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PART 1

THE GREAT SWITCH: “FIVE YEARS IN FIVE MINUTES: THE ULTIMATE BRAND TEST”

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“You gotta play until the end/The only difference between a winner and a loser is a winner plays until he wins...” — Big K.R.I.T.

There has never been a brand acceleration moment like this in the history of marketing. I say this because the pandemic is not just a forcing function, but a shock factor in how consumers choose between brands—not just for today, but for all their brand tomorrows.

The experiences and choices made today will drive lasting, profound impact. Sadly driven by a global pandemic, the dynamic and unprecedented changes being imposed upon consumers cannot be ignored. Astute marketers know that choices made in times of life discontinuities can last a lifetime.

We have an extended period while this storm is overhead, a tempest which won't pass until rapid testing and antibody testing are available at scale. That could take us into 2022 by some estimates. During this era, brands must retool or face retirement by their customers. Those that both navigate well and artfully remind their customers of how well they performed during this vulnerable period will surely emerge with greater equity and subsequent higher market share; those that disappoint will almost certainly suffer a catastrophic loss of goodwill, confidence, and

ultimately the market share they once enjoyed.

There are three powerful new behaviors emerging from this crisis, all of which present immense opportunity or perhaps great peril. In this series, I'll take you through them one by one. They are:

1. THE GREAT SWITCH:

If their typically preferred products are unavailable, consumers will switch without a second thought (and potentially forever).

2. THE GREAT TRIAL:

There will be first-time customers for products that are either new or newly introduced to them.

3. THE GREAT LOYALTY:

Those that tangibly helped their customers face down this plague will win long-lasting brand loyalty.

And now we begin with **The Great Switch**.

The line between consumer goods and industrial/military-grade products has dissolved once and for all. Anxiety about the virus has led many people to seek “industrial-strength” solutions. Also, many familiar consumer products are not available on a regular basis today because of supply chain disruptions, hoarding, and government regulation—toilet paper, sanitizing wipes, paper towels, and cleaning products chief among them. Customers will now try a new brand and find it perfectly suitable, or even more appealing, because of cost, availability, or quality.

The line between home and office has similarly blurred. We remember how enterprise software design changed after consumers saw what was possible with retail software. “If I can have the same ease-of-use at home, then why is this user interface so clunky?” asked Millennials, so products like Zoom and Slack burst into the mainstream for use in the living room as well as the conference room.

While some things will return to “normal” after the pandemic loosens its grip, others simply won’t. From a messaging standpoint, if yours is a brand whose supply chain didn’t perform, you must quickly, genuinely apologize to consumers who depended on you and feel let down, or they might find satisfaction in commercial toilet paper and military wipes forever.

Understanding all this, what is our concrete advice for brands in a supply/demand

crunch? They should present messages like “We are shifting our mix of industrial and residential manufacturing to better serve our valued customers.” Also, they could point consumers to other options—including competitors—as a public service if they still cannot find what they want.

In short, don’t be a victim of the great switcheroo. Move swiftly, openly, and humbly. Or else.

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this series, “The Great Trial,” where we discuss the plethora of experiments consumers are juggling.

Dan Aks, President of Undertone, is a recognized innovator in the education and media industries. Formerly a C-level executive of several media and educational enterprises and a former board member of public, private, and not-for-profit institutions, he is deeply experienced in digital media, digital platforms, linear TV, music, and print media through community newspapers and magazines. Aks is also a former partner in a leading management consulting firm, where he specialized in media strategy and operations efficiency.

THE GREAT TRIAL: “TRIAL BY FIRE”



“Sometimes it takes trials and tribulations to strengthen you for the glory ahead. It’s been a trying last few weeks but I’m ready.” — Anonymous

In short order, this pandemic has changed everything, including our cherished marketing conventions. It has simultaneously exploded then imploded the classic awareness-trial-conversion funnel beyond recognition.

What once took weeks or months now happens in an instant. I’ve noticed it in my own behavior as well as my family’s: I see something we need urgently, or which solves our quarantine shortages in a new way, or even serves as a welcome distraction, and I click-to-buy immediately.

At the same time, if a product from my favorite brand is not available, my loyalty becomes a perishable commodity.

For readers who don’t necessarily consider themselves devotees of behavioral psychology, what’s happening here is that my “fast brain”—which Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls “System 1”—has taken control. It’s the impulsive, cortex-free component of System 1, activated by the pandemic, that’s reduced the funnel to rubble. And it is within this era of System 1 decision-making where incredible opportunity awaits smart brand owners.

It’s also important to point out that cost often takes a back seat when our fast brains are running the cerebral show. I find that while I am usually a frugal guy—“cheap” has been used to describe me more than once—I am less cost-conscious than usual when my funnel lays in ruin. While millions are now unemployed and counting pennies, they will still be purchasing more immediately than before the crisis.

To help marketers understand where they fit in our New Immediacy, I present a framework that identifies three categories of needs. (I’m open to others, of course.) As I see it, the first is stay-well products—preventive wellness items ranging from immune-boosters and face masks to disinfectants and air sanitizers. These address survival, the first of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

In times of need, creative marketers and product designers will find new ways to transform their merchandise into essentials. In fact, I recently saw a glove manufacturer launch a disinfecting mitt. There are fast brains, and then there are fast brands.

The second category is staples, e.g., the toilet paper and paper towel shortages we've all read about if not experienced ourselves. As I mentioned, traditional notions of loyalty are vanquished in this era of shortages. If I were the CEO or CMO of a company suffering inventory shortfalls, I would make sure we clearly communicate with consumers our plans for action to prevent them from making their temporary brand choices permanent.

Success thus requires empathetic, transparent messaging of what we're doing to address these scarcities, as well as how we're committed to protecting the lives of our manufacturing and distribution workers while we increase production efforts, discourage the temptation to hoard or panic-buy, and offer a timeframe within which we can reasonably expect supply to reach satisfactory levels.

The third "needs framework" is comprised of a range of products and services that exist now—and will continually innovate—to address our new lock-down lifestyles.

We've obviously witnessed an explosion in sales of stay-at-home products and services that range from Netflix and other streaming services to family games, activities, and video conferencing solutions. Each of these creates an opportunity for generating post-purchase loyalty, as well as cross-sells and upsells, that extend well beyond the immediate crisis. Every System 1 purchase presents the opportunity for System Forever.

I've also been reading about a new generation of in-home services like

hairstyling, mani/pedi's, and more. Existing business sectors like house-call veterinarians will skyrocket. The consumer hunger for new solutions and immediate gratification—again, the funnel is ancient history—creates enormous opportunities. Even in a contracting economy.

Of course, the macro trends that were with us before the pandemic—the desire for purpose-driven brands, demand for transparency, and emphasis on emotional connection—remain constant. They will however be expressed differently in this brave new world (and will for longer than we would like). As such, the Fast Brain decisions we as customers make, and the new brands we embrace, will depend on heightened cultural and personal relevance.

Some say the world is on fire at the moment, which is why I titled this piece "Trial by Fire." While we socially distance from one another, we find ourselves somehow closer to brands. Is yours ready?

I hope you'll check back in for Part 3, "The Great Loyalty," where we explore the moments when your brand can transform performance in the now into leadership for the long-term.

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THE GREAT LOYALTY: “FIVE YEARS IN FIVE MINUTES: THE ULTIMATE LOYALTY TEST”



“Trust, once lost, could not be easily found. Not in a year, perhaps not even in a lifetime.” — J.E.B. Spredemann, [An Unforgivable Secret](#)

Loyalty is arguably humanity’s commanding instinct. It is our tribal legacy, where social belonging was required for mere survival. Today, it’s what all brands covet: to be the no-brainer choice of a customer’s System 1 thinking.

That’s why direct-to-consumer apparel brands took off so quickly. You bought a pair of socks once, liked them well enough, and so subscribed to their automatic arrival every two months. *You subscribed to socks.* Welcome to the year 2020, where thinking is optional.

What’s System 1 thinking? It’s what humans do by instinct, habit, or emotion. We walk down supermarket aisles, cell phone in-hand and earbuds firmly lodged, plucking what we normally grab from the shelves without processing the decision. And for obvious reasons, every brand wants to take up permanent residence in our System 1 gray matter.

If there’s a System 1, surely you’d assume there’s a System 2. And you’d be right. System 2 is where we spend tiresome

thought cycles to arrive at even trivial decisions. It’s primarily employed during events requiring swift change, like when your doctor cuts salt from your diet or your better half makes you count calories to lose weight. System 2 investigates, reads labels, challenges preconceived notions, churns options. All of that takes energy, and you might have noticed that humans tend to avoid extra work when possible.

Sure, loyalty is hard to win; once it’s earned though, permanence is hardly guaranteed. Particularly since the advent of eCommerce, consumers have every right to be promiscuous with their brands. And they should be. It’s what keeps the best companies on their A-game while languishing competitors rearrange deck chairs on their own private Titanics.

Marketing has thus indelibly transformed in just two months. In our new reality, many brands face the opportunity to earn, increase, or hemorrhage loyalty. Right now, brand equity’s a fragile commodity (for the lucky ones, anyway). I might prefer an underwear brand, but since its stores

are closed and I need some boxers, I'll take whatever comes up in my Google results with the soonest arrival.

How is your favorite food-delivery provider holding up under increased demand? How well-stocked is your supermarket? If it's sparse, have you tried another? If you have, you've burned laborious brain cycles to make a System 2 decision, and now your go-to supermarket is in severe danger of losing one more customer. Who better to pledge loyalty than the house that feeds you?

I've got two suggestions for messaging strategies during this once-in-a-lifetime chance to drive genuine value for our customers who may be facing unimaginable hardship:

1. Brands that win customers due to outstanding products or services must shout from the hilltops how much they care for their customers—without chest-beating—and how that has manifest itself in hard work on the public's behalf, so they might retain and expand the loyalty they've earned. With everything going on, assuming customers have followed these efforts is a fool's errand. Anymore, safety versus consumption is a 90/10 ratio at best.
2. Brands losing the share battle need to offer a humble apology and make transparent their follow-on strategies to retain customers going forward. To do otherwise risks being sidelined, or worse, flatlined.

Now more than ever, enterprises should commit to a sober sense of their performance against competitors. Without it, they're toast. Assuming they do understand, brands must fashion communication strategies that align with hard realities. What a world this is, where responsible travel brands ask customers to stay home and neighborhood pubs tell us to Facetime happy hours.

The entire globe is united for once in the sincere hope this never occurs again. Meanwhile, we must remember that consequences are real and need to be managed accordingly by the brands upon which customers rely for health, safety, comfort, and happiness.

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