

BRAND RITUALS IN A LOW-TOUCH WORLD

What's next for brands?

By Tamara Ansons, Chris Murphy, Steven Naert and Colin Strong | April 2020



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BRAND ROLES IN A “LOW-TOUCH” CONTEXT

In our recent paper, *Coronavirus & Behavior Change: what does this mean for brands?*¹ we established that there is a unique window of opportunity for brands to deeply connect in this fluid period of heightened uncertainty where we have been jolted from automatic behaviors.

Even as parts of the world begin to emerge from lockdown, it is unlikely we will simply snap back to pre-2020 behaviors. With a vaccine not expected soon, we are probably facing an extended period where some form of social distancing will continue. When the planet re-opens for business, many will continue to limit the risk of contamination through some combination of regulations and personal choice.

As we prepare for a likely “low-touch” reality - and as households gradually move towards the establishment of new routines, behavioral science offers insights into how

Now, brands need to help shape and reinforce new rituals in our low-touch reality.

consumers are making decisions. It can also help guide brands as they emerge from a period of consumer empathy to one where brands also need to help shape and reinforce new rituals.

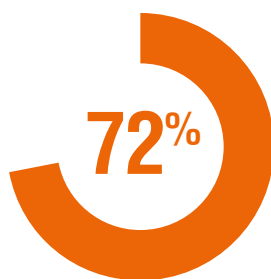
This will be a key focus for brands as they consider how to add value to people’s lives in the low-touch months ahead.

CONSUMERS ARE OK WITH BRANDS BEING COMMERCIAL BRANDS

Let’s get this out of the way first: consumers are concerned about the economy, and they expect brands to be active during this time. Brands are seen to have a social responsibility, and consumers want to hear from helpful brands as they navigate the crisis (see figure 1). They generally also want to continue to hear what brands have to offer.

While it is important to avoid perceptions of crisis profiteering, most consumers understand the economic wheels must turn and will not look unfavourably on marketing activity.

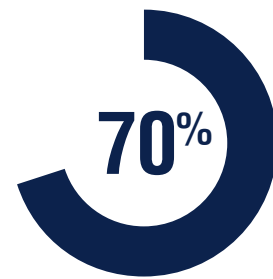
Figure 1 Expectations of brands during coronavirus (% completely/somewhat agree)



Companies have a **social responsibility to offer aid** during Coronavirus



I am interested in hearing from brands that can **help me navigate the crisis**



I want to continue to hear from brands and companies on **what they have to offer**

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

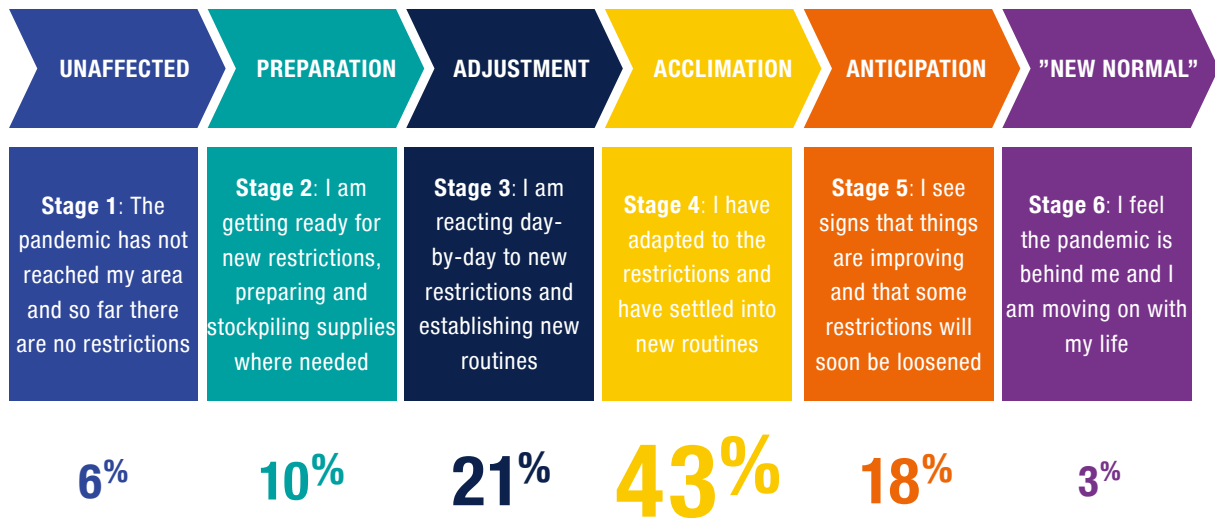
DEVELOPING NEW ROUTINES

In recent months, we have seen drastic consumer adjustments to the evolving COVID-19 and our new low-touch world. These changes have created a raft of routines that introduce challenges and opportunities for brands trying to work out what they should do to be part of them. This includes either helping to

create new routines or leveraging those under construction.

We are using the framework shown below to categorize and understand the key stages of how people feel as they move through the pandemic journey.

Figure 2 Evolution of phases during COVID-19

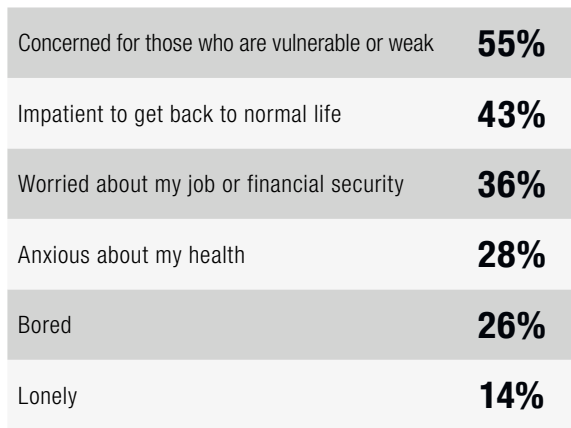


Source: Ipsos Global Advisor online survey of 28,000 adults in 15 countries (16-19 April 2020)

Recent data collected among 28,000 consumers across 15 countries shows us that the majority have moved to, or past, a phase where they are developing a new set of routines (see figure 2).

But "routine" does not equate to "comfortable." At the same time, there is significant international anxiety around physical and financial health, as well as impatience to get back to a 'normal' life (see figure 3).

Figure 3 Which of these best describe how you are feeling today?



Source: Ipsos Global Advisor online survey of 28,000 adults in 15 countries (16-19 April 2020)

BRANDS, ROUTINES & RITUALS

Naturally, brand leaders want to understand which behaviors will persist post-pandemic, and we are flooded with material speculating about the nature and timing of the new normal.

Exploring how routines evolve to the status of a ritual can inform brand strategy. Routines are patterns of behavior generally performed with little thought. But a more strictly observed routine can become a ritual - for example, ritualistically stopping at a favorite coffee shop for a drink of choice.

WHAT IS A RITUAL?

- Rituals are precisely followed behaviors imbued with meaning.²
- Ordinary gestures are transformed into symbolic expressions and are undertaken consistently. Their meaning is reinforced with each repeat performance.
- Rituals reflect a core set of shared beliefs, promoting a sense of belonging or importance.
- Rituals emerge amidst uncertainty to allow a sense of normalcy.³ As anxiety over the COVID-19 global death count rises, a heightened sense of mortality strengthens the desire to reinforce cultural membership and bolster self-esteem.⁴
- Routines typically fulfil a need and, through repetition, become easy to perform and replicate.

In more stable environments, traditional models of habit emphasize repetition and reward to make behavior stick. While some elements of this perspective may help to identify which behaviors will endure, the current evolving environment points us to the importance of ritual and meaning in making this happen.



MAKING BEHAVIOR STICK

In this new context, there is an opportunity to connect brand-associated meaning with new behaviors. Brands can have a supporting role in giving people a sense of control by playing a part in routine and ritual – and where these behaviors carry particular meaning, they are more likely to continue beyond the pandemic.

If a behavior is guided by ritual, people are more likely to continue performing it. This is an essential marker of durable behavior change adopted in the COVID-19 environment. Brands stand to gain long-term perceived value if they perform well in a memorably anxious time.

With an understanding of the nature of rituals, now is an opportune moment for brands to:



Identify new, potentially durable routines that are not yet ritualized.



Drive **internalization** of enjoyable new habits that meet a need and are easy to perform.

- Build benefit associations, building the motivation to repeat them.
- Reflect and affirm the behavior, building consumers' confidence in their mastery of it.



Clearly illustrate a sense of **shared experience** or **consensus behavior**.

- When trying new behaviors, people often feel self-consciously alone. If they know others are doing it too, they are much more likely to repeat it.
- At a time when many are craving interaction, brands seen to be facilitating personal connections stand to gain long-term equity.



Deliver an **aligned brand experience** where positioning and delivery provide mutual reinforcement, laying the groundwork for repetition.



SOME BRANDS ARE ALREADY DRIVING RITUAL BEHAVIOR

One behavioral shift we have seen is a move to virtual. Connecting with others through a screen can feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but with more brands introducing this into their communications and activities, we can expect this to drive internalization. For example:

- Dr Oetker is currently airing a commercial in Europe (“Not together, still very close”) where two partners are enjoying a pizza over a virtual candlelight dinner.
- The craft beer brand BrewDog is setting up virtual pubs where people can enjoy online ordered drinks together with their friends.
- Jack Daniels has launched a campaign using everyday lockdown footage to encourage people to make social distancing social.
- Yorkshire Tea has created a series of Zoom backgrounds to customize video calls.

Outside of this focus on ‘virtual’ behaviors, Ikea, long associated with the ritual of family-welcome shopping, is extending this association by running advertisements featuring familial behaviors in the home, helping to bring about positive

associations with being forced to spend more time there. In the UK, we have seen Birds Eye create a sense of normalcy in their ‘What’s for Tea’ campaign. These and others are communicating the normalcy of shared experience while appropriately showcasing their brands’ roles.

Other brands are well-known for having already done this. After the Great Recession, American Express launched Small Business Saturday, an enduring initiative to support local shops by encouraging people to buy local and post about it on social media using the hashtag #smallbusinesssaturday.

And the repeated performance rituals associated with powerhouse brands like Oreo, KitKat, Stella Artois, and others are well-chronicled. All these established rituals can be extended into the context of our new low-touch world, whereas brands without such rituals now have the opportunity to begin establishing them.

It is too early to make predictions about which new routines will prove durable, but looking at what is common to these examples, we can see that having meaning plays a critical role.



SUMMING UP: THE PATH FROM ROUTINE TO RITUAL IS MEANING

While brands need to operate with intelligence, a strong moral compass and sensitivity, they also play an important role in the economy – and the public are eager for its recovery.

Viewing the current environment through the lens of behavioral change helps us understand that brands have a unique opportunity to build and internalize new routines in today's fluid and low-touch context. And an understanding of rituals provides insight into how routines can be developed to be durable, repeatable, and imbued with brand-associated meaning – which will make these new routines more likely to persist in a post-COVID-19 world.

As many of our automatic brand selections and everyday behaviors have been disrupted, now is the time for brands to become central figures in the performance of new routines and rituals.

WHAT BRANDS CAN DO TO FORM CUSTOMER RITUALS



IDENTIFY NEW AND POTENTIALLY DURABLE ROUTINES



DRIVE THE INTERNALIZATION OF NEW HABITS



ILLUSTRATE SHARED EXPERIENCES AND CONSENSUS BEHAVIOR



DELIVER AN ALIGNED BRAND EXPERIENCE

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Authors:

Tamara Ansons UK Behavioral Science Lead, Ipsos

Chris Murphy Global President, Market and Brand Strategy, Ipsos

Steven Naert Global Solutions Leader, Brand & Portfolio, Ipsos

Colin Strong Global Head of Behavioral Science, Ipsos