

A provocation from
Fearlessly Frank ▶▶

Innovation is now an imperative

It's raining today. A hard, steady, drenching kind of rain.

The first five weeks of lockdown enjoyed bright, optimistic weather as we collectively worked through the shock, novelty, disorientation and creeping boredom inflicted on our lives by an invisible enemy.

But today it's raining. A bit of a downer. A meteorological signal that sunny distractions must stop.

The upside remains: we seem to have averted runaway viral mayhem on a global scale. The slope of the curve is gently pointing downward. R is below 1. Many deaths have happened, but so many more have been averted. But we must face up to the fact that as we gradually plan re-entry to an actively commercial world, the consequences will be profound.

All of business depends upon people buying stuff – and those people are now very different. Every business has a complex dependency upon ordinary folk who create the demand that makes the commercial world go around.

Real people have changed

Let's spare a thought for those ordinary folks. The generation now gradually leaving us – those in their late 80s and 90s – experienced the stress and strain of World War 2. Since then, peace. But those who experienced WW2 were changed in profound ways. Their behaviours for life were altered, shaped by their experience of man's inhumanity to man, and the collective focus on an enemy.

The coronavirus experience has been likened to a war. The analogy between WW2 and coronavirus breaks down on many fronts but of one thing we are certain: the collective psychological consequences will have an equally profound influence on how we live and work going forward.

Ideas are being reevaluated

The World Wars accelerated the conclusion of lurking ideas about where the world is headed and how we should live and work and what we should let our politicians do in our name. For instance the whole idea of an 'Empire' – for so long a concept that had driven statecraft in Europe – died completely. If any Western government since 1945 had started to make imperialist, territorially expansionist noises it would be gone, lost without trace in the face of an electorate with a very long memory.

This is not just about the path out of recession: this is about a complete reboot of the consumer economy.

Businesses have to make themselves fit for a different world

Businesses everywhere must start now to redesign for a different world. It's not a tweak here or there – this is a profound rethink.

Marketing – the practice of creating and placing attractive propositions in front of people in the expectation of achieving commercial growth – will go back to work as the lockdown eases. Most of those employed will begin to look for the familiar, accepted practices. Agonising over creative expressions, optimizing media schedules, dreaming up promotions, attending endless meetings and playing the necessary bullshit bingo in the pursuit of budget.

The familiar is the enemy

It will be wasted effort. All of it. How the world consumes has been through the biggest reboot in history, and we go back to work and try to do things the old way? We don't think how our customer's ideas may have shifted?

Like many under lockdown, I registered for 'click and collect' with our local Waitrose to avoid unnecessary time in the close company of others. Only within a week of things starting every slot was unavailable, and has remained so ever since. I don't object – those spaces are being reserved for those more in need than I. But that hasn't stopped my regular 'loyalty' email, carefully crafted and lovingly presented, imploring me to enjoy the delights of the service I have just signed up for but cannot use. The juggernaut can't help itself, nor see the folly of the things done in its name.

We must avoid the problem of doing the familiar, despite the fact that 'reverting to type' under pressure is the usual and wholly understandable human reaction.

Unframe, unframe, unframe

We must begin the task of unframing everything, taking nothing for granted. We must think anew. Go back to first principles, and re-examine the facts.

The reality of the market is always there to be interrogated, but so often it is overlooked. The cacophony of prevailing ideas inside so many businesses drowns out the imperceptible squeaks and objections from the real world. But those squeaks and objections will be responsible for postcovid behaviours.

Now is the time to pay heed to quiet but profound objections. They will hold the clues for future success.

Precovid – the seed ideas of change

In the Precovid World there were murmurings of discontent. Things we didn't like much, things we wished would go away, things we'd loved to have done something about if only we could collectively decide what.

It's quite a list. Here's just a few of the bigger ones:

- Equality disparity (of wealth and power) across the world and within countries
- Trend to minimal economic growth
- Globalisation
- Ecology/ health of the planet
- Potential for viral infection – post HIV, H5N1, SARS...
- Peak stuff – the concept of satiated Western economies – a move away from the 'consumption economy'
- The global diet and its consequences for health and wellbeing
- Global power pivot to the East
- Populism – turning away from thought and reason (and science)

So in our Precovid world these issues sat, uncomfortable reminders that all was not well. But we wrung our hands, hoped that something would turn up, and got on with our busy lives. We knew of the potential for all these things, but we did little to plan for and think about concrete answers. Still less actually happened with any great speed or urgency.

Postcovid – a volcanic pressure for change and reinvention

Postcovid we will not instantly rise up and become fervent protesters, but the electorate will be more conscious that we can no longer put off big questions. 'Kicking the can down the road' is no longer acceptable. A volcanic pressure to do things differently will emerge. After all, we put the

big question of a global pandemic in the 'too hard' box and felt the (painful) consequence. Lesson learned.

After the last war there was an initial period of relief – and a conscious reflation of the economy gradually consigned wartime austerity to the past.

Then, a few short years later the sixties erupted into a decade of discontent that redefined the entire societal value set through a tumultuous decade. The foundations of the Precovid world were laid then.

The cornerstones of the class system were pulled away. The long march for equality for women accelerated. Racism rejected. Liberalism embraced. Each successive generation took those values, tweaked them a bit, but by and large retained them. Covid has made us think again. The Postcovid consumer will be carrying the seeds of discontent, coupled with a more urgent feeling that something must be done.

Postcovid homo sapiens

Each of us – every living person - has been changed. Irrevocably. Unconsciously. Irreversibly. We've glimpsed the fragility of our own mortality. In response we will pay greater attention to those bigger issues. Action will be demanded, better behaviour expected.

The challenge for marketers everywhere will be to understand how that psychological change will manifest itself and how soon we will see distinctly different behaviours emerge. With the maturity of digital communication, we're betting that will happen sooner rather than later.

Postcovid homo sapiens will invent entirely new patterns of consumption. It will be quicker to change, faster to criticize, louder in its protests. Smart marketing operations will go back to work and immediately begin to map out what will be different. They will invest in better listening, worry about the context for the consumer far more than getting them to buy more alone, and value the process of thinking from first principles even if that

challenges how their organisation works.

That sounds an awful lot like the process of innovation...

New ideas will never find more fertile ground

Small wonder there's a renewed emphasis on generating ideas about how to respond – creatively and sensibly with well thought through and growth provoking innovation.

A word of caution. There are two types of innovator. One type will fail, the other will succeed.

The Type 1 Innovator.

We often hear of companies seeking to achieve a narrow, blinkered goal such as how to achieve everything they need with a vastly reduced budget. This is a great rhetorical question, but frequently one that reflects wishful thinking and can only be answered in Never-never land. It usually belies that fact that the organisation is bullying the innovator into a corner. It is its own kind of viral infection.

The Type 2 Innovator.

The innovator willing to think, consider the real context of the customer, and then generates ideas – however radical they may sound – that thrill those customers. The resulting ideas will be fragile – so they must be handled with care until they are ready. That often means development must happen away from business as usual. Opposition from the parent company can be expected.

Postcovid, Type 2 innovators are needed.

What to do

Businesses are obviously experiencing a significant shock, so leaders need to think through the stages this crisis, and by extension their companies, will go through. It's useful to break down the problem into four:

The first stage is Resolve the immediate problem. As a private-sector institution, you face decisions about business continuity. What are the critical functions that must continue? What could close? What is essential to survival?

The second stage is Resilience. How do you build the organisation to survive. It requires a complete reappraisal and new planning around liquidity, solvency, and economic sustainability.

Next comes planning for the Return. How do you think about returning to normal business? How do you get employees back? What distancing measures do you keep in place? For a lot of businesses that shut down, it is not that easy to open again. You may have lost the workforce along the way, need to bring on new people, train them, get employees back to peak productivity. Then there is the issue of global supply chains. Companies in China are finding that they can restart an automotive plant there, but if the parts are made in Mexico, they have a problem.

Finally, stage four: Reimagination. Senior leaders have never been in greater need of thinking further out. The fundamentals will be different. You may be able to run some operations with fewer people. What can you do remotely? How much more productivity can you gain? How do you move to a digital, contactless world? What new opportunities will emerge? Given the uncertainties, how can we become more flexible?

We can move fast

It is striking that amidst the carnage of COVID-19, businesses are once again focused on innovation and originality. The nation's response has given us great inspiration: From masks and ventilators, to preemptive vaccines or potential cures, everyone has rediscovered the saying that "necessity is the mother of invention." The speed with which new hospitals have been built, new means of production established, and research accelerated have taken years over Precovid planning norms. This leaves an elephant in the room. If we can move that fast, why had we become so slow moving in creating new things?

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