



[Home](#) » [Perspectives@SMU](#) » COVID-19 can be an opportunity to elevate your brand

## COVID-19 can be an opportunity to elevate your brand

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*To do so you will need to Dream, Do, and Dare in equal measure, says JP Kuehlwein. But your actions must be in line with the brand's DNA*

When LVMH, the world's largest luxury goods company, announced in March that it would convert three of its perfume manufacturing plants to make hand sanitisers, **JP Kuehlwein** did a double take.

"It's a bit risky for a luxury brand to make hand sanitisers because it's such a utilitarian product," explains Kuehlwein, co-founder and principal of marketing consultancy Ueber-Brands. "But it's important because it signals empathy: we're luxury but we're not snobbish and arrogant. It's about lives here, we need to pull together."

“If in that situation Louis Vuitton had said, ‘We have to plan our next fashion show’, that would have been bad. It would also have been bad if they had started to sell Louis Vuitton hand sanitisers for \$99 in a chic leather holder. That would have [played into the criticism] that high-end luxury is arrogant and condescending.”

Instead, LVMH has done what Kuehlwein calls ‘elevating’ its brand during a crisis.

“Good brands can harness emerging socio-cultural forces that come to the fore in a crisis. And if these brands can make their action fit their DNA, they can elevate themselves and make the brand stronger.”

## **ELEVATING IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

Kuehlwein, who had served as Brand Director and Global Director of Strategy at Procter & Gamble, made those observations at the recent SMU Centre for Marketing Excellence (CME) Luxury Marketing Series webinar, *“The New Prestige: From Myth Making To Manifesting a Higher Mission – Particularly in a Crisis!”*

Besides LVMH, Kuehlwein also cited Airbnb’s Online Experiences (“Find unique activities led by one-of-a-kind hosts – all without leaving home.”) initiative as an example of an action that fits the brand’s DNA, and thus elevating it during the COVID-19 crisis.

“Obviously nobody was travelling in the U.S., one of Airbnb’s biggest markets,” he explains. “But they had an engaged host and guest community who came up with Online Experiences: ‘Okay, you can’t come to France or Napa Valley, let us do a virtual wine tasting together; order wine online and I’ll do it with you; I’ll walk through Paris with the camera on my phone while you watch because you can’t visit me from the United States etc.’ It became so popular that it’s now a standing offer.”

Brand elevation is not restricted to aspirational or luxury brands. Heinz, perhaps best known for its canned baked beans, garnered plenty of positive coverage by pledging to pay for 12 million meals for underprivileged UK schoolchildren. With schools closed during COVID-19, some of these children were denied a school lunch which might be their only full meal of the day.

“It’s an opportunity to build up a mission, but is this going to last after the crisis?” asks Kuehlwein. “Will they, in a typical mass marketing move, abandon it as just a campaign? Or contract it out to an agency and pay the agency to do whatever? Or will they be smart enough to integrate this and help elevate Heinz into something more meaningful?”

## **DREAM, DARE, AND DO**

The examples Kuehlwein brought up constitute the ‘Do’ element of brand elevation; ‘Dream’ and ‘Dare’ are the other two. Where ‘Do’ is the actual action to elevate, ‘Dream’ is what “makes you want to buy into rather than buy” something.

When buying a piece of clothing from outdoor apparel maker Patagonia, Kuehlwein explains, “you are buying more than just a fleece sweater; you are buying into a whole philosophy of preserving the environment so that everyone can benefit from it”. For Ben & Jerry’s, one would be buying into its much-documented advocacy for social justice (Yes Pecan! Choc-u-pie Wall Street etc.) that is very much in line with its tagline of ‘Peace, love, and ice cream”.

What about ‘Dare’?

"It's about tension," says Kuehlwein, "the concept of defining and finding and celebrating your 'ueber-target', your muse, as a brand." Kuehlwein relates an exercise involving Harley-Davidson where he shows people a picture of an arm tattoo of the motorcycle maker's logo.

"I ask them: 'Who is the person with the tattoo? Is it a male or female? Is the person bearded or shaven? Does the person have a gun? Is the person a smoker? Etc. etc.' 99 percent of the time the respondent, regardless of race, age, or geography talk about the same person: it's this fantasy person that has been going on forever and ever – the outlaw, the Hell's Angel who is loud and tattooed and doesn't give a damn.

"Some of them actually are like this fantasy person, perhaps 20 percent of those who buy the bikes, but the buyers of the full-price expensive Harley Davidson bikes are often doctors, lawyers, and middle-aged men who have a mid-life crisis and they aspire to be these outlaws even if it is just for a short weekend. And then they wash off the tattoo and it's over.

"That is the difference between the ueber-target and the reality. That is how you create this tension."

Social media, in particular Instagram, is a prime generator of this tension. "You see the ideal self all the time on Instagram," Kuehlwein comments. "To the extent that your brand can become part of the ideal self like being in a Gucci changing room where you can pretend to wear this dress even though you cannot yet afford it, you are helping people live this ideal self. But the tension is there: They can't afford it, it's just a picture, you're wearing it just for a minute. It's positive tension."

## **ELEVATION FAILURE**

When asked if any brand in any business, however unglamorous, can be elevated, Kuehlwein revealed that he has been working with recycling companies and firms selling tarmac. He emphasised his point with the example of Fleur de Sel de Guérande, the premium sea salt brand that sells for more than ten times the price of common salt "by invoking your romanticism about certain locations...and it's hand-packed and it's beautiful, and it's elevated!"

However, Kuehlwein cautions against equating those examples with the impossibility of failure. Audi's 2017 'Daughter' Super Bowl commercial proclaiming "Audi of America is committed to equal pay for equal work" backfired spectacularly when it was found shortly after that most of its senior management were men.

"There are more failures than successes, for sure," Kuehlwein concedes. "The majority fail because it doesn't come from within, because it doesn't come from the brand's DNA. The brand's DNA is not just the desired identity, it's 'what is the organisation about?'

"What is the manufacturing about? How is the experience at the retail store? Does it fit together? Is it consistent? Or do you discover when you take aside the curtain that it was all just a PR or ad campaign that an ad agency has created? And as soon as the agency changes, it becomes something else?

"In that case, the organisation or anything else in any manifestation of the product or service would have nothing to do with it. That's when you flop."

*JP Kuehlwein was the speaker at the SMU Centre for Marketing Excellence (CME) Luxury Marketing Series webinar, "The New Prestige: From Myth Making To Manifesting a Higher Mission – Particularly in a Crisis!" that was held on 17 November 2020.*