Longitude

A Financial Times Company

Thought + leadership

Intelligent content in a crisis

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The political leaders who have been praised for their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have a few crucial things in common: they have shown empathy, acted decisively, and communicated consistently.

Above all, they have been visible.

> Customer preferences that once seemed certain have altered drastically in a matter of days.

Their actions tell us a lot about how B2B brands need to communicate during a crisis and in its immediate aftermath.

There's an old adage in marketing that you should always invest through a downturn. Research has shown that those who stay visible during tough economic times will rebound more quickly when things start to improve.

Steady communication with your audience at such times – even if you do less of it – is better than stopping entirely. Shrink away, and you jeopardise brand loyalty and risk a competitor moving into the space you leave behind.

But this crisis is very different, and the rules have changed.

During previous downturns, brands could more or less continue with their existing pre-crisis content strategies. Sure, they had to adjust their messaging slightly and apply extra scrutiny to investment, but these were typically minor modifications rather than wholesale changes.

Now, B2B content marketers are having to shift their messaging radically, and update it constantly as the crisis develops. And to some extent they are flying blind.

One big challenge is that their established mental map of the audience has become abruptly outdated. Customer preferences that once seemed certain have altered drastically in a matter of days. And they are likely to change repeatedly in the coming weeks and months.

Some say that Covid-19 will make us question every aspect of our personal and professional lives, while others say that we will quickly return to our old habits. As with most predictions, the reality probably lies somewhere in between.

Based on conversations with clients and our collective thought leadership experience, we explore what the crisis means for B2B marketing and content professionals – and what we can learn from the biggest story of our lives.

Section one
Communicating in a crisis

As well as being visible, you need to be steadfast in your commitment to thoughtful content. Show emotional intelligence in the stories, advice and opinion you share and publish – and don't pretend to be something you're not.

Support your audience

Your clients are also going through difficult times. Decisions that just a few months ago seemed straightforward now appear fraught with risk. Their customers' priorities have changed, and many are looking for guidance from experts. Now is the time to empathise with your audiences, help guide their decision-making, and show how well you understand their businesses, clients, supply chains and partners.

Look after your existing customers – don't just look for new ones

During tough times, it can be tempting to focus marketing resources on short-term sales activation efforts to win new clients and generate new revenues. This is understandable, but don't do it at the expense of your loyal, longer-term customers. Stay in touch with these core clients, even if they're not planning to buy from you in the immediate future. They are busy, but they will welcome advice and inspiration.

Think long term and stay positive

Whether a recovery comes in two months or 12, companies will eventually dust themselves off and return to seeking growth. Your content strategy should prepare for that time and ensure that you're ready for it. And, perhaps most importantly, stay positive: manage the short-term risks, but keep one eye on better times ahead. Your optimism will come through in your comms, and will rub off on your clients; everyone is looking for good news.

Don't neglect the brand

Building the brand is key to reducing business risk over the long term. Strong brands generate associations that influence purchasing decisions long into the future. Neglecting to invest in the brand, even during difficult times, stores up problems because it weakens the associations that drive purchasing. Bear in mind that how you act and communicate during this period will be remembered long into the future. Those brand associations – positive and negative – will be lasting.

Section two
Open, considered and responsive: be a thought leader in tough times

The principles of good thought leadership haven't changed. But in the current environment some aspects matter more than others. Here are five ways to gain and retain the trust of your clients and readers.

1. Show humility

It's okay to acknowledge that you don't have all the answers, because no one does. Keep in mind that there are two main strands to effective thought leadership and crisis marketing: authority and empathy. Now, more than ever, it's important to convey both. McKinsey, through its executive briefing and collection of insights, was quick to do this as it explored the implications of the pandemic for businesses.

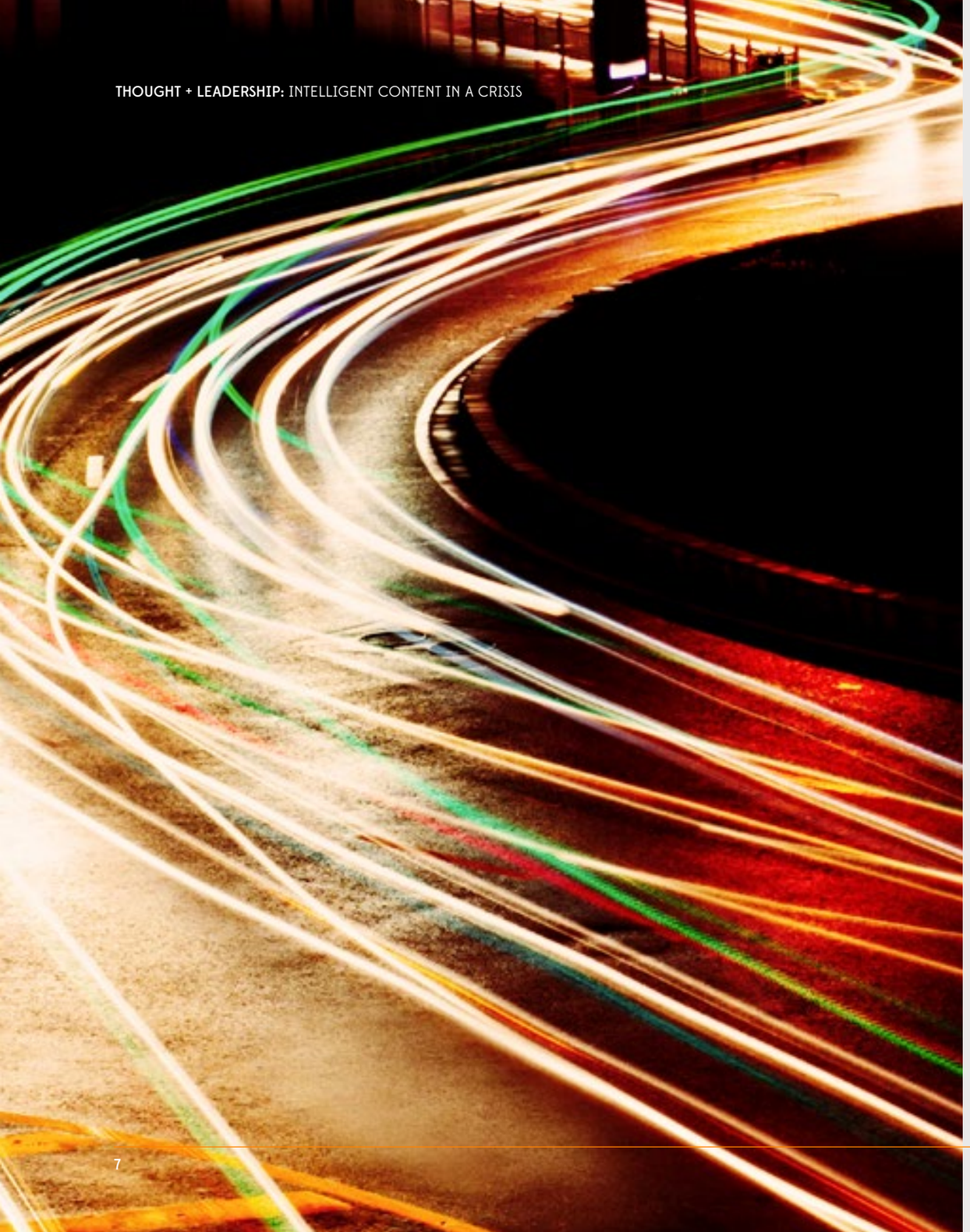
Be authoritative when you are confident in what you have to say and can provide tangible solutions to problems. But when you can't, use empathy to build a connection and emphasise the importance of collaboration to overcoming the most intractable challenges.

Choose your words with care. Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Carmine Gallo stresses the need for brevity, analogies and personalisation when communicating in a crisis.

2. Be generous

Customers will remember the businesses that helped them, and society at large, during the crisis. Be generous with your advice. This will build trust and reinforce a long-term emotional connection with your brand. EY's mix of guides, frameworks and opinion pieces is a good example of this.

This is a time when audiences need insight more than ever, and it offers businesses a chance to build strong, lasting connections.



3. Embrace agile

This crisis is unlikely to progress in a linear way: there may be false starts and unexpected setbacks, with different markets and sectors emerging at different times and at different rates. Your messaging needs to be tuned into this fast-changing context. That requires genuine agility: being able to turn on a dime and shift your perspective to meet the current needs of your audience.

Content will have to be developed quickly, which means waiving time-consuming stakeholder reviews and decision-making by committee. You will need to establish a clear chain of command, and set up small, nimble teams that can flex their approach in hours – not weeks. Most importantly, test your content continually so that you learn what works and what doesn't. Then, optimise your content production in near-real time.

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4. Be observant

Be in no doubt: your audience's priorities have transformed in a matter of weeks. We're all living through similar experiences, but you probably don't understand your audiences as well as you did before the crisis.

So it's important for marketers to question every assumption they have about their buyers and recalibrate where necessary. Listen to your audiences and adopt an outside-in approach. Gather feedback from conversations with customers, and add that to your content strategy on an ongoing basis.

5. Become ambidextrous

The trajectory of this crisis is uncertain. That means brands need to prepare for different scenarios and potential outcomes. Marketers will have to tune their content and points of view to different phases of the crisis and be ready to publish or postpone them at short notice.

A portfolio approach will be key to staying relevant. Focus on short-term and medium-term content initiatives simultaneously. Allocate some of your resources to immediate, pragmatic advice on how to weather the current stage of the crisis, but also be prepared for the recovery. This means focusing on a medium-term strategy with insights into how companies should start to emerge from the hardship. Be flexible and willing to reallocate resources depending on how the situation evolves.



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Covid-19 covered

Some brands have been quick to produce a wealth of rolling content that deals with the impact of the crisis on their clients, and on how their expertise is helping to tackle the effects of the pandemic.

The online effectiveness consultancy Bowen Craggs has highlighted good examples of best practice, including Verizon's comprehensive hub and articles from AXA and Siemens that offer fresh angles on the pandemic.

Timing is everything
The three stages of the crisis

When we speak to clients about their current content plans, the same question comes up again and again: how do we make sure that our content is on message and fits with the crisis as it is now?

Our advice? Companies need to think about the likely trajectory of the crisis. Although timings are uncertain and will vary across sectors and geographies, we expect business responses to the crisis to follow three broad stages: readjustment, adaptation and recovery.

Readjustment

In this stage, companies are in panic mode and thinking only about current concerns. They are adjusting their workforces to remote working, dusting off business continuity plans, and gauging the immediate impact on their short-term revenues and profitability.

Adaptation

In the next stage, companies have moved beyond the immediate shocks and are thinking more broadly about the impact on their business. Do they need to change strategy or business model? How do they keep their workforce engaged and motivated? Yes, they'll be looking at cost-cutting measures, but they'll be keeping one eye on recovery in order to avoid making cuts that could damage their recovery.

Recovery

At this point, companies are starting to think ahead, although they'll still be dealing with the fallout from the crisis. They may start to see opportunities in the gloom, and will be thinking about how to make themselves more resilient. They'll also start seeking out longer-term growth and strategic initiatives for the first time since the crisis emerged.

In the coming months, it's vital that your content is appropriate to the stage of the crisis, which means thinking about several timeframes simultaneously.

Here are the key questions that your audiences are likely to ask themselves at each stage of the crisis, and they'll be looking for your help to answer them. We recommend getting ready for all three stages, then ensuring that your content targets the right stage at the right time.

01 Readjustment

- Is our business continuity plan robust enough?
- Can we withstand supply chain shocks?
- Is our IT fit for purpose?
- Are we supporting and safeguarding our people?
- Can our financing and cash arrangements withstand the shock?
- Are we communicating to stakeholders about the short-term impact?
- How are we helping our customers and communities?
- What will be the immediate impact on our cashflow, P&L and balance sheet?

02 Adaptation

- How do we adapt our business model to current needs?
- How does my leadership approach need to change?
- How do we keep up morale in a distributed team?
- Has customer behaviour changed, and is it temporary or permanent?
- How do we reduce costs without restricting our recovery?
- Will the crisis lead to more sustainable ways of working?
- Can we keep sourcing goods from affected suppliers?
- Is our funding sufficient to withstand medium-term pressures?

03 Recovery

- Are there any M&A opportunities?
- Will sustainability and ESG be more, or less, important?
- How do we innovate our way out of a crisis?
- What level of risk are we prepared to take?
- How do we build greater resilience into our operations?
- What's our new workforce model, and what's the future of the office?
- How can our digital transformation activities make us more resilient?
- What's the future for AI and data analytics, 5G and the IoT?

Section three
It's what you say and how you say it

Marketing professionals are rightly asking searching questions about how to proceed with their campaigns.

Some are thinking about how their pre-coronavirus idea will be received in this very different world. Some will have research or content creation underway, and are wondering whether it's still appropriate. Others are thinking about postponing campaigns until there's greater clarity about the extent and duration of the crisis.

Marketing and communications teams need to be careful: off-message content that doesn't reflect and respect the current context will fall flat. Get it wrong, and you'll damage your brand and alienate your clients. Trust your communication instincts, and consider the following steps.

Don't ignore the elephant in the room

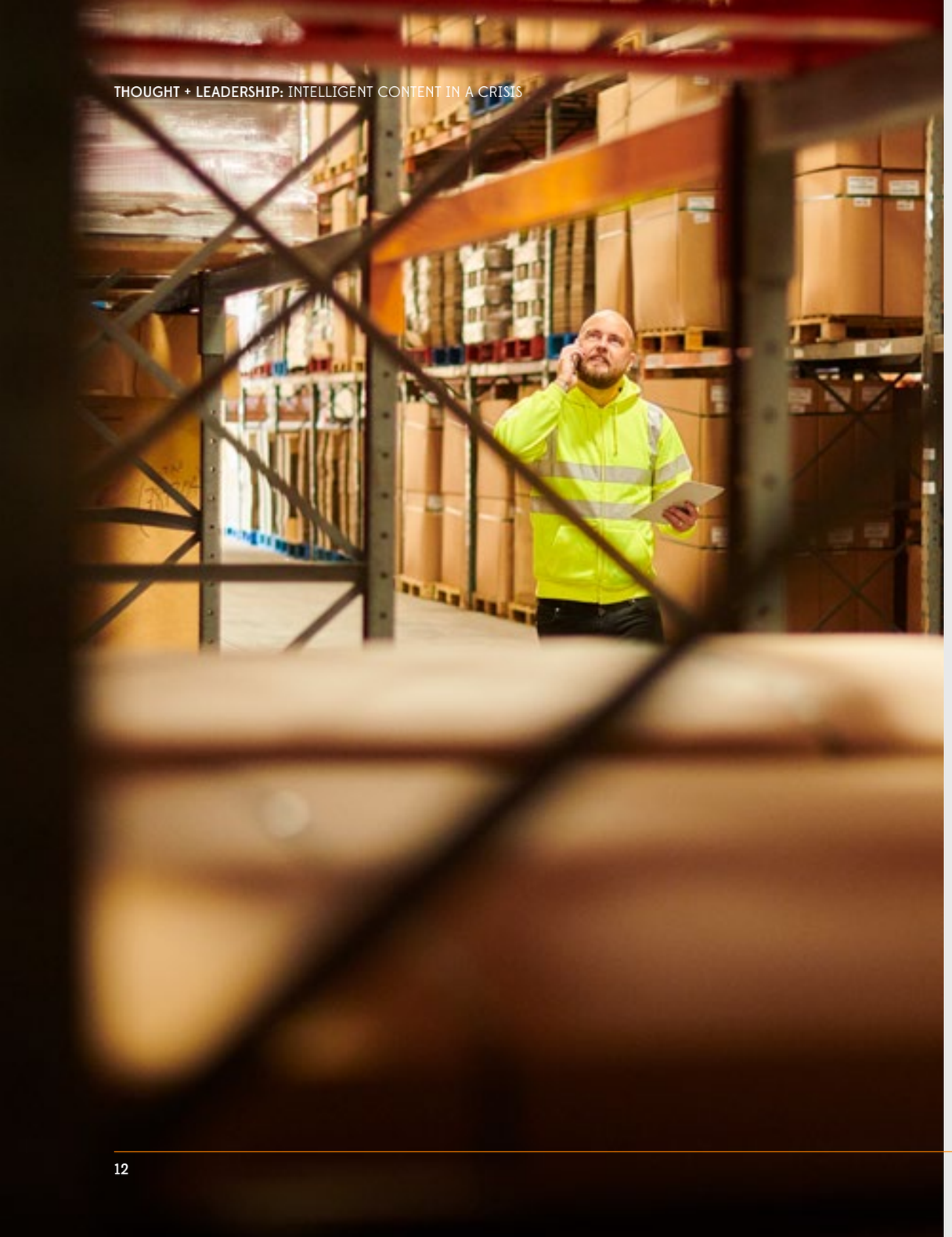
Campaigns will miss the mark if they don't reference the current situation or they fail to place their theme in context. Without thoughtful adjustment, it will seem to audiences as though your organisation is speaking a different language and is from a different time.

That doesn't mean jettisoning your ideas. With careful consideration, most themes can be adjusted so that they're positioned more sensitively – even if you're well underway with their development.

Listen to your audience

Now, more than ever, it's essential to listen. Your audience's needs are changing rapidly, and assumptions about their pre-crisis preferences are unlikely to hold true.

Gather insight from client conversations taking place on your frontline, and find out as much as you can about their challenges. Then be prepared to adjust your messaging accordingly.



Get agile

Be willing to change tack and get creative. If your content doesn't feel appropriate for the current environment, don't reject it completely. Instead, consider how you can adjust or reframe it to be more sensitive and appropriate. This will probably require more effort, but it will be worth it.

Keep one eye on the longer term

This crisis will eventually recede, although nobody knows when. You and your clients are currently in readjustment mode, but that won't be the case forever.

By all means target your messaging to meet short-term realities, but don't forget the longer-term outlook: ensure that your content evolves as the crisis unfolds. Stay visible, but stay relevant too.

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Credible evidence and context

Major news organisations have seen a spike in their traffic during the crisis. Many publishers, including the Financial Times, have moved their content out from behind paywalls so that non-subscribers can access their reporting and analysis.

The FT's coronavirus tracked page has been widely followed and cited, which underlines the appetite for credible data and context. Clients are looking for authoritative interpretation by people they trust: what does the pandemic mean for their customers, prospects and partners? Now, more than ever, your content needs a solid evidence base, context and nuance.

Section four
Subjects and stories that matter

There are some subjects that are too important to ignore – especially during a crisis. The issue is not that too many brands cover the same topics, but that so many take the same well-trodden angles.

You need to find new lines of enquiry, seek expert opinion, and come to conclusions that have practical value for your clients. There's no margin for irrelevance.

Here are the evergreen subjects where you'll need to demonstrate your authority from the very first sentence.

Resilience

This will be the big topic for thought leadership in late 2020 and beyond. Business leaders will be under pressure to ensure that their companies can withstand shocks such as coronavirus in the future.

They need insights into how to strike a balance between efficiency and resilience, and how to develop adaptable business models and processes that allow them to change tack quickly. Interest will grow in risk management that enables leaders to identify weak signals and 'black swans', as well as in ways to respond quickly and decisively to risks across the business.

Leadership

Leadership is a perennial topic on the thought leadership agenda, but we expect interest in it to increase as companies seek to learn lessons from the current turmoil. Why? Because there's no blueprint to follow, so businesses want to know how to respond.

Popular themes are likely to include purpose-driven leadership, the shift from a command-and-control model to a more networked approach, how to make informed decisions, empathic communication, and resilience. Many business leaders will have gone through immense stress during the crisis, so there will also be interest in wellbeing, mental health and personal resilience.

Supply chain

Empty supermarket shelves and governments' difficulties in sourcing vital medical equipment have been powerful reminders of vulnerabilities in our global supply chains. So expect to see a surge of interest in supply chain topics as business leaders seek to gain a better understanding of how to identify and mitigate risks to supply while keeping supply chains lean and efficient.

The crisis has also revealed the risks of supply chain concentration, with many companies seeing disruption that stems from quarantined areas in China. Many will be keen to address these vulnerabilities by gaining greater visibility of their logistics networks and becoming more aware of potential gaps and weaknesses.

Automation and AI

This is likely to be a tricky topic to navigate. Automation's potential to reduce the need for human workers might make it a sensitive subject at a time when jobs have been cut. And for many companies, investment in AI and automation has involved capital expenditure – something we expect to be placed under greater scrutiny in the months ahead.

But interest in automation and AI is unlikely to wane. Instead, the focus will shift to using these technologies to drive operational improvements and seeking new ways to boost efficiency against a difficult economic backdrop.

Sustainability

It's often said that interest in sustainability and environmental concerns is cyclical. It rises during good times when there is less pressure on the cost base, and drops dramatically during a downturn when companies need to focus on the fundamentals.

In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, however, we don't expect interest in sustainability and related topics such as brand purpose to fall. But we do predict that it will shift. It will broaden beyond environmental, social and governance (ESG), which has dominated in recent years, to encompass broader themes around sustainable business models, financial stability and resilience. Purpose-related topics will also remain popular in a world that takes a more empathic, inclusive approach to business.

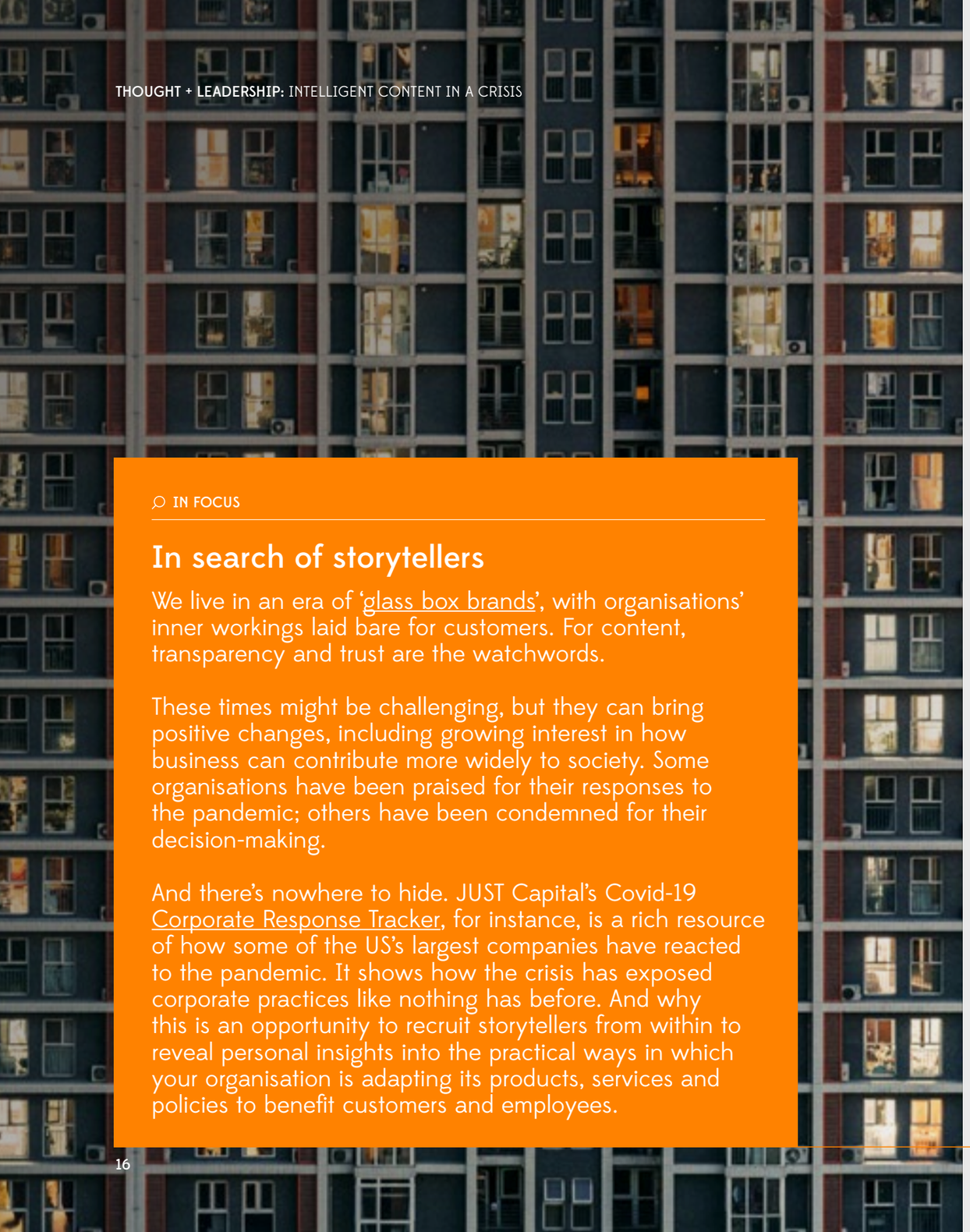
Innovation

In the aftermath of the crisis, many companies will pivot to short-term business priorities. Cashflow, protecting the core business, even just survival will be key. This might suggest that interest in innovation would send the wrong message, but innovation becomes even more important during a downturn. That's because the margin of error is smaller, so companies need to take a disciplined and strategic approach to securing the future of their businesses.

Those that get it right will see outsized returns over the longer term, when other companies are busy retrenching. So business leaders will want insights into how to improve their approach to innovation, get their priorities right and set themselves on the path to future growth.

> "In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, we don't expect interest in sustainability and related topics such as brand purpose to fall.





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In search of storytellers

We live in an era of 'glass box brands', with organisations' inner workings laid bare for customers. For content, transparency and trust are the watchwords.

These times might be challenging, but they can bring positive changes, including growing interest in how business can contribute more widely to society. Some organisations have been praised for their responses to the pandemic; others have been condemned for their decision-making.

And there's nowhere to hide. JUST Capital's Covid-19 Corporate Response Tracker, for instance, is a rich resource of how some of the US's largest companies have reacted to the pandemic. It shows how the crisis has exposed corporate practices like nothing has before. And why this is an opportunity to recruit storytellers from within to reveal personal insights into the practical ways in which your organisation is adapting its products, services and policies to benefit customers and employees.

Digital

The big thought leadership topic of recent years is unlikely to disappear any time soon, but we expect the tone of it to change. Companies further ahead with their digital transformation are likely to perform better in the months that follow the crisis than those that are lagging behind – particularly if we see an extended period of social distancing and remote working.

But, as with innovation, the margin for error with these investments will be much narrower. Digital transformation efforts will face greater scrutiny and companies will adopt a more cautious approach – particularly if their balance sheets show signs of strain. But turning off the taps entirely will not be an option, so expect to see strong demand for insights into how to avoid costly mistakes and maximise the chance of success.

> "Companies further ahead with their digital transformation are likely to perform better in the months that follow the crisis than those that are lagging behind.

Like all their business colleagues, marketing and communications professionals are operating without a playbook for this crisis. Even strategies that have worked in previous crises are of limited use. Because this time, it really is different.

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> You may take some wrong turns, but as long as you correct your course, that won’t matter.

But despite the challenges, some principles still apply.

First, companies need to stay visible. Hiding from view because you’re unsure how to communicate is not an option and will reflect badly on your organisation. Taking a position in your content, even if you admit that you don’t have all the answers, is by far the better approach.

Relevance is also critical. Content has to feel on-message and appropriate for the context. The biggest difficulty with this is timing. Get too far ahead of the curve and you risk sounding off-key; stay too far behind and you’ll appear to be out of touch. Being agile and able to flex your messaging quickly to suit the current stage of the crisis is essential.

The brands that perform best in this crisis will also be distinctive. This does not mean being wacky or going off-piste with your messaging. But you do need to stand out – saying similar things as everyone else is better than silence, but it won’t help to build a connection with your audience. If your content is interchangeable with your competitors’, then audiences will forget it and it will serve little purpose other than to create noise.

Navigating without a compass is difficult. You may take some wrong turns, but as long as you correct your course, that won’t matter. Project the right balance of empathy and authority, and audiences will forgive you.

You might even win over some new ones.

About the authors



Rob Mitchell
CEO, Longitude

For well over a decade, Rob has been helping senior marketers at global brands get more value from their B2B investments, and he has led hundreds of thought leadership campaigns across Longitude's 50+ clients, including Accenture, EY, PwC and Oracle. He was formerly Managing Editor at the Economist Intelligence Unit and directed sponsored reports and other custom projects at the Financial Times.



Sean Kearns
Editor-in-Chief, Longitude

As Longitude's Editor-in-Chief, Sean specialises in creating editorial that provides audiences with original, practical insight. He has more than 15 years' experience as an editorial lead, working in Europe and the Middle East over the course of his career. Before he joined Longitude, Sean was Editorial Director at Bladonmore.

Longitude

We're here to help B2B brands find their way through these challenging times.

Get in touch to book your free crisis strategy workshop. For more insights into creating thought leadership in a crisis - and afterwards - visit our blog and follow us on social media.

+44 (0)20 7873 4770
enquiries@longitude.co.uk
www.longitude.co.uk

About Longitude

Real thought leadership. For brands with big ideas.

B2B content doesn't have to be boring.
Your audience deserves better, and so do you.

Real thought leadership enables brands to produce content that genuinely influences and inspires their audience. We believe that every B2B marketer should feel empowered to work on campaigns that make a real and lasting impact.

With the right blend of strategy, insight, campaigns and amplification, we help you to craft content that gets you noticed.

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