

Successful health campaigns during COVID-19 need to manage our altered ideas about the future

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Typically, public health campaigns such as "[Together, let's stop HIV stigma](#)," "[Enjoy the outdoors, without a tick](#)" or "[#Fightflu](#)" rely on repetitive reminders of a single message to shape the behaviours of their

target audience. Such campaigns work well under general social, institutional and economic stability because the audience shares a common frame of reference.

However, the pandemic has changed those conditions. COVID-19 is not merely a contagious illness that affects the body, but has resulted in a profound collapse of the predictability and performance of most societies.

It has disrupted international trade and travel, jolted consumer and stock markets, halted annual cultural and religious festivals, upset major life transitions such as weddings and going to university and rearranged the physical organization of shopping, retail and work.

Our hopes for the future, in essence, have been shattered.

It is therefore no surprise that this [global crisis](#) has rewired the way people receive and interpret messages posed by public [health](#) advertising.

Mask wearing is a good example: in some places, it has become a contentious political issue rather than a health issue. Public health messages about masks have been interpreted very differently: some view wearing a mask as a social responsibility that enables freedom, while others see a worrying example of social [repression of individual liberty](#).

This example goes to the heart of health messaging in the context of a health [crisis](#) that has disrupted hopes and expectations: repetitive reminders to wear a mask will not engage people who are ambivalent about the meaning of this action in light of a derailed future.

In an effort to contribute to the international pandemic relief efforts with our [specific skill sets](#) in [marketing and consumer behaviour](#), we decided to investigate the optimal public communications strategies on

health during such broad crisis conditions.

The study

We analyzed YouTube's most popular consumer-focused [advertising campaigns](#) released in 2020 to draw implications for public health advertising. Overall, [our study found that traditional health communication strategies do not work](#) effectively in broad contextual crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because crises disrupt our expectations for the future, thereby affecting our emotions, planning behaviours and identities.

Generalized crises require not only customized advertising efforts for various communities and societies, but also an evolving, multistage approach not recognized in prior research on health messaging.

We identify three key elements to ensure the success of a public health campaign during a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three-step plan

Initially, crises result in a general sense of mourning for a future that can't happen. Traditional campaigns therefore fail because the relevance of the message is crowded out by anguish over what could have been. In response, successful health messaging should first help us through all the stages of grief: denial, anger, depression, bargaining and finally acceptance of what did not happen.

An illustration of this first "mourning a lost future" advertising strategy can be found in [Facebook's "We're Never Lost If We Can Find Each Other" ad](#). This advertisement helps consumers come to terms with lost futures caused by the crisis using real life photos taken during the first wave of the pandemic. A poem talking viewers through the different

stages of grief is narrated throughout the advertisement. It prepares the audience emotionally to engage with a new future by letting go of the old one.

However, there is not just one, but many new futures that become possible in a crisis. This gives rise to ambivalence. This is a challenge to traditional campaigns that focus mainly on reminding us of good behaviour. Ambivalence makes it difficult to assess future benefits of, for example, masks or vaccines. Ambivalence may even create apathy and anger. Hence, health messaging should reconstruct our shared anticipations for a specific future and shore up planning behaviours.

This second "managing the futures that could be" advertising strategy is demonstrated in [Durex's "Let's Not Go Back to Normal" ad](#). This advertisement depicts the new post-lockdown future as safe debauchery. It also plots a pathway into the future, when the pandemic will be over, to engage in protected sex.

New roles

Lastly, crises impose new roles on everybody, which in turn pushes us into new identities. We are new people and strangers to each other, with no basis for collaboration. Traditional campaigns therefore fail because they cannot know their audience, when the audience doesn't even know itself.

Successful health messaging should provide tools to manage individual and collective identity transformations. They should show how products or behaviours help consumers become who they want to be.

The third "modelling new future consumer selves" advertising strategy is best illustrated by [Amazon's "The Show Must Go On" ad](#).

This advertisement exemplifies who consumers are to each other, as well as who they are to themselves during a crisis. The storyline traces the actions of individuals in a family and building complex, who all safely aid a ballerina to achieve her dream of performing *Swan Lake* despite her cancelled performance.

Public information campaigns during health crises often have the goal of quickly establishing consensus and driving coordinated action in society as a whole. Understanding the challenges of the crisis context can help convey important [public health messages](#).

Ultimately, the purpose of advertising in a broad crisis is rather to restore hope by providing a new envisioned future to work towards together. This is a future that individuals can invest themselves in emotionally, rationally and existentially.

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