

WHITE PAPER

In Times Of Crisis Reputations Are Built (and Destroyed)

by **Jamey Boiter**



7 Steps to Brand Relevance in the Age of Coronavirus

In the fall of 2011, I wrote a short piece for Fast Company on **recession-proofing your brand**. We had just emerged from a man-made financial crisis that echoed the Great Depression. Consumers were wondering if things would ever get back to normal. And in that fragile marketplace, brands had no idea how to create the positive change needed to encourage action among their many audiences. There were, however, a few shimmering lights that led the way out of the darkness.

By 2014, a resurgence in the economy led the market to a new prosperity for many. But you've read that book. And you know how it ends. We are living through it now.

The last two months have been a crescendo of devastation affecting the entire world. And now that devastation is here. We have entered a new norm. One that will forever change how we work, socialize, and communicate with one another.

This is a time to try and understand where we are, and how we got here, without attempting to find blame. It is a time for

reflection. For listening and for learning. More will be revealed as we move forward. But this is also a time for action. Large and small actions that are pointed at establishing our new trajectory. This too shall pass. And how will you be positioned when it does?

It was Helen Keller who said, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." As I've reflected over the last few weeks from my new telework base [at the end of the dining room table], this quote has become more and more relevant for me. And for my clients. And for those whom we one day aspire to have as clients.

What are you doing right this second to protect your brand's reputation? With your employees? Your customers? Your consumers? The banks? It is in times of crisis when compassion, empathy, and innovation can be the difference between whether or not your brand will be around in six months.

If that sounds scary, know that what follows are words of encouragement, not fear. Read and consider how your brand is communicating right now with its various audiences, and as important, how it will be communicating as we emerge from this nightmare. Here are a few things to reflect on, and hopefully, act upon.

1. Stay Engaged (with empathy)

Brand communication, by its very definition, is absolutely necessary now. You've probably noticed that many brands are reaching out to their consumers to let them know they are there for them. Viral videos and social media are helping brands of all shapes and sizes communicate to sequestered audiences, ideally with messages of encouragement and compassion. Even better, with specific ideas and thoughts on how to navigate these uncertain and uncharted waters. Now is the time to share with audiences how you're coping, how your workforce is handling the situation, and to suggest tips on getting through each day with some positive energy. Now is the time to show your consumers and customers you care about them. Show them your heart.

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2. Prop Up Your Teams By Any Means Necessary

We've talked for many years about building the brand ecosystem inside your organization. This is where governance of brand and fidelity of brand are owned and communicated amongst everyone inside your organization to build and nurture a culture of brand. In this way, all out-facing communication becomes a unified conversation with your audiences, based on the culture and the compelling truths of your brand as communicated and experienced every day internally. With quarantine, sequestering, and telework, it's more important than ever to create those brand experiences for every single member of your team. They are looking to their brand, and to you, for guidance. Be there for them. They are the front line of communication and ambassadors of your brand, so make sure they're still feeling the love and culture of the brand. Have video conference calls at least weekly so everyone sees one another and can reconnect. Host a Friday afternoon video happy hour. Just for camaraderie and story sharing. And don't be afraid to include customers or clients. This too is an opportunity to share your culture and your compassion with your clients.

3. Continue—or Start—to Innovate (especially now while you may have extra time)

The world, as we have known it, will likely not just revert to the way it was. It never has after a global crisis, much less one of this magnitude. As businesses, we need to first understand what will come next and then imagine how we might make it better. How might we innovate a process or a product or our brand to be more relevant to our existing and emerging customers. What is the new norm going to look like, feel like, be like? Maybe those millions of on-site workers are loving to telework in their sweats. Maybe curb pickup gets way more popular than eating out. Maybe couples tag-teaming telework and kid care instead of their old 5-day, 9-5 and paying daycare

will become preferred. Ask yourself, how can we be a bigger, better part of all that? What are emerging factors or norms that are triggers to innovate new tools or practices that make your brand more relevant? Is this the time for NPD within your brand portfolio? Should there be a new brand out there waiting on everyone with new solutions when we're ready to fully engage and are looking for some new shining star? Perhaps. Innovation is a key component to business growth and success in the market we have known, when everything was running smoothly. Just imagine how important innovation will be to your existence in 3 to 6 months, when we emerge into an all-new market.

4. Is This the Time to Reinvent?

In my Fast Company post in 2011, I stressed for brands to stay in their lane. I never recommend change for the sake of change, but this is especially true in a time when the crisis we're facing is temporary. Running away from who you are will not generate good will with your audience. It will erode brand trust and equity. HOWEVER, having said that, in your reflection time of brand relevance, could this be an opportunity to refresh or reinvent your brand if there are major pain points and business challenges with your current positioning? Be honest with yourself and don't make excuses. If your brand is broken, it's broken. This may actually be a great opportunity to regain relevance, meaning, and value in the market through change. And design. Speak to your market. Find out if there is trouble with your positioning, or if competition has eroded your position. Use this time to get better. To be better.

5. Truth, Transparency, Authenticity, Simplicity, and Clarity (TTASC)

How is your message? Are you communicating with truth, transparency, authenticity, simplicity, and clarity through every touchpoint? Consistency of message, both internally and externally, will ensure that your brand is being seen as truthful and authentic during this time where "hype" has no place. Transparency is paramount in communicating where you are as a brand, and what you are doing to help. Move forward, show compassion toward your employees and your customers. Paul Volker's mantra during the economic recession of the last decade was, "When a crisis comes, the only asset you have is your credibility." Truer words were never spoken. If you have built a brand culture of TTASC over the years, and you've used this as your guiding principle of communication, your audiences are very likely to forgive

you for a mistake or an unpopular action you've taken. However, if you've built your brand on spin and falsehoods, the repercussions could be devastating. Again, writing for Fast Company during the BP Gulf Oil Disaster, it was pretty easy from a brand strategist perspective to see how that was going to end up. An energy company that boasted its new tagline of "beyond petroleum" was living and communicating a false narrative, of who they were and how they behaved. Use this time to ensure you're communicating truthfully and authentically. Make sure you are being transparent. Keep it simple. And have clarity in your message, tone, and delivery.

6. What is Your Brand Really Made of?

I love the movie *The Right Stuff* for many reasons. Just like I love *Apollo 13*. Full disclosure, I am a child of the sixties and seventies, and seeing the Apollo missions on TV left me with an indelible imprint of wanting and needing to do the right thing, because it's the right thing to do. (I actually credit my Dad for most of that.) But what those movies are about, and what that time was all about—is character. Does your brand have character? As a brand, does it do the right thing, because it's the right thing to do? Or is it just mailing it in right now? Brands that are working hard to do the right thing now are the brands that will be remembered. They will be rewarded with preference, and perhaps even loyalty. What are the emotive associations your consumers have with your brand? Do they support you because of your purpose? What is your brand doing right now to help? To give back? To support? We've known for some time that Millennials and Gen Zers believe more in the why, than the what or the how. They respect truth and transparency...character. They respect the brands that know why they exist. As a result, these important audiences follow them, prefer them, and buy them. Take this time to examine the foundation of your brand—why it exists and for whom. What are the pillars of your brand—the compelling truths; are they still relevant, and are you communicating them through every touchpoint?



7. Invest in Your Brand

Now that you've reflected on the first six steps, where is your brand? If you're in a good place with all six, then you have much to be thankful for. And much to talk about. Invest in important communication now with your audience. Assure them that you understand the situation, and are doing the right thing for them. That you appreciate every single one of them and you will be here for them. If, however, considering these six steps leaves you with questions and challenges that need answers and solutions, please also take step seven seriously. Invest in your brand. Find out what the pain points really are and why they exist. Look for the latent opportunities that exist within every brand. Harness those hidden gems to bring relevance back to your brand. Doing so will be an investment into the one thing that no other competitor has. Your brand. Make it be what differentiates you from your competition. Make it one of your highest performing assets. It is YOUR brand, YOUR reputation. Build it now. ■



MEET JAMEY

As BOLTGROUP's brand principal for over 25 years, Jamey Boiter leads all brand strategy, design, and experience teams. He has been a featured speaker at national conferences and college campuses, a writer on the subject of brand strategy, design, and experience, and a featured blogger for Fast Company. An award-winning designer and strategist, Jamey has served on both the Executive Advisory Board for the Charlotte Chapter of AIGA, and the Advisory Board for CPCC Advertising + Design.