LIFE AFTER COVID-19: HOW THE CRISIS CHANGED TECH AND WHAT TO DO NEXT
Four months ago, none of us had heard of Covid-19. But since then this global pandemic has killed hundreds of thousands of people, upended the global economy, and transformed daily life for billions of people. The tech industry has been right at the heart of these incredible changes, as employers and employees have digitised the way they work with unparalleled speed.

None of us could have imagined something so dramatic happening so quickly. But now it has, we’re all trying to work out how to adapt. So, in partnership with Coleman Parkes, we wanted to find out what businesses around the UK are thinking and feeling right now.

How has Covid-19 changed their business already? What might the future have in store? What role does technology have in their plans? And what should tech marketers and communicators do in response to this unique situation?

In this busy time, with events moving at such speed, we’ve deliberately kept this report as succinct as we can, while still doing justice to the fascinating findings. And throughout we’ve provided specific advice for tech marketing and comms people on what they should do immediately, and in the months ahead, to be as practically helpful as possible.
We surveyed 450 UK business leaders across six sectors (tech, telecoms, manufacturing, health, financial services and professional services), with the goal of understanding how leaders of medium to large organisations were really feeling about the effects of Covid-19; the lasting impacts for their business and employees; and the opportunities arising from the crisis for companies and the tech industry more broadly.

From the data, we’ve defined seven key trends arising from the Covid crisis and recommended how communicators and marketers can best react to them – now and in the future.
THE DEMISE OF THE TECHLASH?

From workplace collaboration tools to delivery platforms, technology has been something of a lifeline during this pandemic, and the backbone of so many of the changes businesses have had to make over the past few months.

Despite the trials and tribulations of Fake News across the big social platforms, the tech giants are banding together to rid the internet of coronavirus disinformation. Just under half of the UK C-suite admit their perception of technology companies has become more positive due to the way they’ve responded to Covid-19.

- 48% admit their perception of technology companies has become more positive since the pandemic began
- 48% foresee an increased investment in hardware over the next 12 months
- 43% foresee an increased investment in software over the next 12 months
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMS AND MARKETING

NOW: EXPLAIN HOW YOU’RE SUPPORTING BUSINESSES
With technology playing such a pivotal role in business right now, it’s important that marketers and communicators use this opportunity to reiterate the benefits their tech delivers. Especially those that focus on helping the community and society.

Your customers and prospects, as well as regulators and policymakers, are watching how brands react in the current context and will remember which ones helped and which ones didn’t. All of your comms need to amplify the positive actions your organisation is taking and show how you are making a helpful contribution at a time when many businesses and employees are struggling to stay afloat.

NEXT: REASSESS YOUR COMPANY NARRATIVE FOR A NEW CONTEXT
There’s a long-term opportunity for tech brands to change how they are viewed, after many years of suspicion and criticism from opinion formers.

Companies should take this chance to reassess how they position themselves and what messages they deliver. That’s especially important as we move into a post-Covid world where people’s expectations and assumptions about business will be profoundly altered by the pandemic.

Brands should take a humbler approach in their comms and marketing, and emphasise their impact for the collective good. From there, brands will also need to prove the positive impact they have made, and are making. With a crisis comes opportunity for heroic action and many brands will play a part in our social and economic recovery. Using comms to tell the world about your work with customers has never been more vital.
Leadership and employee resistance has long been a digital transformation blocker, but Covid-19 forced organisations to overlook internal politics and begin solving problems in weeks, not years.

What’s important here is that many of the changes made in response to the global pandemic were already planned, just for longer-term roll-out. Covid-19 created urgency and an immediate business need that wasn’t previously there. In fact, the majority of C-suite respondents (58%) say it accelerated their digital transformation by three years or more.

42% of senior business leaders report digital transformation efforts that would usually take years to implement was made possible in just weeks.

On average, the C-suite say Covid-19 has accelerated their digital transformation by 3 years.
Now: Help Businesses Navigate Sudden Change

Many companies have had to speed up their digital transformation process enormously and will be struggling to cope.

Marketers and communicators need to provide content and information that helps organisations step out of firefighting mode and successfully embed new technologies and processes. Within your comms – across all channels – now is also the time to be a measured, calm guide to your audience. It is easy given the current situation to fall into negative tones and doom-mongering. But what your audience and market need now is a focus on recovery – as such, comms should have a realistic but determined and hopeful tone in order to connect.

Next: Look to a Permanently Digital Future

Once they’ve made the immediate shift to remote working and virtual teams, businesses can start thinking about how they capitalise on the opportunities of being more digitally enabled organisations.

This is the beginning of the journey, not the end destination. Technology brands are perfectly positioned to provide best practice frameworks for building and maintaining culture and wellbeing virtually, with a remote workforce. Focus on how you can help customers and prospects lift their heads up to the horizon and get them thinking about what fresh possibilities are now visible. They should provide guidance on how to benefit from digital ‘business as usual’ and how to revise their roadmaps accordingly.

What This Means for Comms and Marketing
TECH EXPERIENCE = EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

For years there’s been increased focus on the global war for talent and the importance of employee experience. Covid-19 has redefined how employees “experience” their jobs. While many businesses believe employee friendships, productivity and sense of purpose have improved, it’s clear that remote working hasn’t been a magic bullet for employee satisfaction.

Workers are judging their employers on their technology experience right now - and if it’s not good, retention could become an issue further down the line.

40% agree that their employees’ experience of technology right now will impact their view of us as an employer.

48% believe employees’ tech experience now will impact retention when more typical business resumes.
NOW: ESTABLISH INTERNAL MESSAGING CONSISTENCY

In times of crisis, transparency reduces anxiety and uncertainty among your internal audiences. Ask employees what they want and need, rather than making assumptions.

But most importantly: define a consistent set of messages for your internal comms that offers employees stability and hope in times of immense change. And don’t overlook how these messages are being relayed – choosing the right platforms will be critical to employees receiving them well.

NEXT: COMMUNICATE A CLEAR TECH STRATEGY

Brands need to recognise that their employees’ technology and work experience will impact their end-customers more than ever before. If your people don’t have the right tools for their job when they’re working from home, customer experience will suffer.

So it’s crucial that companies communicate internally in the right way, and ensure that important updates – including future plans – get amplified across the organisation in order to reduce siloes and inconsistencies.
Constraints fuelling business innovation

Crises are well-known for changing the playing field and that scarcity actually demands innovation. It makes sense that many businesses believe that since Covid-19, their level of innovation has improved. And even more think they’ll see an improved culture of innovation beyond the crisis.

This is likely because almost half of businesses (49%) have had more time to think about their existing business models and how they can be improved. The result? Pivots in product or service offering, increased agility and an unshackling from legacy systems. Compared to crises before, technology will play an ever-critical role in facilitating that innovation.

49% Almost half (49%) expect an improved culture of innovation over the next 12 months

46% foresee an increased investment in R&D over the next 12 months
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMS AND MARKETING

NOW: FIND EXTERNAL STIMULUS TO BOLDEN YOUR VIEWS

Businesses are more open to doing things differently than ever before. Focus on crafting relevant and timely points of view that challenge industry status quos and position you as a brand built on the principle of innovative thinking.

Many technology brands will take a pivotal role in guiding the next wave of innovation and what that means for individual sectors. But if your company is conservative in its views, consider how you could run research or partner with a third-party influencer to evidence a bolder or more progressive point of view.

NEXT: PARTNER WITH YOUR R&D AND PRODUCT TEAMS

With leaders aspiring to maintain an always-on innovation mindset, find ways to showcase how your technology can help drive continual innovation within businesses.

Providing evidence of the human benefits of tech-driven modernisation will help show that you can support companies on their innovation journey. One of the best ways to define these benefits is working closely with R&D teams to understand your company’s innovation pipeline and how you can bring that story to life in your comms and marketing.
A RESET FOR STATE AND SOCIETY

The UK government has announced a series of financial measures to shore up the economy against the impact of Covid-19. It’s no surprise then that following the crisis many businesses expect to have an increased reliance on government – especially those in financial services. The trend for domestic sourcing had already been kickstarted by a drive for sustainability, but it’s clear more businesses will be considering how can they be less global and more local.

Almost half of businesses (47%) expect to have an increased reliance on government, with 58% of financial services companies anticipating this.
NOW: COMMUNICATE YOUR VALUE TO SOCIETY
Big businesses especially will need to demonstrate the contribution and value they deliver to society more than ever before. Communications should centre on a shift from shareholders to stakeholders – one of those being the British general public.

Beyond reactive community focused activity, this requires revisiting your vision and mission and making sure your communications to various audiences show value that goes beyond revenue.

NEXT: ENSURE YOUR BELIEFS ALIGN WITH YOUR BEHAVIOURS
Many political and economic conversations are on the horizon. As society increasingly relies on private businesses to guide them through tumultuous times, it’s important to crystallise your view of the world. Developing clear and credible opinions on potential future debates such as globalisation vs nationalisation will be important to show your brand understands the macro context within which your audience is operating.

To help demonstrate this understanding and improve credibility, consider working closely with your customers to tell their stories in your communications through a customer evidence programme – or even a more robust customer advocacy programme.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMS AND MARKETING
IT’S NOT A COVID MONOPOLY

While Covid-19 is the main issue in the public consciousness, perhaps surprisingly businesses see it as one of a number of different factors they have to deal with. In fact, political unrest, cyber security and Brexit are all expected to have the same significant impact on business over the next 12 months as the global pandemic. That’s not too say the current crisis isn’t mission-critical, but rather it adds to the storm of external forces a modern business must navigate.

Out of a list of six environmental factors likely to impact business over the next 12 months, Covid-19 came in fourth:

1. Political unrest (53%)
2. Cyber security (53%)
3. Brexit (50%)
4. Covid-19 (49%)
5. Climate change (48%)
6. Trade wars (47%)
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMS AND MARKETING

**NOW: REFRESH YOUR MESSAGING, DON’T REWRITE IT**

Businesses are dealing with more than Covid-19 and so it’s important that your comms and counsel reflect this reality. By focusing on more than the immediate crisis, you can help show empathy with your audience. This means making edits to your messaging to reflect our current environment but not overriding messages that talk to existing issues such as Brexit or cybersecurity.

**NEXT: PRODUCE A MARKET MAP**

Understand Covid-19’s impact in the context of other challenges and priorities that the C-suite will be grappling with. Where does Covid-19 interact with other issues and create potentially new challenges – for example, supply chains and domestic sourcing, increased cybersecurity risks with the rise of remote working?

One of the most thorough and practical ways to do this is via a Market Map. Digging into the macro issues impacting your business and industry, competitor positioning and what your customers are thinking and feeling.
SEEKING SAFETY AND SOLACE IN BRAND

Businesses are refocusing their efforts on marketing properties they can control. From SEO to content marketing, the crisis presents an opportunity to refresh “owned” properties and ensure they’re best serving customers. Connected to this is a focus on brand-building activities that drive credibility.

Understandably, tone is critical right now. Over half of CMOs and CCOs (61%) want to understand how best to communicate the positive impact of COVID in a credible and empathetic manner.

SEO
Marketing and comms leaders’ main marketing priorities have shifted to: search engine optimisation / organic presence (59%), content marketing (52%) and PR (49%)

48% of CMOs and CCOs foresee an increased investment in brand marketing over the next 12 months
NOW: CONDUCT A CONTENT AUDIT
Content hygiene often gets overlooked during proactive campaign season. Now is the perfect time to audit your website, blog and social media channels to assess what’s performing well and whether your content strategy need refreshing. Don’t forget to review your tone of voice too - for instance, do you need to revise wording to ensure it’s respectful to customers’ current challenges?

NEXT: TRACK BRAND PERCEPTION
As brand-building and perception becomes increasingly important to both marketing and leadership teams alike, put measures in place for tracking it over time. Whether that’s a regular brand awareness survey, monitoring share of voice or tracking new users to your blog content. There’s little use in focusing your marketing efforts on awareness and having no way to prove if it’s working.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COMMS AND MARKETING
A LITTLE ABOUT US AND OUR SURVEY

ABOUT THE RESEARCH
The survey was conducted by Coleman Parkes in April 2020 and targeted 450 business decision makers in medium to large organisations (£20m+ revenues) across multiple key sectors in the UK.

ABOUT COLEMAN PARKES
Coleman Parkes is a full-service B2B market research agency specialising in IT/technology studies, targeting senior decision makers in SMB to large and enterprises across multiple sectors globally. For more information, contact research@coleman-parkes.co.uk

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