

March 20, 2020

Lauren Wong, Associate Strategy Director  
Myra El-Bayoumi, Head of Strategy

# 5

c| Article

# A Brand's Responsibility in Times of Crisis



We're in the midst of a global health crisis — one that affects our healthcare systems, connected economies, and daily life. For some, this pandemic has triggered mostly inconveniences, indefinite WFH policies, and anxieties. For others, this world event will leave a serious and lasting mark on human lives, from our jobs to our small businesses to the health of our loved ones.

In moments like this, we often look to individuals who step up and perform incredible acts of courage or kindness. And while these individuals are critical in showing us the strength of the human spirit, their impact is focused, personal, and direct. Very few human beings can tackle some of the systemic issues uncovered in times of crises, or provide support and relief at scale.

But brands have that power.

And at Character, we believe that the strongest among them — the purpose-driven brands — use that power on a regular basis as well as in times of crisis.

Brands like these, who see their purpose as an insatiable call to action and an impetus to contribute, acknowledge their responsibility to make positive contributions to society and rise to that occasion in an ongoing way. And when a crisis hits, the way they show up scales swiftly in response — not as lip service or a PR exercise, but in tangible actions that support their people when other institutions or systems fail. They find authentic ways to respond that naturally reaffirm their purpose, whether through their connection to communities, their expertise, or their offerings. And when the dust settles, they continue to act in ways that sustain, protect, and provide for those they serve.

That's what's needed today.

And that's what's happening.



Here are a few brands that are leading the way:

- The NBA was one of the first to suspend its sports season, creating a wave of subsequent sports associations to halt their seasons and protect their players, staff, and audiences. Coaches, teams, and even individual players are making bold financial commitments to support hourly arena workers who are most affected by the shutdowns.
- Sweetgreen is deploying its “Outpost” operations and teams within hospitals to provide free salads and bowls to frontline medical professionals who are working overtime to respond to increasing demand for medical assistance.
- Zoom is giving any K-12 school in Japan, Italy, or the US free access to its videoconferencing platform to support educators’ ability to connect with students and continue their studies.
- Museums from around the world are providing free access to their rich cultural collections through digital content, virtual walk-throughs, live-streamed talks, and curator selections.
- The Atlantic, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Bloomberg News have pulled down their paywalls to ensure everyone has access to the facts.
- Comcast, Sprint, Google, Verizon, and many others have endorsed the FCC’s pledge to “keep America connected” by waiving late fees, not discontinuing service for anyone who cannot pay, and opening up hotspots to anyone who needs them.



For many of these brands, their decision to do the right thing is also the choice to do the hard thing. By leading with their humanity, they're giving way to a new definition of capitalism where maximizing shareholder returns is not the singular focus. It's one where corporations are equally expected to demonstrate the value they create for their employees, the environment, and the society in which they exist — even when that means giving up revenue or deprioritizing profit. That expectation is felt acutely at a time like this, where those who lead stand apart from those who follow, setting the example that will earn them the loyalty that will help their businesses recover when this, too, passes.

The heroes in today's global health crisis are on the frontlines: medical professionals, caregivers, relief organizations, etc. They're also scattered across industries around the world, answering the call to address the economic and social consequences of moments like these. We're inspired by the way brands have risen to the occasion, whether by providing critical services or shedding light on communities in need.

We see a world where companies, brands, and organizations prove their purpose through the powerful actions they put into the world — not just in times like these, but every day they're open for business.

