

WHAT SHOULD YOUR BRAND BE SAYING DURING THE PANDEMIC?



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Executive summary

Since COVID19 first hit the shores of Ghana on March 12, a lot has changed in how Ghanaians see the world around them as well as how they live. What does not seem to have changed though is how actively businesses try to capture their attention to share messages about their brands with them. As an advertising practitioner strategizing what to say on behalf of some brand, you have probably wondered what is the right thing to say in these times. Should you be touting your brands' promise as usual or should you join the 'frontline' in ensuring public safety against COVID19? This consumer survey report presents findings that you might find helpful by giving you a glimpse into the minds of the people you target with your messages.

Introduction

COVID-19 has shocked the world and affected how businesses the world over act! In Ghana, like anywhere else, businesses are searching for new ways of surviving and staying successful. Till they find their way round, most have resorted to using communication as a means to nurture relations with their customers to ensure their sustenance. A cursory observation would show that brand communications, since the onset of the pandemic in Ghana, has assumed a blended tone where baseline promotional messages are infused with 'stay safe' suggestions to project the look of a brand that cares. The infusions cover but are not limited to announcements of operational changes made to ensure customer and employee safety and convenience, appeals to stay safe and observe the COVID19 safety protocols and directions on how to stay safe. Underlying all these infusions is also a promise that the brand will stand by customers as they negotiate their safety around the pandemic. On mass media as well as more direct media (e.g. email and other tools such as handheld devices and social media), brands have sought to engage with their consumers using these messages.

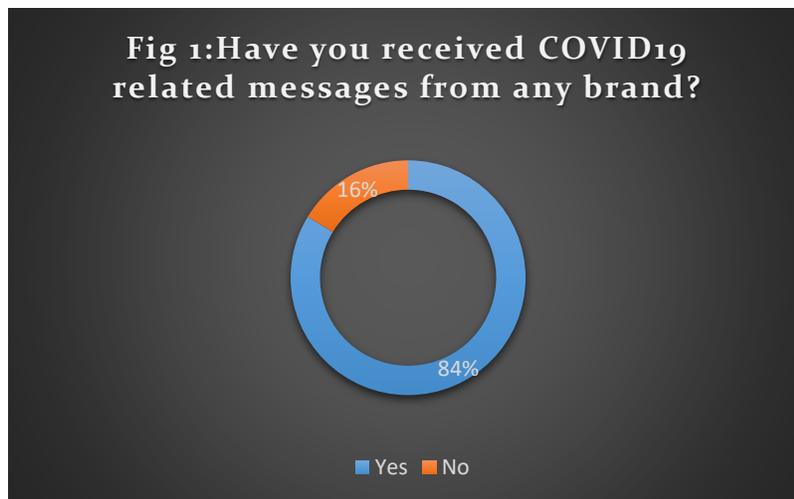
The question, though, is 'how well are the things brands are saying during the pandemic fitted to what consumers want to hear?' Should brands go on with their advertising using a 'business as usual' logic? Should brands actively court a 'we care for you' persona? Are brands expected to advise consumers the pandemic or should that be left to the experts? More importantly, how do consumers' market responses and actions link to their expectations for brand communications during the pandemic? In other words, as consumers struggle with an existential threat to their lives, what are they ready to listen to from brands?

The process followed in gathering evidence

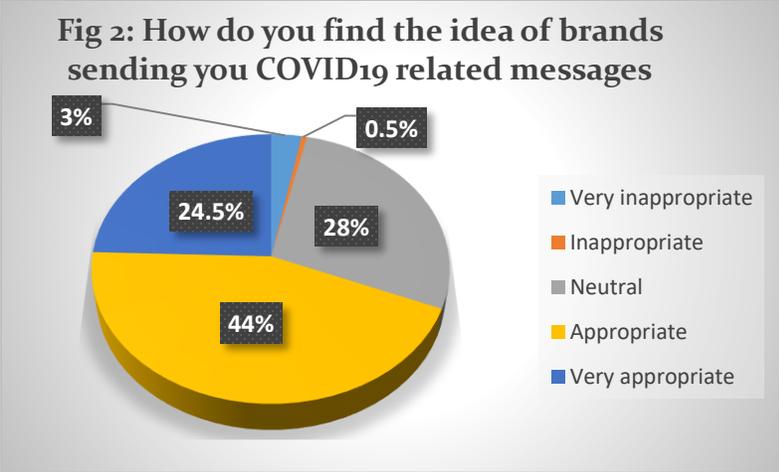
This study by the University of Ghana, Department of Communication Studies surveyed 541 consumers, online, to seek answers to the questions raised above. Respondents ranged between 18 and 58 with the average age being 27 years. They were generally highly educated (90% tertiary) and had a male-female ratio of 49:51 percent. The results of the survey are presented here for the benefit of marketers, advertising practitioners and other brand communicators, and brand owners.

The evidence found

Four out of every five respondents (84 percent) have been targeted by a brand with a message that mentions COVID19. Clearly brands have not been silenced by COVID19. They are still actively engaging with the consuming market and, as the data in Fig 1 shows, their messages do get through to the latter.



The good news is consumers generally smile at this engagement as most respondents consider it alright for brands to contact them with direct advertising messages during this period. For every ten respondents surveyed, nearly seven said they deemed it either 'very appropriate' or 'appropriate' for brands to send them messages that mention COVID19. Even where respondents do not find this to be appropriate, it appears it is more because they do not have a clear posture than that they find it to be inappropriate (Fig 2).

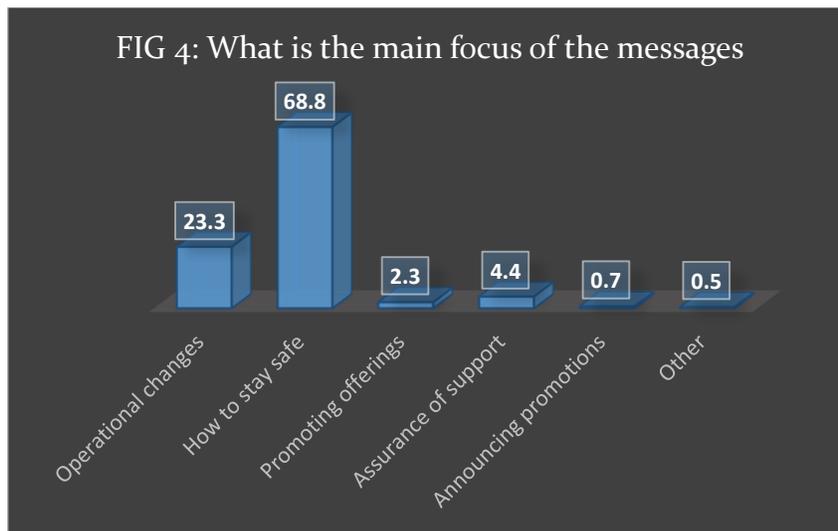


This is not surprising as these messages had come from brands with which respondents already had dealings. Ninety two percent of respondents who have received such messages from brands said it came from one of which they are customers (Fig 3). In the midst of this pandemic adversity, brands are focusing more of their energy on who they have in their bags (customers) rather than what could be (prospects). As the data in Fig 2 shows, this is not a bad strategy as these customers deem it okay to be contacted by somebody they already know.



Regarding the substance of these messages by which brands are engaging with consumers, most focus on staying safe. About seven out of every ten respondents (69%)

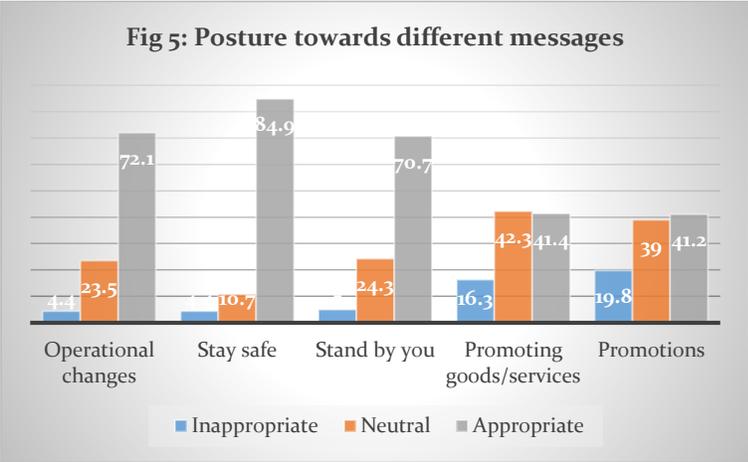
say the messages they received focused on telling them how to stay safe. Given that they are largely targeted at existing customers, this is not surprising. Brands feel a need to show concern for their customers to make the latter feel cared for and ready to stay with them. Stay safe messages are followed by those announcing operational changes to customers. This, one may argue is also a way of the brands demonstrating concern for their customers and carrying them along their new processes. Interestingly but not surprisingly, messages that have a self-serving focus (e.g. promoting offerings) have been put on the back bench by brands (Fig 4).



While the evidence in Fig 2 suggested that generally consumers are happy receiving messages from brands during the pandemic, it appears this tolerance is nuanced and depends on the focus of the message. As shown in Fig 5, respondents are less receptive to messages that seek the interest of only brands.

Purely promotional messages are frowned on more than messages of ‘concern and safety’. Significantly, fewer of them find messages of concern and safety to be inappropriate than do those who feel same about messages advertising goods/services and promotions. Indeed, for every individual who found a ‘stay safe’, operational change or ‘support’ message inappropriate, there are at least three or four more who feel that way about messages advertising goods/services or promotions.

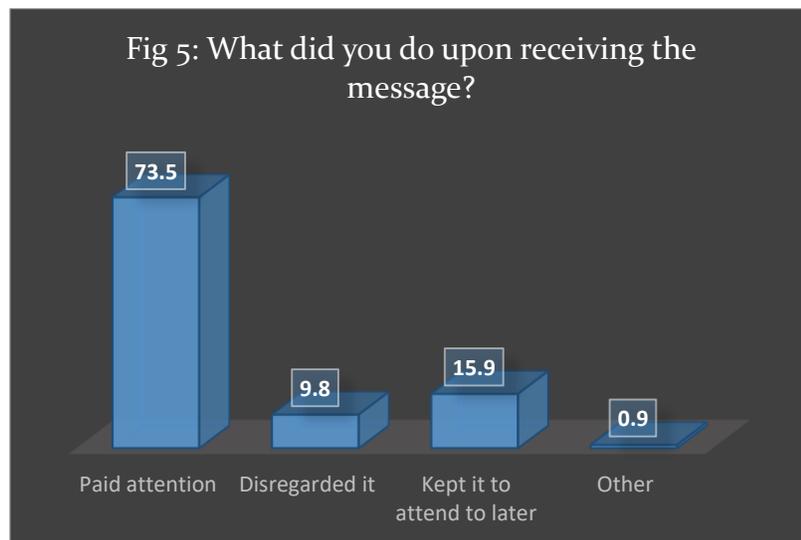
Indeed, for every individual who found a ‘stay safe’, ‘operational change’ or ‘support’ message inappropriate, there are at least three more who feel that way about purely promotional messages.



We asked respondents to indicate the single most important thing they expect brands to be talking about during the course of the pandemic. Not surprisingly, most people want to hear brands share in the stress of the pandemic with them. As shown in the word cloud below, most want to hear brands educate people on how to stay safe, provide information of the measures being taken to support them, share information on their CSR activities etc. This agrees well with the preceding section where we indicate that people frown on self-serving messages from brands and smile at those that appear to have their welfare in mind.



Finally, and given that all messages are not treated equally, the study explored consumer responses to the brands’ advertising messages during the pandemic. Nearly four out of every five respondents (73%) say they pay attention to messages they have received from brands during the period of the pandemic (Fig 5). When they cannot immediately attend to the message, consumers are more likely to keep it for later than disregard it altogether. This is good news for brands as it means the investments to communicate directly with customers is generally worth their while.



Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following suggestions are warranted:

- Brands should not lay low because they are worried consumers are inundated with messages. They (consumers) are generally happy to hear from you during this pandemic.
- Brands should be careful what they say in their advertisements as all messages are not treated equally. People are less receptive to seemingly self-serving messages.
- No matter what your message is, a word or two that reminds people to stay safe or tells something you have done to ensure their wellbeing will not hurt.
- Emphasize messages that show you have their backs. Suggest ways for them to stay safe but also mention what you have done to ensure their safety (e.g. operational changes, CSR, alternative arrangements for accessing your offerings and of course give freebies!)
- Whatever you do, do not leave the fight for the ‘frontliners’. You are the frontline and consumers expect you to help with the fight against COVID19.

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