COPING WITH COVID: How Customers Feel About Business During The Pandemic

U.S. Learnings from a Global Study by Arlington Research in association with MEDIA FRENZY GLOBAL
The financial impact of Covid-19 has devastated global economies. As a result, the desire to hold onto cash coupled with the fear of saying the ‘wrong’ thing has spread a blanket of silence across industries, with marketing investment being cut, paused, or pulled altogether.

We wanted to determine which—if any—of these strategies was the best way to go. So we joined our research partner firm in a major study asking 13,000 consumers globally—including 2,500 in the U.S. alone—for their insight and opinions on brand communications during the coronavirus pandemic.

The findings provide compelling evidence that ‘switching the lights off’ and saying nothing is not the right thing to do now. In fact, it’s far from it.
Shortly after we received the findings that follow, America was further convulsed by a wave of social unrest that is yet to be resolved.

Combined with the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, business communications may seem like the last concern on anyone’s mind. But the first thing on many people’s minds when the challenge of Covid-19 was understood was its effect on business and the economy generally.

As these events impact American society, business leaders at all levels are among the most engaged citizens looking for ways to calm the situation and find long-term solutions to the challenges we all face.

All of this underscores the centrality of business in the life of society. Products sold and services offered are—in many ways—the common ground on which our society is built. For this reason alone, businesses have a certain responsibility to communicate with customers and prospective customers.

Brand-building is not just about selling. It is as much about a company’s values and its connection to the lives of the people it serves. Thoughtful and respectful communications now may bind companies to their markets for many years to come.

For business, that is the light at the end of this particular tunnel.

Sarah Tourville,
CEO, Media Frenzy Global
The survey was conducted online between April 23 and May 19, 2020, surveying 13,000 respondents aged 18+ from a nationally representative sample for each country surveyed based on gender, age and region (+/-2%), including 2,500 from the United States.

The survey explored six key areas:

1. How consumers feel about businesses that had gone quiet during the pandemic
2. Brand perceptions following little/no communication during the crisis
3. Feelings towards Covid-19 related news
4. How much content people are willing to consume at this time
5. The brands who are successfully inspiring consumers to spend
6. Feelings towards their own company’s communications throughout Covid-19

Global Headlines

- Just under a third of consumers perceive no news as bad news
- Almost 4 in 10 consumers (38%) said their perception of businesses has changed during Covid-19, based on communications
- Almost half of respondents surveyed are desperate for non-COVID-19 news—regardless of age or gender
- Almost half of consumers are consuming more content than ever, at this time
- People want brands to inspire them during this unsettled period
- Employees are concerned for their future if their company has gone quiet
U.S. FINDINGS

1. No news means... bad news

   ‘I worry the businesses that have gone quiet (no news or content being shared) during the Covid-19 pandemic are in financial trouble, so I am not buying from them.’

   A full third of U.S. consumers surveyed (33%) worry that the businesses who have gone quiet (with no news or content being shared) during the Covid-19 pandemic are in financial trouble and so are not spending with them. This is a staggering number.

   The feeling is pretty mutual across the board with over four in ten (41%) of Millennials, 45% of Generation Z and more than a third (37%) of Generation X in agreement. Interestingly, agreement is also higher in cities (38%) compared to rural locations (26%). Looking at gender splits, men (41%) feel more strongly about a lack of communication than women (25%), with both numbers over a quarter overall.

   It’s clear that without a clear communication strategy, companies risk consumers coming to their own conclusions—and those conclusions might not even be right. Your business may be faring the storm but your staff and/or customers don’t know it and may be reluctant to place that next order for fear you might not be able to fulfill it.

2. Just under half are desperate to hear about non-COVID-19 news

   ‘I am desperate for some news and content that isn’t related to the Covid-19 pandemic.’

   The U.S. is among the countries most desperate for ‘other news’ at 47%. Feelings in response to this question are strong, with just 18% disagreeing.

   The gender split is relatively uniform (48% of men and 45% of women agree with the statement). Agreement is felt across most generations, (in the mid-40%), with Millenials feeling most strongly at 51%. The results are also consistent between those living in urban areas compared to those living rurally (48% agreement for urban areas versus 47% in rural areas).
3. People want more content, not less

‘I spend more time consuming content now than ever before.’

50% of U.S. respondents surveyed agree with this statement, among the highest in the world, with a slightly bigger sway for men (55% agreement) than women (46% agreement). Only 17% disagree overall. Much of this can, undoubtedly, be attributed to lockdowns with people spending the majority of time at home, online.

From a communications point of view, there’s never been a more captive audience who feel positive about being kept in touch with. This is felt across generations, most powerfully by Millennials and Generation X (both 55%), with only the ‘Silent Generation’ (born pre-1946) as an outlier at 28%.

The number is also surprisingly comparable between city and rural populations (54% and 52% respectively) —considering those without access to open spaces are effectively ‘locked in’ their urban homes.

4. People want to feel inspired to spend

‘During this crisis, brands that inspire me and give me hope are the ones I want to spend money with in the future.’

45% of all those surveyed agree they want to be inspired by brands so they can be hopeful about the future. This is turn will inspire them to spend money with these brands when this is all over.

Again, men nudge ahead in agreement with this statement (48%), with 41% of women agreeing. This is especially true of those living in cities (50%). Millennials take the lead of all generations (53%) followed by Generation X (45%). Across all generations, disagreement is markedly low, ranging from 20% of Generation Z to 15% of Baby Boomers and only 13% of the ‘Silent Generation.’

In summary, people want news, they want more news that will inspire them, and when they are inspired they plan to spend more.
5. **38% said their perceptions of businesses have changed**

   ‘My perception of businesses has changed based upon how they have communicated during the Covid-19 pandemic—good or bad.’

Incredibly, almost half of Americans (45%) surveyed agree with this statement. There is a slight gender split (49% of men versus 40% of women). Amongst the different generations, almost half of Millennials (49%) agree their perceptions have changed one way or the other, with Generations X and Z not far behind (47% and 44%, respectively).

Interestingly, perceptions are changed more in cities (49% agreement) compared to their rural counterparts (38%).

This points to getting your tone right and showing some humanity. Consumers’ perceptions of businesses have changed for the better or worse, based upon how a company has communicated.

6. **People are worried about their jobs**

   ‘The company I work for isn’t sharing any content (news or thought leadership) so I am worried about its future after this pandemic.’

The U.S. is among the countries where agreement is highest at 35%.

Respondents perceive that no news from their company means it’s not good news for their job security. This is especially true amongst men (42%), and people living in cities (40%) are more worried than those in rural areas (25%) – despite it traditionally being easier to find work in big cities compared to rural regions.

Millenials are the age group most concerned by an apparent lack of communication (41% agreement), with nearly a quarter (23%) of Baby Boomers worried.

If we want to restore faith in our economies, it’s imperative we keep employees up to date on company news, changes and the future.

1 Based on all respondents excluding those who selected ‘Not applicable to me’ i.e. those who are not working for a company.
CONCLUSION

“The coronavirus pandemic has brought about the biggest change to normal life since World War II. But as the research has shown, brands need to stay active and in touch with their audiences, come what may.

There is a huge demand for content right now and engagement is at an all-time high. People are responsive to authentic and relevant content that doesn’t necessarily dwell on the dark. As with any form of marketing, the key is to listen, whether you’re communicating with your staff, customers, community, or future customers.

The majority of people taking part in this survey told us that how well a company responds to the coronavirus crisis will have a huge bearing on the likelihood of buying from them in the future. Do not underestimate the ‘power of now’. Now is not the time to stop communications – the beginning is always today.”

Sarah Tourville is CEO of Media Frenzy Global, a marketing communications agency with offices in the U.S. and U.K.

Top tips for striking the right balance

• Show compassion or innovation to create deeper more meaningful relationships with your audience.

• Create interesting and thought-provoking content that will get traction now and in the following months.

• Your tone should be consistently empathetic—keep ‘checking the temperature’ to ensure your message is respectful and always appropriate.

• Audiences are embracing new platforms like TikTok, live streamed events on YouTube and Zoom conferences. While people are sympathetic, now could be a great time to experiment and try a new platform.

• Give people what they need, when they need it.
ABOUT MEDIA FRENZY GLOBAL

An award-winning agency, Media Frenzy Global (MFG) grows total company value for technology companies by increasing market awareness and connecting that to revenue.

MFG is the only internationally-focused boutique PR and Marketing agency in Atlanta whose sole focus is to build innovative and disruptive brands across continents. Its international cross-border expertise, diverse team, multi-award-winning campaigns, and 5-star customer testimonials make MFG a leading choice for brands seeking to tell progressive stories that connect with a multicultural and multigenerational audience.

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