

PR IN A TIME OF CHANGE

MANAGING COMMUNICATIONS
STRATEGY AS THE PANDEMIC
CONTINUES

MEDIA HOUSE INTERNATIONAL

OVERVIEW



Alongside the PR and marketing challenges of the pandemic, there is now a much stronger visibility of societal issues such as Black Lives Matter, and a growing sentiment from the public that all companies should be demonstrating a commitment to positive change.

Now, even the most robust 2019 crisis management and corporate affairs plan can seem outdated and companies need to reassess their communications strategies in order to be fully aligned with the 'new normal' and to ensure continued positive public sentiment.

It is likely that fewer than 5% of commercial organisations worldwide had a planned crisis communications response to a global pandemic before 2020. Almost every company across the globe scrambled to respond when COVID-19 hit, with nearly every area of business affected whether via direct sales, finances, supply chain or employee and public safety.

Many months later, it is clear that COVID-19 is here to stay for the foreseeable future and every company is working to make the necessary adjustments in order to evolve. While some organisations sat tight and stayed quiet during the initial outbreak, the response of others was highly visible – both good and bad, in some cases with a direct repercussion on their sales or reputation.

“
**THE PR
RESPONSE TO
COVID-19 HAS
HAD MIXED
RESULTS**
”



COVID-19 PR

What worked, and what didn't

Ask anyone on the street to name a company which handled the onset of COVID-19 negatively, and you will be met with a barrage of responses such as **Wetherspoon's**, **Sports Direct**, **Waterstones**, **Amazon** or **Boohoo**.

The majority of these were felt to put staff at unnecessary risk, prioritising profit over safety, and seeming to exploit their workers with little regard for their health. A recent survey found that **71%** of respondents would lose trust in a brand forever if they felt the company was putting profit over people – and the headlines speak for themselves when it comes to companies which operated in this way.

71%

lost trust
permanently

(Source)

The truth, as any business owner will know, is that profits pay wages and that mass redundancies would occur if profit margins are not a priority. However, this has to be balanced against current consumer sentiment –

90% of those surveyed said that companies should be doing everything they can to protect the well-being and financial security of their employees and suppliers, even if it means substantial financial losses until the pandemic ends.

90%

believe in prioritising
people over **profit**

(Source)



Case Study

★ PRET A MANGER ★

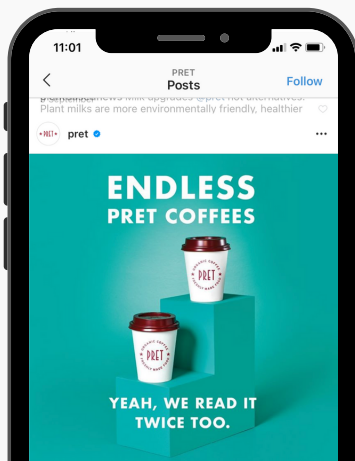


Certain companies started off walking this tightrope fairly well – one example being **Pret A Manger**, which switched to takeaway only in order to protect staff ahead of the UK's formal lockdown order.

When the shops began reopening, Pret A Manger deliberately chose locations close to hospitals and offered 50% off food for NHS staff in order to make the decision seem more 'feel-good' than simply a calculated financial decision aimed at boosting revenue. This decision increased the brand's YouGov impression score, which calculates changing public opinion of major organisations.



(Source)



Additionally, the company announced in September that it was launching a new £20 per month subscription service for hot drinks, with a maximum of five coffees per day, meaning huge savings for a constant coffee drinker. It was seen by the press and public as a savvy way to increase income while also acknowledging consumers' desire to save money during a difficult financial period – the closest thing to a 'win-win' for the company and customers alike.

However, in light of the second UK lockdown, Pret's founder showed how easy it is to make one misstep. He stated the lockdown was a mistake and would *only* 'save a few thousand lives' as if that were not worth the effort. Understandably, this was met with huge backlash.



Louise Hector @louisehector · 1h

Julian Metcalfe of **Pret** telling the old, disabled, those with diabetes, asthma, cancer, MS etc that he's ok with them dying because he's got a fucking warehouse full of rocket that he needs to slap between a couple of slices of Mother's Pride and flog for £5.

Adapting the business model

Other companies with positive public perceptions during the pandemic have embraced marketing messages which centre around social distancing, minimising risk to the public and concern for others. Some examples include **Delta Airlines'** commitment to keeping every middle seat free until 2021, as well as **Thai Airways'** Stay At Home Mile Exchange, which saw app users earn air miles for continuously staying at home during lockdown.



Carlsberg Beer introduced a campaign called 'Adopt A Keg', which recognised the dire financial straits of bars and pubs forced to close during lockdown and encouraged the public to pay for a 'virtual' keg at home which would then be swapped for real beer when the pubs reopened. It was well received as fun and light-hearted, but also helping to support at-risk businesses (even if it also financially helped Carlsberg itself).

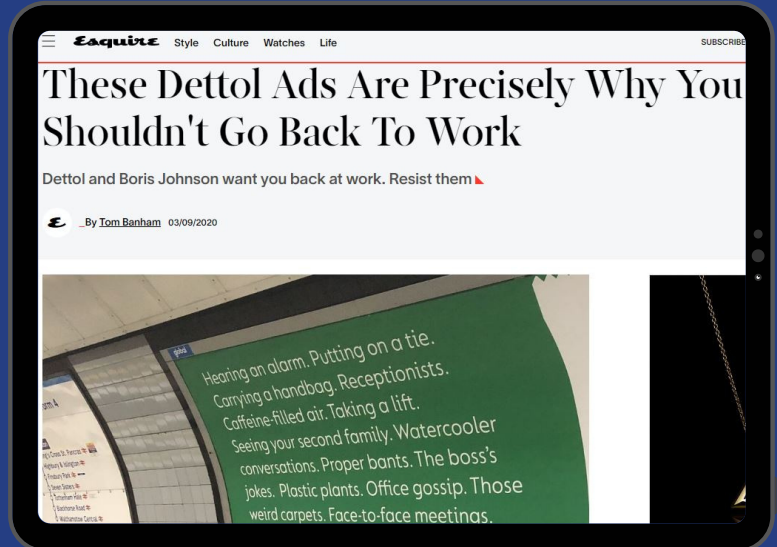


26%

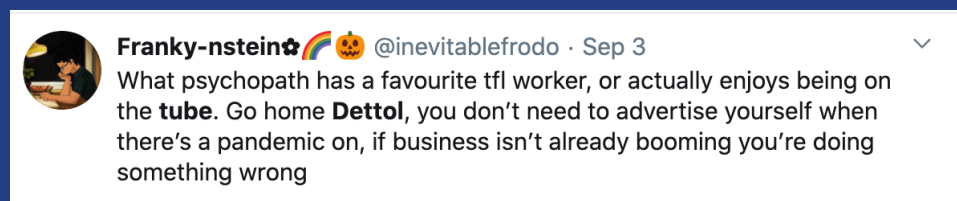
of consumers surveyed **prefer** brands and products they trust to be **safe** and minimise **unnecessary risks** (Source)

Missing the Mark

In a stark contrast to Carlsberg and Delta Airlines which were encouraging the 'stay at home' message, **Dettol** launched an ad campaign centred around returning to school and the office, listing reasons to return such as 'proper bants' and 'taking a lift', provided that people used Dettol products to ensure cleanliness.

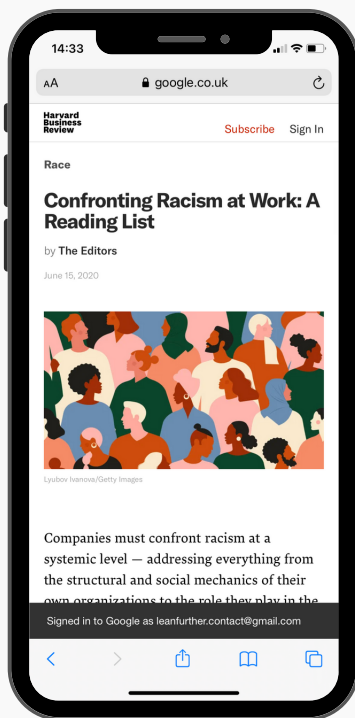


The advert went viral, with media and public alike accusing the company of totally missing the point and insinuating that the excitement of **'carrying a handbag'** outweighed the severity of Covid.



Societal Changes

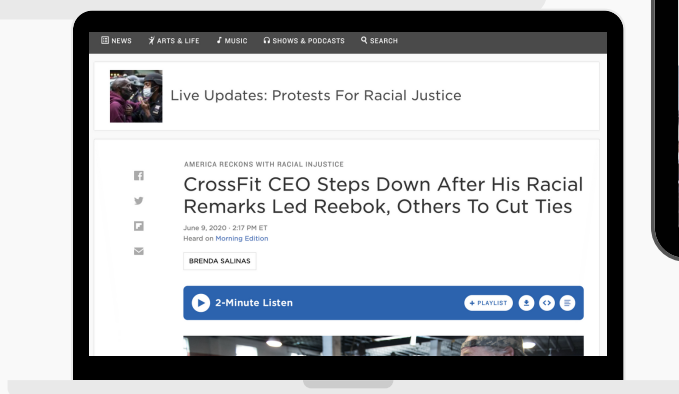
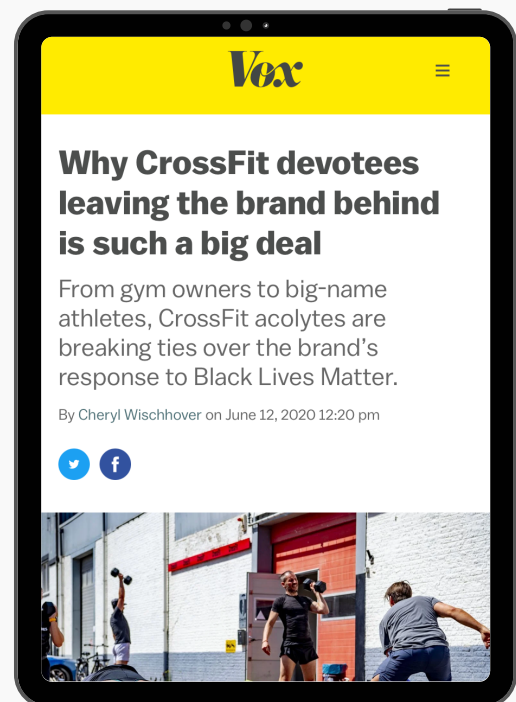
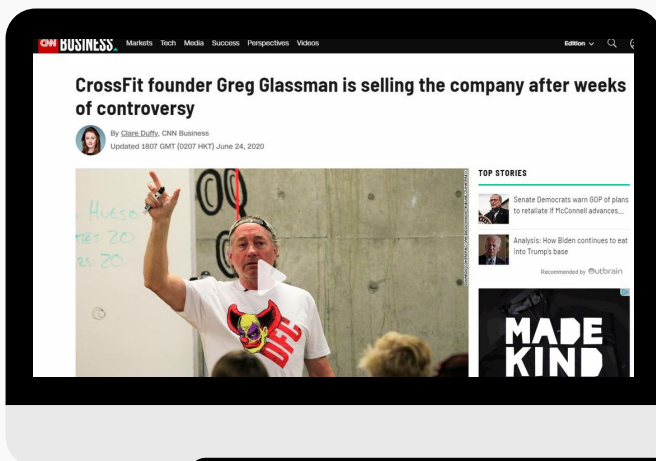
This growing desire for companies to widen their focus and help society is not unique to Covid. Throughout 2020, social issues such as climate change or the Black Lives Matter movement have increasingly become a major part of public conversation, with organisations' approach to diversity, inclusion and community receiving intense scrutiny.



Sexual assault and general abuse of power has been in the public consciousness for the past few years, especially since the rise of 'Me Too'. 'Cancel culture', or the shunning of high-profile individuals due to their actions, is increasingly common, alongside a similar intense public scrutiny towards companies and organisations. It is no longer unusual for a company's downfall to happen in a matter of days, especially due to 24/7 news cycles and constant social media commentary.

CrossFit

CrossFit CEO Greg Glassman, who built the hugely popular sports franchise, ended up losing his company over a now infamous Zoom call with various affiliates where he was being asked to take a stance on George Floyd's killing and the Black Lives Matter movement in America. He asked the call participants why he should mourn for George Floyd, adding that it was the **'white thing to do'** and that he didn't view police brutality as a problem. In the same call, he also encouraged gym owners to pretend to comply with social distancing measures and then do **'whatever the f***'** they wanted.



The story was covered everywhere and within days, various major gyms and sports brands had pulled all connections to CrossFit and the story was covered by every major global news outlet. Glassman was ultimately forced to step down as CEO and to sell the company that he founded, so as to completely distance his own actions from the brand itself.

Have Your Own House in Order

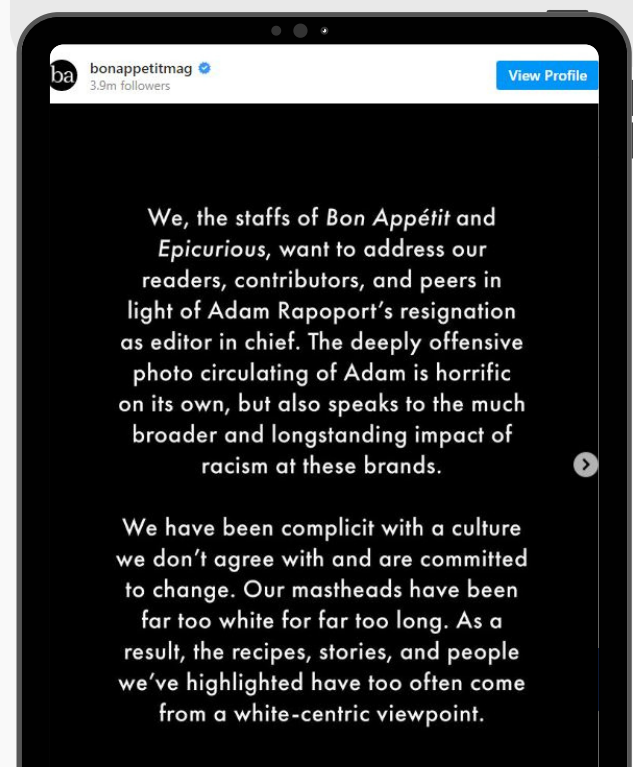
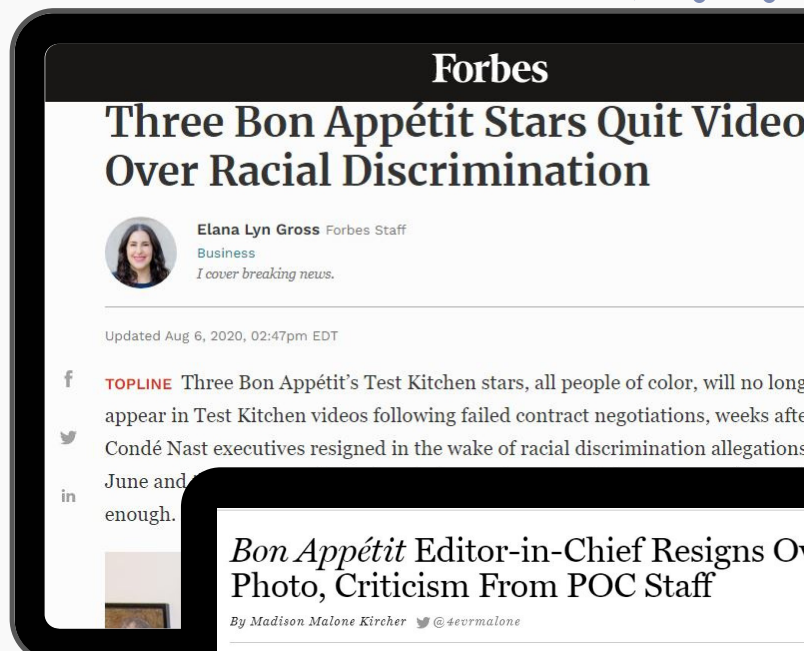
Numerous companies have quickly jumped to condemn racism, sexism or other discriminatory or intimidating acts, only to have their internal practises called out.

Following the murder of George Floyd, **Condé Nast's** Bon Appetit Magazine issued a statement, stating that they would be profiling black people within the food industry while also working to expose and highlight racism. That triggered a huge backlash from staff members and contributors, accusing the magazine of mistreating BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and other people of colour) staff, underpaying and mistreating them.

In addition, a photo emerged of the editor in brownface, which resulted in such an intense backlash that he resigned on the same day. The outlet published a grovelling apology where it distanced itself from the actions of the editor while also admitting to various acts of racism within the staff.

Despite this, issues continued to arise. The outlet's Drinks Editor was exposed for publishing homophobic, sexist and racist posts (but never suspended) and the outlet failed to adequately raise the salaries of various BIPOC contributors, resulting in a mass exodus over the course of the summer.

In late August, the magazine announced Dawn Davis, a black woman, as its new editor, heralding a new chapter at the publication. Davis was quoted as saying she wished to remove the 'vacuum' of only-white voices – an admirable act which will hopefully be the saving grace of an otherwise much-tarnished brand.



Lessons to be Learned

So what does this all mean for organisations going forward? Ultimately, society is changing. Now, more than ever, the public cares about:



Ethics



Empathy



Community

Public scrutiny is more intense than ever. Companies need to consider their key values and convey these internally and externally. Mistakes will be made and outdated viewpoints will need to be addressed, but it is how the organisation handles the situation that will sway public opinion.

Take the example of **Uncle Ben's** rice, which recently announced a name change to **Ben's Original** in order to remove connotations of slavery. Or the **National Trust**, which recently published a report acknowledging its various properties' links to slavery and colonialism in a bid for more transparency. While neither action is likely to encourage or discourage sales / visits, it indicates a company which is actively making an anti-racist statement.





80%

of people feel more connected to their **communities** during COVID
([Source](#))

18%

of UK consumers have **changed** their buying **habits** due to a company's handling of COVID.
([Source](#))

40%

of those surveyed want organisations to demonstrate **empathy** during COVID
([Source](#))

45%

of employees judge their employers' handling of COVID as neutral to **very bad**
([Source](#))

Gone are the days where consumer and corporate messaging were entirely different vehicles. Instead, organisations' corporate actions will tend to dictate public opinion. For this reason, every organisation needs to have clear corporate communications strategy in place, incorporating the actions below:

- **Remain fluid and flexible:** we cannot predict the outcome of Covid or other global events over 2020 / 2021, therefore plans should be made with a degree of leeway for all eventualities
- **No empty promises:** people want organisations which commit to their words and demonstrate through their actions. In other words: put your money where your mouth is.
- **Minimise risk:** safety of employees and the public is key, and perceived safety risks will not easily be forgotten.
- **Don't rush in too quickly:** while a quick and efficient response is key, it needs to be considered and accurate. Planning ahead for likely eventualities will enable the approval of major decisions ahead of time and allow for a fast but focused response.

The New Normal – Crisis PR Style

So how does a company plan for all the new crisis eventualities?

While every organisation will have different needs, the majority of companies will need to consider certain key scenarios:

- **A Covid outbreak**
- **Accusations of discrimination**
- **Changes to Government guidelines**
- **Staff redundancies**
- **Financial cuts**
- **A Covid-related death**
- **Security data breaches**
- **Accusations of employee mistreatment**
- **Inadequate safety measures**
- **Site closures**

How Do I Avoid A Crisis In The First Place?

"By a margin of nearly 2-1 (54% vs 30%), organisations that had a crisis response plan in place fared better post-crisis than those who didn't."
(Source)

- **Prioritise all stakeholders equally**
- **Minimise risk**
- **Respond accurately, honestly and with humility**
- **Ensure actions and ethos are aligned**
- **Adopt one single PR strategy: make sure that the message shared with the public aligns with a company's internal and external actions**

"Those that keep their crisis plan up to date and implement the lessons learned are four times more likely to come out on top."
– Pwc Global Crisis Survey 2019

(Source)

Inclusion. Impact. Integrity.

About Us

Media House International is a PR, public affairs and crisis management firm with offices in London and Glasgow. Executive Chairman Jack Irvine and Executive Director Ramsay Smith are both former national newspaper editors and have dealt with numerous high-profile organisations, companies and individuals across a variety of crisis situations and reputational issues, ranging from fatal air accidents, terrorism and high-profile kidnapping attempts through to data leaks, malware hacks and assault allegations, as well as various issues related to COVID-19.

www.mediahouseinternational.com



LONDON OFFICE
20 IRONMONGER LANE
LONDON
EC2V 8EY

GLASGOW OFFICE
20-23 WOODSIDE PLACE
GLASGOW
G3 7QL