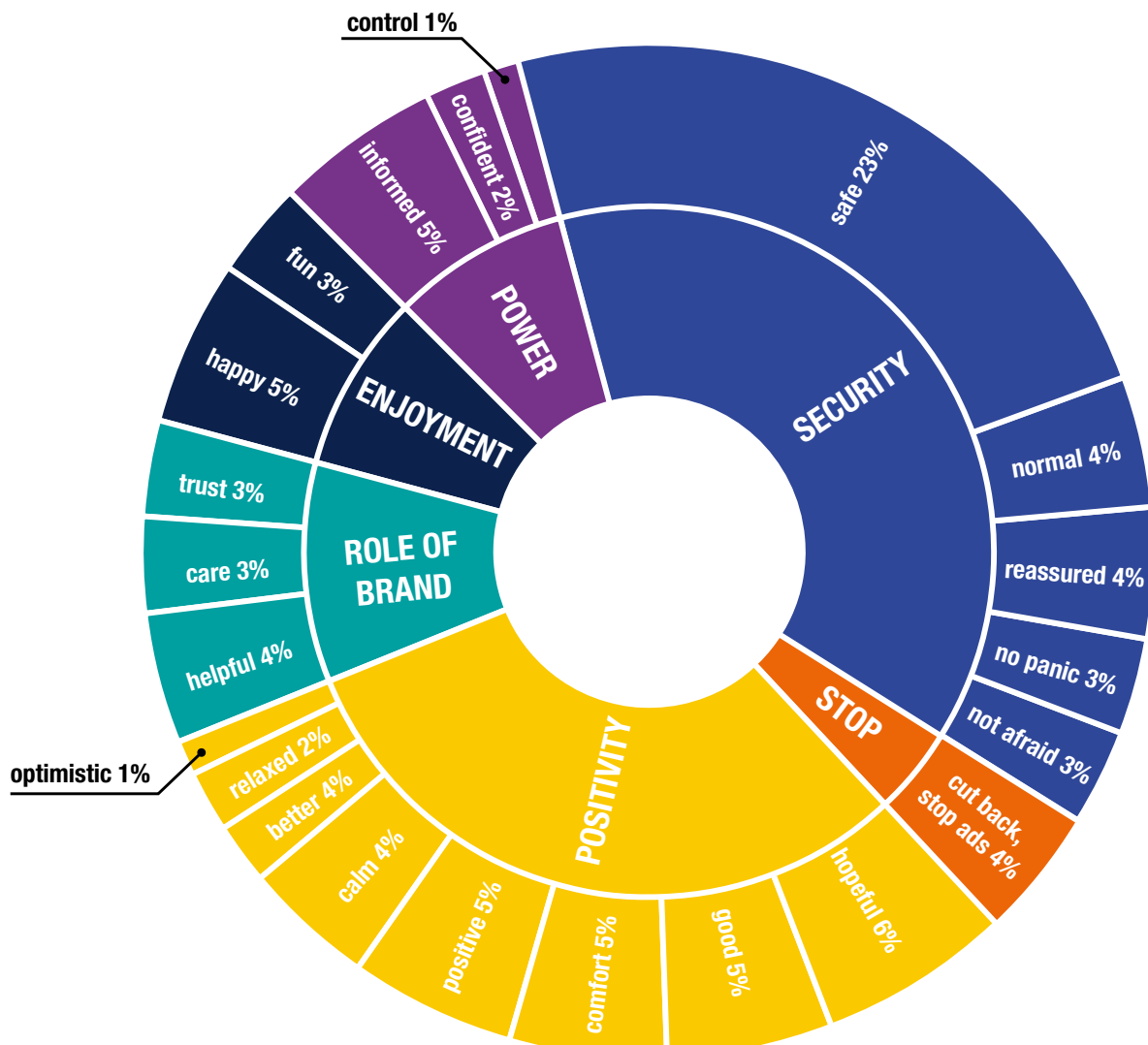


Source: Ipsos Brand and Communications poll, w/c 16 March, n=999 adults aged 18-65

More specifically, we asked people how they want advertising to make them feel during this crisis and used text analytics to understand thematically the key feelings they want. By far the dominant theme measured centred on security, likely with people simply wanting advertising to help them retain a sense of consistency and normality in their lives. Followed by this was a desire for general positivity, with people specifically wanting messages of hope, comfort and calm. Conversely, only 4% wanted brands to stop their advertising.<sup>5</sup>

With clear indications people expect brands to lead the fight and expect and want continued contact with brand communication, what can brands do to meet this expectation, and how can they benefit and survive during this time? To understand the present, we must first look to the how successful brands have acted in the past.

**Figure 4:** In the current situation with Coronavirus how do you want advertising to make you feel?



Base: 999 adults in the US aged between 18-65.



## A NEW TIME WHERE BRANDS CAN TAKE A STAND AND STAND BY PEOPLE'S SIDE

Throughout previous crises, strong brands have a history of taking a stand and showing their support to what people endure, yet also getting the chance of creating a closer bond, by showing empathy, answering people's needs for moral and physical comfort – as these vintage World War II examples testify.

This is also true in more recent crises and challenges the world faced:

- After September 11, 2001, General Motors showed its support to help Americans 'keep America rolling' with a zero-interest deal.
- During the British mad cow crisis in France, meat producer Charal advertised with a lot of humour its safe French meat range, showing how a deprived husband could bite his wife, and asking 'when was the last time you gave meat to your husband?'
- More recently, Budweiser advertised how it supported people facing hurricanes and fires catastrophes, by offering canned Bud water

While its impact is more severe than past crises, in some respects COVID-19 is no different. It is a key moment in people's lives, where change looks like the only constant, but also where brands can show their full empathetic support, and keep their brand top of people's minds and hearts.

In his [March 17 Marketing Week article](#), Mark Ritson is fully right to highlight that at ***"some point consumers will return to the streets, the cafes and the various other activities that they have been denied during the dark days ahead. Keep the brand light burning, because the cost of snuffing it out for the rest of 2020 and then trying to reignite it next year is gigantic."***

Figure 5 Advertising responses to WWII



Let's take Facebook for example, who is giving away advertising space to suffering small businesses, setting up \$100 million program of grants that are eligible for up to 30,000 businesses. French Pay TV Channel Canal Plus who gives free access to every French in lockdown for the next 30 days.

**“Brands can show their full empathetic support and keep their brand top of people's minds and hearts.”**

China, who was first to be hit by this unprecedented crisis, paved the way. Of course, brands like Ikea were in the spotlight with so many occasions to be and work at home, and took good advantage of that:

Translation: "My parents had never seen how I look at work. Now they do." It's a great way to show that amongst the drama of that situation, there's also some good that comes out of it.

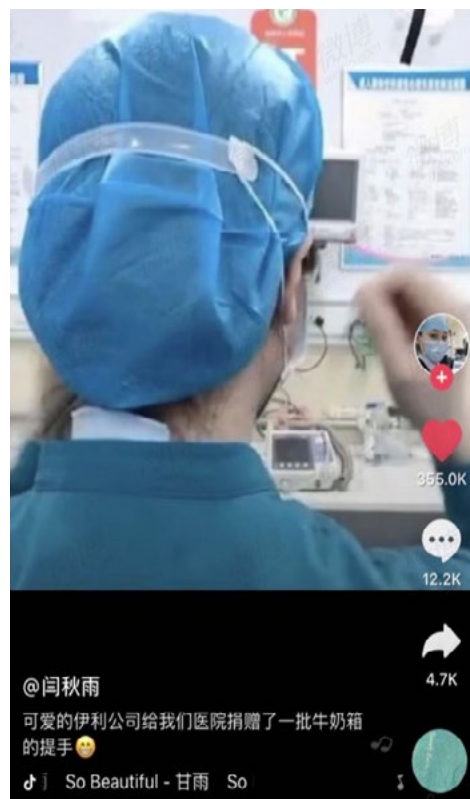
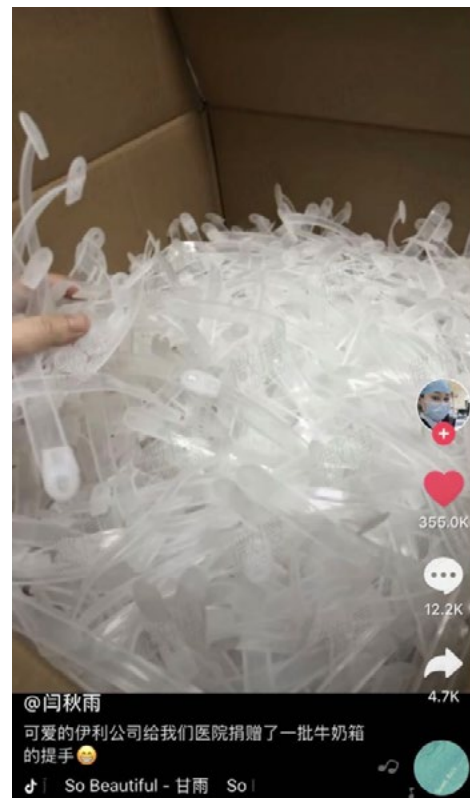
**Figure 6** Ikea response to Coronavirus



But less naturally relevant brands like dairy milk brand Yili seized the occasion to bond with the nation – they offered plastic carton holders to volunteering doctors and nurses. As you quickly experience when you are a mask wearer, it hurts the ears a lot – but not if you use Yili's cartons holders.

In a similar fashion, Nike used Tik Tok to offer daily workouts videos to Chinese during the lockdown, recognizing their need for physical activity.

**Figure 7** Yili response to Coronavirus





All these brands demonstrate that, relevant or not, taking a stand along-side people facing the crisis starts by standing by their side and empathizing with their needs, emotions and feelings.

- With the pandemic starting to take hold in the USA, we've also seen brands release campaigns in reaction, focused on a message of support and help rather than advertising their specific products. Ford has recently been a prominent example, pulling their product ads and instead working with Wieden + Kennedy to launch a campaign reassuring their customers they will be there for them by pausing on lease or credit payments during the crisis. [You can view the creative here.](#)

We evaluated this creative using our evaluation service, Creative|**Spark**, where we measure a combination of thoughts, feelings and emotions with business outcome validated metrics to measure effects and identify areas to optimise, if needed.

Despite a relatively sombre tone and dark visuals, the memory encoding effects were strong and even with very minimal branding presence, Ford was associated at good levels, leading to strong overall branded attention:

**Figure 8** Built to Lend a Hand - Ford



Source: Ipsos | Creative|**Spark** Results

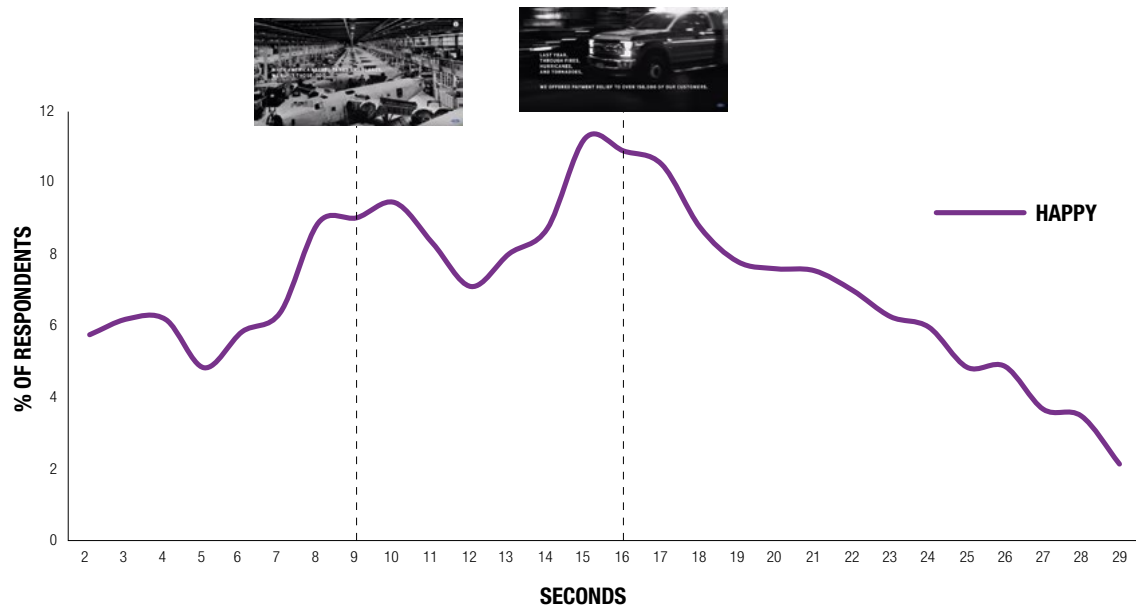
Having measured the strength of memories and thoughts encoded, we measured the immediate emotional responses via web cams (aka as “facial coding”) to better understand the key moments (see Figure 9) that attracted a positive emotional response, which we know can be the fuel of memories.

The key moments of positive emotional affect we measured focus on the help Ford have given to people in key crises in human history, such as building tanks and planes for America during World War II and payment relief to customers through the extreme weather events of 2019, before

communicating they will lend the same support during the COVID-19 crisis. These types of responses suggest overall that people respond positively to this type of action from brands during periods of crisis and reflect in general the wish for security and well-being people want from advertising during this time.

When asked directly after being exposed to the creative, most people also agreed that Ford is a brand that ‘does the right thing for others’ (83%) and is an important part of American culture (90%). Following this perception, we also

**Figure 9** What emotional response did the creative evoke, and when?



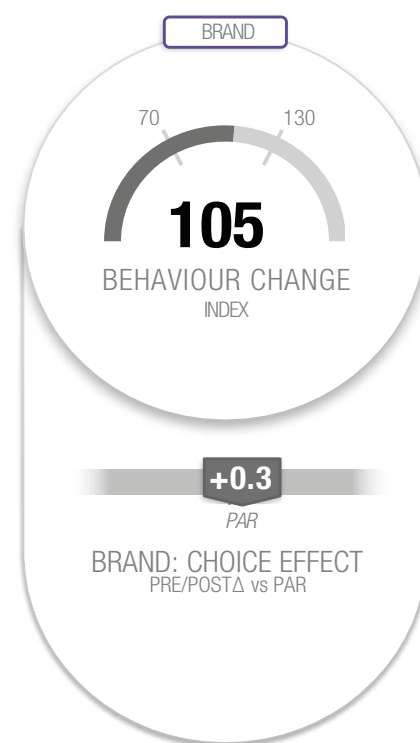
Source: Ipsos | Creative|Spark Results

see potential for the creative to positively change behaviour towards the brand. Despite arguably not being a campaign obviously tasked with driving short term effects, the behaviour change impact was at average levels, suggesting brands can also benefit from this approach while doing the right thing in times of need.

While the creative attracts strong branded attention and positive behaviour change (see Figure 10), we do though see less strength in the residual feelings (see Figure 11) left with people. To measure this, we apply text analytics to code the sentiment of responses as positive or negative and combine the coding of the words together to represent overall intensity, and in doing so we see a majority of people were left with positive feelings, though the overall intensity across all words is low.

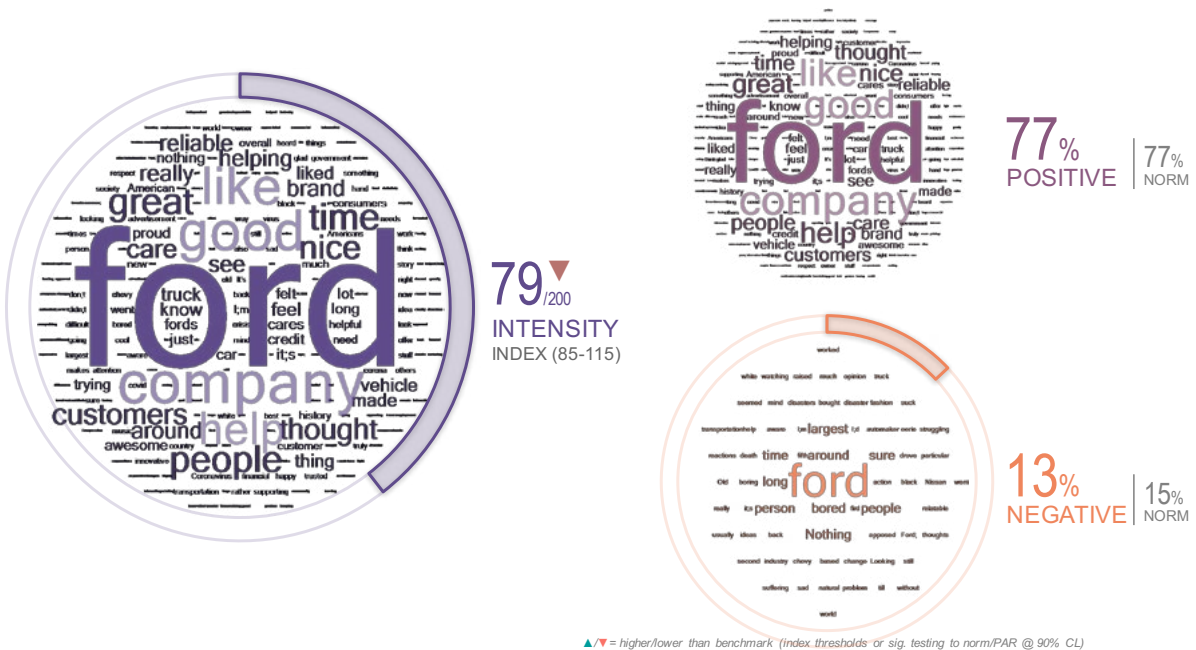
This is perhaps not surprising, given the sombre tone of the creative and the message Ford delivered, reminding people of their actions during these times of serious crisis. The timing of the creative at the start of the effects being felt in the pandemic is also likely the right choice for Ford, though as we hopefully get towards the stabilisation and reduction of the effects, brands likely have an opportunity to be more positive and speak to the positivity needs people express when thinking about the advertising they want to see.

**Figure 10** Built to Lend a Hand - Ford



Source: Ipsos | Creative|Spark Results

**Figure 11** What residual feelings were left by the creative?



Source: Ipsos | Creative|Spark Results



## WHAT IT ALL MEANS: SURVIVE TO REVIVE

From people's perceptions to case studies we collected around the world, all our findings tend to demonstrate one thing, brands have a lot to lose if they 'go dark' and stop marketing and communication activities.

It's first of all a question of survival, of showing that your brand can still help, and answer people's needs, empathizes, so it can find and play its role in this new normal, and stay alive in everyone's minds. Even if the context of the crisis is completely novel, Ipsos lessons learned in developing strong, purpose led communication still apply:

- **Being authentic and faithful to what the brand stands for**
- **Making sure you act and do, as much or even before telling**
- **Find the right story and striking the right tone**
- **Leveraging multi touchpoint campaigns to ensure you deliver the right messages to people where they are now and when they are most receptive**

This is a question of short-term survival indeed, but also essential to prepare the medium-term revival, to plan for the day after tomorrow when people will go back to their normal lives. It is about making sure you will continue to be part of people's lives in the new context that they will live.

This certainly takes courage for brands and advertisers to stand up and stand out in these troubled times. We see clear indications from the data that people expect brands to be active, to help them feel some form of normalcy in their lives, and to help generate positivity in these difficult times, and we will continue to monitor these perceptions in different countries as the crisis evolves.

But deciding on the strategy of communication and crafting these messages doesn't need to be blind. The right type of research can be instrumental in helping your brand find the best story and voice to engage with people, so you can be sure and make the best decisions. Advertisers are working with Ipsos to leverage our best in class services, and ability to offer virtual contact with people at scale, to understand how best they can develop and launch the right campaigns to help people and themselves.

By using the right insights, measures and taking a bold approach in their creative, we believe brands will be key to fighting this war against COVID-19. A war to end the life shutdown people face, and the war for brands to survive, then revive for the new world they face.

Ipsos Creative Excellence experts are ready to help you navigate the crisis with your advertising research questions.

### REFERENCES

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