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## REASSESSING HABITS A CRUCIAL PRACTICE IN COVID-19 TIMES

NIALL BRENNAN WRITES THAT AS CONSUMERS FACE THE REALITY OF LIVING WITH A PANDEMIC, MARKETERS MUST TRACK THE NEW HABITS EVOLVING

Habits are an essential part of what makes us human. Without them, we would be overwhelmed in our decision making. Just imagine how challenging it would be if we had to stop and consider every single decision that we make each day? Instead of having to face this daunting dilemma of overload, the habits we form in our lives conveniently provide us with a template for the decisions that we regularly take.

We continually retreat to them as they make our lives more manageable and orderly than it otherwise would be. For marketers, habits are the holy grail as brands that become intertwined with a consumer will be chosen frequently and predictably. It is why we spend so much of our time understanding consumer behaviours and the underlying needs, motivations and the social norms that are driving them.

While deliberately thinking about it or not, as marketing professionals what we are constantly trying to figure out is how to break consumers' existing habits or how to make them start new ones. We are really in the business of behavioural change. Covid-19 has unsympathetically wreaked havoc with our habits and in this 'new normal' they are under constant attack, which is deeply unsettling us.

In the early weeks of lockdown, when the most dramatic disruption occurred, we scrambled to find new habits as we craved new forms of structure in our lives. People flocked to Joe Wicks' workouts each morning, we fitted in our daily walk or cycle religiously each day and some even managed to reinstate family mealtimes each evening. With gyms and swimming pools closed, people took up sea swimming.

### RETREATED

People also retreated to behaviours that provided them with a grounded sense of control. We started baking, fortifying our homes with new products and gadgets and even a surge in the purchase of new bikes that we are promising ourselves we will cycle to work when things go back to 'normal'. These behaviours are symbols of our craving for control in a world that has become completely unpredictable.

The disruption caused by Covid-19 has also evolved the mindset of today's consumer. In the 'Lockdown Diaries – Digital Ethnography Research' that B&A has conducted since Covid-19 began, our research has found that consumers are questioning many of the habitual purchases they made before lockdown. Behaviours that they previously did unconsciously have become vividly apparent to them.

As a recent respondent put it best, "A lot of what I did and bought before... I was sleepwalking into it. I was spending money and time on things without even really thinking about it". Despite this, not all has changed. In fact, many of the underlying human motivations and emotional needs that previously propelled many of our habits remain intact. That applies to work practices and people's lives in general.

For example, people still want to symbolically celebrate the end of the work week with our favourite take away or an after work pint with colleagues or friends. The difference now being that we solve these needs with new habits. As one young respondent recently said in an interview: "We now get starters with our take away each Friday to make it feel more special, sometimes even two starters!".

### IMPLICATIONS

The pandemic is more a fork than just a bump in the road. At this critical juncture, the onus is now on brands to reintroduce themselves to what is likely to be a more pragmatic and value seeking consumer next year. To do this, brands need to have complete clarity on how consumer habits are evolving. They must clearly communicate through their propositions how they will remain relevant to consumers.

There is no doubt that opportunity exists. With habits becoming less fixed as customers adjust to a new world, now is the perfect time for them to be introduced to new propositions, brands and new ways of interaction. Consumers have never been as receptive to new ways of doing things and new ideas – change has become the norm. Brands must recognise and capitalise on this heightened consumer receptivity.



### SHOPPERS LIKELY TO BE MORE VALUE-CONSCIOUS

Niall Brennan says shoppers are on the lookout for new ways to solve underlying motivations and needs within the context of the 'new normal'. The disruption caused by Covid-19 means that brands cannot assume consumers will just reinstate the same old habits again. Irish marketers need to appreciate that the pandemic is going to have a lasting impact on consumer needs and beliefs, as well as their brand expectations.