Next Level Student Marketing

campaign The Drum

Experiential Agency of the Year
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HOW COVID-19 IS AFFECTING STUDENTS AND HOW WE CAN HELP
These are unprecedented and uncertain times for students and the brands and businesses which serve them.

At a time of developing crisis, when institutions are shutting their doors and people are being asked to isolate themselves, we wanted to understand how students are being affected, what they’re thinking and feeling and what their needs are.

By understanding students’ needs, we can discover how best to help them during this period.

Our insight is based on a quick-fire survey of over 300 UK-based students, conducted on 20th March 2020, just after schools closed and the day on which all pubs restaurants and entertainments shut their doors.
INSIGHTS
A SUBSTANTIAL SACRIFICE FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Despite being less likely to become sick, students are trying to do the right thing because they are genuinely concerned for their families, society and the world at large.

The situation is hitting them very hard and creating a great deal of uncertainty about their education and potential future and many are perceiving a lack of leadership.

They recognise their role in limiting the crisis, are observing the advice and want others to do the same.

“The thought of missing out on graduation is heartbreaking, however, we’d all much rather miss these ceremonies to help keep the virus at bay, than to take any unnecessary risks.”

“Everyone just needs to work together and try to stay calm.”

“It’s a scary time but if we all do our part we can save ourselves in the long run!!”
While 81% of students are now studying online, a further 15% have paused studies altogether.

They don’t believe that the situation will change in time for Term 3 with 84% predicting home-based working and 76% preparing to take their exams online.

"Being in final year, everyone is just very uncertain about what’s going to happen and how it will affect our grades."
Students’ concern about the virus is mirrored by how seriously they are taking governmental advice on social distancing and self isolation.

73% of students are very worried about the effects of the COVID-19 virus with 25% being extremely worried, and 84% of students taking the government advice to socially distance very seriously, becoming annoyed with others who don’t toe the line.

“I think a lot of students aren’t taking it as seriously as they should. Lots of people I know are still posting stories of them on nights out.”
A CONCERN FOR RELATIVES AND THE FUTURE

By far the **biggest concern** for students is the **health of friends and family**, presumably driven by the age differences in health outcomes.

A **secondary** concern is seen in the likely effects on the **economic and job markets** coupled with more immediate, practical concerns such as **shortages of food and supplies** and restriction of **personal movement**.

"I'm worried about the effect on the elderly and vulnerable, however, I'm more worried about the economic and social fallout as a result of the pandemic, both during and well after the state of emergency has passed."
Brands should be looking at ways in which to support the direct efforts of students at this time, inspiring them to stick with their positive behaviours and rewarding those who are inspiring others.

By not only helping students directly, but by helping the people they care and worry about, brands will help ease student stress.

“What this means for brands

“Some are taking it too lightly - needs to be changed and need to find ways for students to have a good time at home.”

“If brands urge students to take more serious action, students will stop treating COVID-19 as a joke.”
DEALING WITH THE ABSENCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND FUN

Socialising and shared experience is a huge part of students’ lives, the removal of all social activities, the disappointment of cancellations and the lack of things to look forward to will leave students feeling very flat.

And all this on the back of a Brexit they largely didn’t want and a sustained tumultuous political environment.

The further removal of certainty about the future added to the removal of planned fun and social support creates an unprecedented time of potential mental negativity for students.

“A lot of students are devastated at the impact it’s had to their education, trips being cancelled, lectures being cancelled, university finishing prematurely, especially for final years who thought they’d have these last events of the year to celebrate and say goodbye and that’s just been taken, but obviously this can’t be helped and it’s for the good of everyone.”

“Everyone wants to see each other.”
Normally hyper social, students have been forced to cancel many planned activities including family gatherings (53%) and holidays (68%). Additionally social and cultural events such as social gatherings (86%), festivals (35%), concerts (34%) and sports fixtures (42%) have been sacrificed or impossible.

This signifies a huge reduction in students’ social footprint. Even before the enforced lockdown the widest extent of most (81%) of their planned social contact was limited to visiting family and friends and non-social movement restricted to shops and parks.
While Freshers have had their super-social first year cut short and Year 2s have suffered disruption, it is the Year 3 students who are suffering the most.

In addition to uncertainty around exams, 77% believe that their end of year ball will be cancelled and 50% believe the same of their graduation ceremony,

“Annoyed that this has cut our final year short, we weren't able to have a proper goodbye/send off and that we are most likely not going to have a graduation or ball this year.”

“A lot of events that I would have been attending, have been cancelled. I am hugely missing out.”
Brands can help by finding ways to inject joy and certainty into students' lives.

Online experiences which allow friends to hang out and do something interesting and novel together could help lift spirits and demonstrate brand support.

Brands could also take a role in organising events for students to look forward to after the crisis has passed.
ISOLATION PRESENTS PERSONAL CHALLENGES. AND OPPORTUNITIES

Many students will be away from their friends for a long period of time and others will be completely alone, with greater levels of isolation likely to lead to greater levels of worry.

Many students will be isolated from family during this time, either through choice, circumstance or concern for their health, creating a potentially difficult emotional separation.

Huge amounts of additional time and a distaste for boredom will see students evolve at polar ends of the productivity spectrum with a huge upswing in entertainment and leisure behaviours matched by an increase in new productivity and personal opportunity.

Students will be looking for inspiration for how to put this new time to good use.

“I think the most important thing for students is keeping them having a purpose and maintaining social interaction. I think brands can facilitate this by offering personal goals that students can fulfil, and to maintain social interaction, introducing schemes that allows for further online interaction.”
The unprecedented social distancing measures are likely to be remembered as a defining part of students lives and they will be experiencing it in a variety of situations.

Social separation from university friends will be a big factor with 66% of students having returned to family homes, leaving just 20% living with university friends.

Concerningly 9% of students are self-isolating alone. Given that this audience is almost as likely to get their information on the virus from unregulated social media (72%) as from TV news (80%) this could be a recipe for exacerbating feelings of worry.
Unsurprisingly for this hyper-social audience, the most difficult element of social distancing is the lack of human contact (27%) and spending long periods indoors (20%).

For many the excess of unplanned time is a stressor, with 26% citing boredom as their biggest worry and 9% most concerned about a lack of routine.

“Students are left in the dark, often without family and in some cases completely alone if housemates have gone. Final year students feel let down and scared”. 
Many students are planning to put this time to good use.

Plans to catch up on studies (47%), life admin (29%) and less pressingly, shows/ series (40%) lead the list of positive outcomes.

A further 32% see the period as an opportunity for self development while 46% are hoping to save money.

Interestingly students are also viewing relative isolation as a break from the stresses of daily life with 27% looking forward to peace and quiet and a further 24% welcoming the time as a break from their usual routine.
As well as significantly increasing the amount of streamed entertainment content (90%) and social media (51%), students will be putting time to good use.

Over 68% of students said that isolation would increase their study time and 46% said they would be working out more. Reading, gaming and online chatting and shopping were also predicted to rise significantly.

In online delivery, food is the category most likely to rise for students, with both takeaway (53%) and grocery (51%) leading the services. Demand for online delivery of entertainment (40%), clothes (26%) and household supplies (22%) is also predicted to increase during this time.
Finding ways to connect friends and family and enable them to spend meaningful time together will have a positive effect on students at this time.

Digital experiences, services and delivery options which allow people to connect with the outside world, the people they love and the resources to make the best of this time will be highly valued.

Additionally, information from trusted sources, such as favoured brands, can help to ease uncertainty and stress.

Brands can help students by providing the inspiration and resources they need to enable positive growth through this period. From tutorials and books to recommendations or expert tuition, the potential to support students in their chosen endeavors is huge.

“We are scared about not knowing what’s going on / how exams will be done so motivation to study would help”.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS
STUDENTS WANT PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL HELP FROM BRANDS

In a sea of uncertainty, students want information they can trust in order to limit their worry and they want to see leadership from trusted brands and institutions.

They’ve never seen the world behaving like this apart from in disaster movies and they want to know that the situation won’t collapse further.

At the other end of the spectrum, they are also desperate for distraction from an overwhelming and depressing news agenda - a glimpse of fun and happiness now that their friendship group and social life is no longer accessible.

“The government has not provided any support for these people who are terrified of being separated from their families in the near future.”

“People want a space where they are not being bombarded with info about covid19.”

“There’s not enough to combat the anxiety inducing hysteria.”
Socially-isolated students will welcome contact from brands with leading industries being entertainment (63%), food (58%), personal health (54%) and social media (42%).

They see brands as playing three key roles in the unfolding crisis. The first is to prevent shortages and ensure key products are affordable.

More surprising is the practical leadership role which students want brands to play with regard to providing information about the virus (62%) and emergency equipment to deal with the crisis.
Additionally, students want brands to provide entertainment to help fill the time, such as funny videos (45%), interactive experiences (40%), live online events (37%) exclusive content (32%) and online tournaments (19%).

Other more tangible examples of desirable brand interactions include special offers and deals (58%) and surprise deliveries (46%).

“The large focus on trying to keep people’s mental health up is good. I also LOVE the outlets spreading happy news rather than all doom and gloom.”

“And a real need for light relief

“Already had enough of hearing about it - need things that take minds away from it rather than focusing on it”
From providing students access to important supplies to becoming a trusted advisor on the situation, the invitation is there to get involved in a practical and direct way.

There is also a huge opportunity to play a digital and physical role in creating joyful and entertaining experiences and distraction for students in a variety of ways.

“What this means for brands

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WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ACTIVATION
THE CURRENT RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

These particular times call for a set of particular principles which brands need to observe when engaging a student audience.

1. Be Specific to students’ needs
   Of course, students are not alone in needing support at this moment, but recognising their challenges and responding in kind will ensure the brand is seen as genuinely supportive and win loyalty and respect within this audience and not alienate others.

2. Don’t require anything in return
   Typical marketing contains some sort of value exchange - a quid pro quo, where marketers and audiences both give and gain in their interactions. This is not typical marketing and brands should not create interactions with anything other than 100% generous and benevolent intentions. Being seen to profit from the current crisis could cause significant damage.

3. Flex your brand
   Whether it’s brand purpose or brand personality, the foundations of these positions should be built broadly upon to accommodate a meaningful action to students at this time. It doesn’t have to be part of the current brand campaign, just authentic to the brand’s DNA.

4. Use your assets
   Whether it’s product, sales force, network, distribution or even real estate or branding, brands should be examining their infrastructure and inventories for ways to create solutions to existing or anticipated challenges.
A SIMPLE BLUEPRINT FOR IDEAS

These are fast-evolving times and students’ needs and the conditions in which they are met are often changing quickly. There are already restrictions on how brands can and should activate and planning needs to accommodate these.

1. **Focus on human needs**
   
   Focusing on environmentally-driven needs risks missing a window of relevance while in planning. By creating ideas which resonate with the higher order and enduring human needs, ideas are likely to be more meaningful and remain relevant for longer.

2. **Keep it simple**
   
   Many marketing activities during this time will be gestures of kindness. These work best as simple executions rather than overly involved creative ideas which require too much of people. It’s simple, helpful, appropriate brand actions which will make a difference.

3. **Think digital and delivery**
   
   With the lockdown now in force, most students are living an even more digitally-based existence. Think about ways to help them remotely through these channels. Many students will be using online delivery services during this time - how could your brand use this to help solve a challenge they have?