

Covid-19: How marketers can help in coping with anxiety in times of a pandemic

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By [Jones Mathew](#)

Analysing how an individual copes with anxiety in times of a disaster like the current Covid - 19 [pandemic](#) may have important implications for marketers. These are times when blatant [marketing](#) must be replaced with actions that step in to alleviate tension, fear and anxiety among people. [Nike](#) marshalled its factories to manufacture masks and other medically useful products as the pandemic gripped the globe, as an example, thereby living up to its “Just Do It” tagline once again.

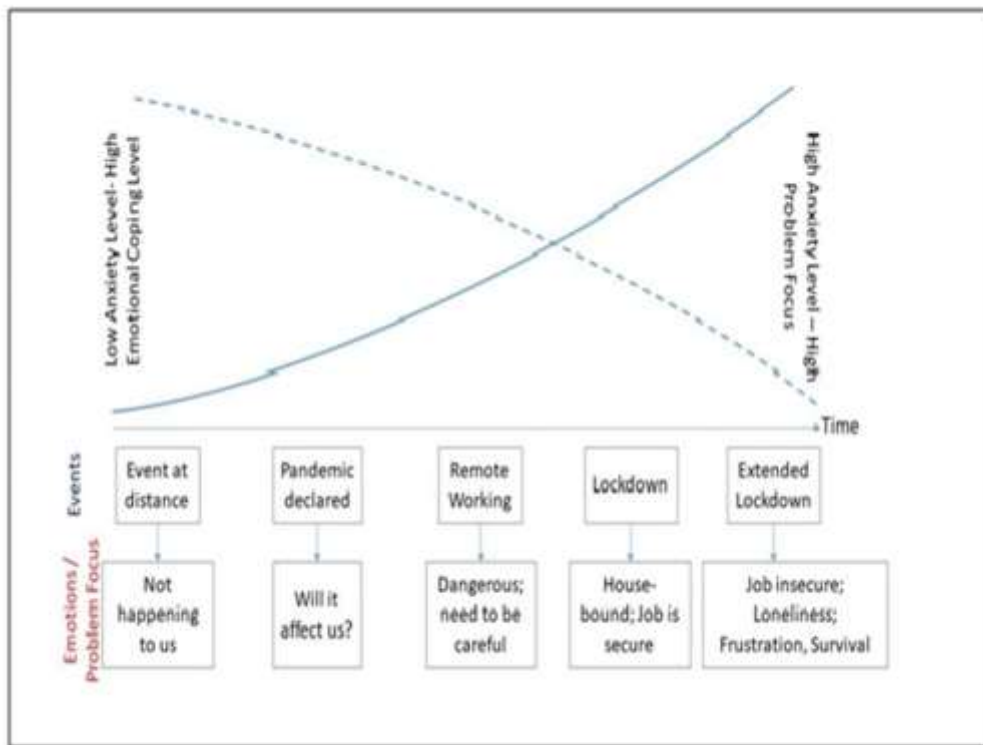
A disaster is not only much larger in scale than a personal or family emergency but it has a much longer lasting change element compounded by extremely high level of uncertainty and complexity. It is natural that people process information differently during disaster and non-disaster times. Anxiety levels also peak in a different way compared to during a personal or family emergency. In a personal situation, there are comfort and care givers available who are outside the ambit of one’s personal emergency event who are removed from the pure intensity of the event personally and are therefore able to give rational and emotional support. But when there is a disaster affecting large sections of the population, such rationality is crushed by the immediacy of the event for all in that area.

During a crisis, messages must be simplified otherwise a receiver may not hear or remember all the relevant information thereby often misinterpreting or getting confused by a multitude of bodies providing information (central government, state governments, World Health Organization, individual brands, WhatsApp groups, self-styled experts, TV gurus, individual medical experts and so on). Marketers must double down on simplifying their communications to the maximum extent possible to help members of the public easily understand the gravity of a situation and on ways and means to minimize the dangers. Many companies have adopted the route of infographics to communicate with people easily through pictorial messaging.

As a force of habit, in times of a disaster, victims tend to hold on to long held beliefs as a coping mechanism (“media always hypes the dangers of any event”, “the last time something similar happened I got by doing precious little about it”). Marketers when communicating must speak with a voice of high credibility (the CEOs personally of marketing companies must put forth bytes in the media instead of some anonymous source in the company – people in times of crisis want to hear leaders with authority taking charge and communicating with the media or directly with them). Recent examples have been R S Sodhi, GCMMF MD (the cooperative that owns the Amul brand), [Kiran M Shaw](#), Chairperson and MD, Biocon Ltd, [Suneeta Reddy](#), MD of Apollo Hospitals, and most recently, [Ratan Tata](#), Chairman Emeritus, [Tata Group](#), who have directly communicated and contributed as heads of their organizations to citizens at large regarding care during [Covid-19](#).

In times of crisis, another coping mechanism at play is the tendency to confirm things (news, suggestions, caveats) before action is taken (“let’s see what my neighbours are doing”; “If s/he is walking around in spite of directives to stay indoors, it must be safe to try it”). Marketers must take extreme care to consistently communicate messages that are seen to be correct. News marketers like the print media players (Hindustan Times newspaper for one) have been issuing large page advertisements urging people to read newspapers for the correct information which has been vetted for authenticity rather than relying totally on digital media where “fake” is common. Speculation and rumour consumption can only be plugged if consistent and credible information is provided quickly and in the right amount preferably from highly placed government sources. Marketers might do well to remember that digital is instant, convenient but often unreliable; print is slower, once a day but often more reliable. Newspapers themselves might innovate and bring out a morning and an evening edition to overcome the state of the day news reporting.

Given below is a representation of how emotional and problem-focused behavior will occur as events of a pandemic nature unfold over time. Marketers should focus on changing their communications as the events progress and people go through different approaches to managing the crisis amid changing emotional states. Initially, when the event is yet distant, consumers continue to exhibit behavior typical of audiences who believe that the crisis will pass them by, like the Jews of Biblical times with markers on their doors. Marketers too continue to pander to this prevailing mindset amongst consumers, and “business as usual” goes on. But a pandemic comes upon you sooner and with greater force than you think. How should marketers best serve customers’ interest. Be upfront of the danger, provide timely updates (not just one SMS message saying that the company would be working with a limited staff so “please bear with us for slower than usual service”). Be creative, be solemn, be catchy. [McDonald](#)’s splitting its golden arches to drive home the social distancing imperative for containing community spread by SARS-CoV-2 (the virus behind COVID 19) is a case in point – a widely recalled logo, reorganized in a solemn way, and yet which proved catchy.



How emotional and problem-focused behavior will occur as events of a pandemic nature unfold over time. As the pandemic stretches its tentacles wider and deeper, people are asked to work remotely to reduce the risk of transmission. Many organizations had already adopted this method in order to protect their employees much before the government issued advisories. Such marketers signaled their caring attitude for its employees who they always claimed were valuable resources. Conversely, there were other organizations who forced their employees to continue to work as usual up until the government made it clear what it wanted. Such organizations can forever tout their 'valuable human resources' and nobody would believe them. From a pure marketing point, companies in the essential goods domain need to assure citizens that supply chains would remain intact, though skeletal. Hence, messaging could be built around not giving in to panic, and to hoarding. On packages of essential products messaging could be built around "One piece or packet per family or user", thereby hopefully reinforcing anti-hoarding sentiments.

Obviously, with a virus like the SARS-CoV-2 with no known vaccine or medical regime to overcome it, it was almost a foregone conclusion that a complete lockdown would be essential to arrest the spread. That is what the government of India did. What is the role of marketers in this phase? Possibly extending its products pro bono to all those in need of nourishment, nutrition and support like Parle G did with its biscuits (30 million packages to be distributed FOC through government agencies) and educational institutions did like IMT Ghaziabad and [Great Lakes Institute of Management](#) who have extended fee submission dates for students struggling to get bank loans in this time of intense crisis.

Looking into the future, where the lockdown is most likely to be extended beyond the first spell,

how should marketers address its audience? First of all, by this time, jobs will be cut, layoffs will most probably happen and therefore the problem solving focus of responding to the pandemic will be the top most priority of people. Banks and NBFCs can stay loan collection for a specified time period, FMCG goods companies can work out special last mile distribution strategies, utility companies can collect bills after the pandemic fades out, digital education companies can extend their platforms for longer durations for people to keep upskilling themselves and using their time productively; and pharmaceutical companies can work at boosting the supplies of essential kits and drugs for not only people suffering from COVID 19 but also the millions suffering from a host of other diseases for which frequent medication and hospital visits are essential for survival but are held immobile in their homes due to the extended lockdown.

Marketers have risen to the occasion many times previously in times of crises to address the needs of a nation in emotional and physical terms. However, the challenges of COVID 19 are unprecedented. This one calamity will probably most permanently change the way the world functions henceforth. Marketers need most urgently to move outside its profit only motive at this time.

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The article can be read online [here](#).