

Change as a core KPI

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The Covid-19 pandemic has forced business leaders to respond to change quickly and effectively, and adapt current models to accommodate the new normal. **Graham Deneys, strategy director at Carat South Africa**, says change is here to stay and we better get used to it - fast.

I've spent much of the past three weeks reading various industry opinion pieces on [Covid-19](#). These include spend recommendations, channel-mix adjustments and recommendations to resist knee-jerk responses to challenges. The common denominator in this very important dialogue has been uncertainty, largely due to change and the question of whether or not marketers and businesses could adapt current business models fast enough. Many of these commentaries mention agility, which had me wondering just how agile we really are?

A new world

We are living in unprecedented times that have created shifts in human behaviour for which, unfortunately, many people and organisations are unprepared. When I think back to the financial crisis of 2008/2009, there were many lessons, but this virus is something entirely different. Covid-19 has delivered a multilayered dose of pain of which recession is just one.

A recent global survey by market research agency Kantar revealed that just 8% of 35,000 survey respondents said that "brands shouldn't advertise during this time", that means that 92% said they should. But here's the twist: the 92% also said that if brands do advertise, "they should think very carefully about their tone and messaging" and 75% of respondents said: "brands should help them in their daily lives at this time".

With this in mind, campaigns, structures and models will need to be adapted in order to deliver for consumers during this time – from simple copy updates to full-platform reinvention.

The key issue though is the shape-shifting nature of the Covid-19 pandemic. Adjustments now could be obsolete by the time President Cyril Ramaphosa next addresses the nation. It goes without saying that planning a strategy for an ever-shifting target like Covid-19, and the subsequent consumer reaction, is extremely difficult.

Always-on has taken on new meaning, and here we aren't referring to hyperconnectedness, but rather the agility to constantly update our approach in an attempt to remain relevant. It's not an easy ask, but it's also not impossible to achieve.

It requires a move away from legacy processes that might exist in corporations with structures and ways of working that have been developed over years, and a pivot to new processes that potentially scare the living daylights out of us.

In a space or time where change is seen as optional, the process could take months, even years, of consultation and planning, and two key elements are usually present:

1. The collective uncertainty towards the proposed change.



Graham Deneys, strategy director at Carat South Africa

2. Potential short- vs long-term implications on business.

But what we are experiencing now is forced change, kicking at the gate and demanding speed and agility. It's no longer a choice, but the same two elements are still present and the question remains: Can we meet the challenge and change?

Forced shape shifting

I am sure many would have doubted the feasibility of an entire company operating via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. In an alternate reality, it would have taken months of consultation before a full transition could happen. Yet, at Dentsu, we pretty much just did it overnight – because we had to. I recently presented to 125 people over Zoom – and it wasn't lost on me that I often don't have a physical audience of that size in my day-to-day work.

Another example comes from the motor industry. The online car showroom has traditionally been an almost gimmicky way to promote and sell more cars but, now, without the ability to run a physical showroom, we are seeing the entire automotive industry shift like a giant electromagnetic pulse into this space. Suddenly Tesla's showroom strategy doesn't seem so strange. Instead, it's something we should all have been doing already.

As a final example, the shift to online retail has been rather slow and cumbersome for many traditional retailers (consumers weren't quick on the uptake either), but take one guess as to what is now a key change priority?

Gather the troops

Almost every industry is experiencing forced change and in most situations, it should result in improved long-term business prosperity and exciting new forms of employment.

But one thing we can all digest over the next few days and weeks is that change must happen now, and while legacy needs to be considered, it should not constrain us or create stalling fear.

Those who don't adopt a hyper-agile approach will risk potential obsolescence as the world moves forward without them. We must transition from an overly consulted and convoluted red-tape model to a dedicated, hyper-agile team model with change as its core KPI.

I can tell you that there would have been huge concerns around the notion of simply tapping your bank card at the till to pay for goods (how unsafe), but look at us now.

Between Zoom dinners, drive-by birthday parties and virtual game drives, it looks like we've got lots of work to do!

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