

# FROM BRAND IMPRESSIONS TO BRAND INTENTIONS

## Reimagining Brand “Awareness” in a Time of Social Disruption

**H**uman experience is shaped by norms that form over time – perceptions that feel like certainties, that we take for granted and assume to be true. These norms are the unspoken rules that we play by and expect others to play by, the nonconscious frames through which we evaluate the behaviors of ourselves and others. Shaking hands is good. Masks are bad or for hiding things. It is safe to walk down this street, but not that street. They partition the world into vectors of value and prime our minds into habits of attention. They shift, bend, and change over time as social influences like family, friends, education, work, and cultural models affect how we perceive and live with them. Their overarching influence, however, provides stability. Norms help us feel like we are living a single narrative and help to weave new and even conflicting experiences into what feels like a unified flow of expectancy. Occasionally, however, norms can shatter, leading to a suspension of social cohesion and meaning. When our personal and social centering forces dissolve, things fall apart.

**CURRENTLY, A CONFLUENCE OF EVENTS HAS LED TO AN UPHEAVAL OF NORMS WITHIN INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, AND SOCIETY AT LARGE.** Since the COVID-19 pandemic spread, many of us would now likely recoil at the offered hand of a stranger, and masks are more associated with protection and responsibility than with mystery or danger. No single event through which we are currently living can responsibly be termed historically “unprecedented.” Pandemics, violence against marginal populations, and political opportunism are hardly new. Yet our moment feels different, volatile, vulnerable, delicately balanced, and perhaps even hopeful, like an historical prelude that could lead to a safer, brighter, and more equitable future.

**WITH THIS SUDDEN DISRUPTION OF THE USUAL, WHAT IS A BRAND OWNER TO DO?** How should they position their brand? How should leaders deal with potentially problematic histories that sit uncomfortably alongside emerging social realities and progressive values? What should brands prioritize and avoid in their efforts to win customers’ attention and loyalty? And ultimately, to what and to whom are brands responsible?

Historically, brand awareness has been defined within marketing circles as the alignment of consumer recognition of a product or company with a particular brand identity in the market. We speak, for example, of “Googling” something when we search the internet, or we ask for a Kleenex when we need a tissue—two classic, gold-standard examples of brand awareness. We propose a new definition of brand awareness. First, we propose that the most successful and enduring brands are those that are most aware of their customers. They prioritize the cultivation of a deep, nuanced, respectful, and

abiding understanding of those they serve over the generation of generic market impressions. Second, we propose that as definitions of value move beyond profits and share price<sup>1</sup>, and as the benefits of brand move beyond equity alone and into the space of contributing to a more equitable society<sup>2</sup>, the most vital brands are those that understand the full scope of the consumer experience and the role their brand plays, including not just personal but also broader societal dynamics. We propose that the brands that will thrive and attract the most consumer awareness and loyalty within the current context of social disruption and beyond will be those brands that become most aware of the complexities and contradictions that make up human truth.

**THIS PAPER LEVERAGES BRANDTRUST’S ORIGINAL INQUIRY INTO THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE** of the COVID-19 pandemic, and extends and expands it through reference to both more recent events and additional source materials to lobby for this inside-out definition of brand awareness. Our Original Inquiry mixed-method research consisted of thirty sixty-minute Emotional Inquiry™ phone and video interviews as well as seventy-five online Narrative Inquiry survey responses.<sup>3</sup> While the research revealed much about our current moment, it also critically emphasized the timeless value of refocusing our collective attention on the complex processes of human meaning-making. By listening to the stories of people who went through this disorienting time and analyzing them through the lens of the applied social and behavioral sciences, we affirm that people make meaning out of experiences, many of those experiences are with brands, and that brands therefore have a stake and a role to play in the success of society’s collective experience.



## The World on a Wire

On August 7, 1974, Philippe Petit, a young French high-wire artist, brought the bustling world of Lower Manhattan to a halt for nearly an hour by walking between the Twin Towers on a high wire with neither harness nor net. The power of the spectacle emanated from an artistic revelation of something unsettling about human experience: though we each walk with varying degrees of safety, life is lived on a wire. Petit's performance embodied this harrowing truth with courage and grace. The absurdity of a man walking some 1,300 feet in the air on a cable an inch in diameter

exposed absurdities that we take for granted—the very ground we walk on—as nothing but thin air.

What Petit revealed through courage and daring, COVID-19 and recent social unrest have loosed through disruption and fear. At the outset of the pandemic, the place where many realized this existential vertigo for the first time was in the grocery store. Witnessing bare shelves, replied one respondent from our research, “really, really made me feel anxious in a way I hadn't anticipated. I was scared. I thought there could actually be a food shortage. This is serious. This is what people who lived through wars faced.”

This fear, especially at the outset of the pandemic, brought incivility in unnerving proportions. One respondent spoke of the horrifying feeling she had witnessing vehicles speed through red traffic lights irrespective of pedestrians or traffic. Another respondent recounted passing through an aisle and seeing two grown women “fighting for a box of Stove Top stuffing.” She continued:

*“I felt like I was living in a zoo. I didn't feel like I was living in a society. I didn't want to be reduced to base animal instincts and knock over an old lady to get a box of Stove Top stuffing. I knew there were good and bad people out there, but the bad stuff was coming to the surface, and that was what was really scary to me.”*

Unsurprisingly, the grocery store factored repeatedly in our respondents' stories. It was one of the few public places open during shelter-in-place restrictions. And yet the grocery store has always signified so much more. It is the ancient marketplace of social gathering, interaction, and exchange brought forward into the present. It is the place where ordered shelves and carefully monitored expiration dates communicate the fine workings of a civil society and a carefully curated self. In this respect, the grocery store proved an ideal environment to observe human behavior during times of social disruption. With its sudden disorder and scarcity of stock, the grocery store became the symbol of the breakdown of a prior social cohesion. As one respondent lamented, “It is hard to remember what normal feels like. All of what is going on has changed my whole defini-

tion. It's like taking a step when you expect a step and finding nothing.” The fragile bond of society—that collection of previously conceived norms—had frayed. Social boundaries crumbled and were being redrawn on the fly in defensive and often unproductive ways. What was left were shelves and selves in disarray.

During times of social disruption and disorientation, we employ diverse behavioral strategies to serve as a kind of balancing pole. These can take the form of varying defense mechanisms, ranging from simple and relatively harmless acts of self-distraction (deflection) to displays of anger and scapegoating (projection). The sinister side of this natural impulse is to narrow one's social circle to the exclusion of pro-social action and attitudes toward “others” outside. As the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres noted, the pandemic has unleashed “hate and xenophobia, scapegoating, and scare-mongering.” The secretary general urged collective efforts “to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate.”<sup>4</sup> This virus of hate has manifested itself in the rise of racially motivated crimes particularly against Asians and Asian-owned businesses during the time of COVID-19. One respondent recounted her experience of this trend in vivid detail:

*“I was walking over to the hospital to bring some food and supplies to my sister who is a nurse. A large Caucasian man walked over to cut me off. He yelled racist threats and slurs at me. He also yelled for me to go back to my country. I grew up in America! One of my uncles even served during World War II ... During COVID-19, racists have been coming out of the woodwork. What is happening during this pandemic is scary. What makes it scarier is when you have racist people who are threatening, and in some cases hurting people who look different. And yet I recently read that one out of four doctors in America is born from a different country. We would not have advances in healthcare or technology or any industry if we didn't hear ideas from others or collaborate with others. We cannot do things alone. We live on one planet. We are all human. What is challenging during this time is that, as an Asian-American, I do not feel safe going out, even when I need to get groceries. I am learning from this experience how hateful some people really are, who they really are, and how they will put the blame on everyone else.”*

In this story shared weeks before the police killing of George Floyd and the ensuing protests, and at a time when masks were just beginning to be worn, the respondent provocatively presaged that we were starting to see an “America unmasked.” Unresolved tensions within American society over issues of racial and economic fairness and justice were beginning to boil over.

A repeated theme throughout our interviews was that of suspicion. “I feel like I'm being the snitch in the kindergarten class,” said one respondent with a chuckle. What had been a prior unrecognized giving of the benefit of the doubt had given way to a sudden suspicion of neighbors, co-workers, and strangers at the grocery store. A rise in social monitoring—of who is and who is not adhering to social distancing and mask-wearing, or who is hoarding resources—led one respondent to sigh, “It is all so exhausting.” Suspicion is also directed toward institutions. “Every day,” said a respon-

dent, “the information contradicts the day before.” We are living through a peculiar moment in which our dependence on systems and institutions has never been higher; and yet, as the Edelman Trust Barometer has demonstrated year after year, our suspicion of these systems continues to deepen.<sup>5</sup> This is an untenable position for any society. However, alongside this mounting suspicion our respondents also expressed an openness to hope. “I keep looking for clues or answers or patterns,” said one respondent, “something that could make sense of a bigger picture.” And who knows, they continued, “maybe it will someday. I think there's something out there that's going to help make sense of things in the long run—that what I'm doing is not in vain even though what is happening doesn't make any sense.”

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These diverse and sometimes competing behavioral strategies of meaning-making mix an ambiguous cocktail. Our sense of self strives to defend, repair, or simply power through a landscape suddenly bereft of familiar markers. The effect of this mixing produces a kind of social kluge, a messy amalgamation of work-arounds held together with duct tape and chewing gum as the self and society are required constantly to redraw their norms, and indeed themselves, in the absence of a cohesive force. This is the precarious nature of the moment—and its promise, too. To be sure, new organizing forces will emerge. Historically, governments and political actors offering strong solutions based upon exclusion and fear have arisen during such moments of social disarray. We are certainly witnessing some of this with the rising polarization of contemporary politics here in the U.S., where this research was conducted, and around the globe as well. And yet there appears to be a growing desire for a new cohesive force that is pro-social and egalitarian. How might businesses and brands participate within this emerging desire?

## Toward a New Value Proposition

Our research revealed hints of an awakening within consumers toward a more holistic and inclusive definition of the value they receive from brands, one that aligns with much of the prevailing thoughts on best-practices within brand building. Though suspicion of institutional motives and intentions remained in respondents, they consistently articulated that value was more than price margin and encompassed more than short-term gains. It is more about what a brand stands for and lives out consistently over time. It is more about how a brand treats its employees. It is more about how a brand balances making money with genuinely putting consumers first. It is more about a brand’s honest articulation of their goods and services instead of catchy slogans touting empty promises. The trending currency in this new economy is the pro-social behavior of brands.

**BRANDS GENERATE EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS.** A brand that becomes aware and engages in pro-social behavior connects the history and function of its product or service with something fundamental to human experience. The socially aware brand nudges these attachments in pro-social directions. Such brands, as recent research has demonstrated, inspire consumer loyalty and longer-term gains.<sup>6</sup> Social context, of course, shapes consumer decision-making. Socially aware brands will therefore not only be keen readers of the varying contexts in which they participate both at present and in their organization’s past, but also press for fairness and positive change within their contexts.

**CONSUMERS ARE TAKING NOTE OF HOW BRANDS ARE BEHAVING DURING THE PANDEMIC.** Respondents in our research, for example, were quick to call out brand behavior that leveraged social panic and scarcity for short-term gain. “I think it a sin,” lamented one respondent with respect to examples of price gouging, “to use a crisis to take advantage of your fellow citizens.” Tired clichés, especially of the “we are all in this together” variety, were met with cynicism and scorn. On the other hand, brand behavior that was pro-social and empathetic, and communicated honestly to their customers resonated with respondents.

**THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE, INTRIGUINGLY, SHOWS UP ON BOTH SIDES OF THE LEDGER.** The virtual NFL draft in April played well with respondents in our research. As NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said, “I think all drafts are really about hope.” Historically this has meant hope for teams to improve their rosters and chances at a winning season. The 2020 draft, however, signified more. Goodell continued, “with all that is going on in our society and around the globe, we need more experiences together. We need that ability to look forward and maybe have

a distraction or diversion from all that we’re going through over the last couple months, and this is a way to bring people together virtually.” Our study subjects agreed. They spoke repeatedly of feeling “emotional fatigue,” “lonely,” “isolated,” and in need of distractions from the panic of daily news cycles and boredom of quarantine.”

*“For those two to three hours of the NFL draft,” said one respondent, “I was euphoric. The draft was like a door beginning to open up to normalcy.”*

Following our research, the triumph of the draft and the NFL’s nimble presence where and when its consumers needed them suffered a setback. Just a month later, when Goodell commented on the police killing of George Floyd, displayed an epic failure of awareness.<sup>7</sup> Several star players spoke out over Goodell’s fumbling over vague platitudes. “What actual steps are you taking to support the fight for justice and system reform?” asked Minnesota Vikings linebacker Anthony Barr in a tweet directed at c Goodell. “Your statement said nothing,” he continued. “Vague answers do nothing. Let the players know what you’re ACTUALLY doing.”

These two acts by the same brand demonstrate conflicting and cross-purposed responses to shifting norms. In the case of the draft, the NFL deftly demonstrated deep brand awareness of its consumers’ social needs, as reflected in the stories we heard from our respondents. In the case of its public statements and lack of actions regarding the social unrest loosed by George Floyd’s death, however, the NFL regressed to vague parroting. The commissioner’s statements might have played the right keys, but they missed the music entirely. This is the challenge ahead for brands: do they re-adjust with the sudden shift in perceptions of what makes for “good” brand behavior? Or do they attempt to revert to former perceptions of “good”? Do they hold the line on what they perceive to be the norm, or do they participate in broader conversations about evolving norms in partnership with their customers?

Being on the wrong side of this shift has been costly. A growing movement among consumers is exposing inequitable practices within varying brand histories. The corporate side of cancel culture has organizations in a panic. Socially aware consumers want to align themselves with socially aware brands. Sadly, several brands have made headlines either by denying or obfuscating their problematic histories. Socially aware brands, however, confront their legacies responsibly, and co-create strategies of social repair with those affected by past missteps. For example, when Brandtrust partnered with Anheuser-Busch InBev to understand women’s relationship with beer around the globe, we found that companies like ABI and their brands were in fact complicit in the establishment of images, associations, and experiences around beer that were at best exclusive and at worst deeply toxic to women. ABI then embarked on a global effort to repair past errors and cultivate a better, more genuinely inclusive future with female employees, partners, and [customers](#).

**AS PEOPLE CONTINUE TO REBUILD AND RE-ORIENT THEMSELVES TO THIS NEW MANNER OF LIFE SHAPED BY THE STEADY STREAM OF SOCIAL DISRUPTION, THEY WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO WITH RESPECT TO GOODS AND SERVICES.**

For better or worse, we are consumers to our core. Behavioral practices of consumption and distraction function like a balancing pole to stabilize the threatening sways of life lived on a highwire. Consumer practices, however, are shifting toward aligning themselves with brands that embody new definitions of value. Price points, profits, and product quality will always matter. As the last several months have shown, however, it matters how brands respond to and engage with the social context in which they go about their business. New categories are taking shape. New audiences are revealing themselves. New and disruptive perceptions and norms are emerging. All of this poses significant challenges for brands that refuse to listen, learn, and adapt. And yet it also presents an enormous opportunity for brands that are ready to become more authentic and aware, and participate in and effect positive change within a new, more holistic and inclusive economy that prioritizes human value.



# Steps to Increase Brand Awareness

Businesses are becoming better equipped to drive positive social change. Their agility and ability for decisive action outpace governments. Their success generally hinges on generating positive connections with their constituents that must be consistently repaid through buying behavior, rather than occasionally acknowledged come election season. And, as pointed out earlier, for some time now, U.S. consumers trust brands and businesses more than they trust the institutions traditionally charged with maintaining and improving our society: organized religion, the education system, and the government, for example. If business leaders want to seize this opportunity and live up to this responsibility, they can follow a simple three-step approach to building their own brand's awareness.

## 01. Truth

**THE FIRST STEP IS SIMPLY TO LISTEN.** If you want to understand the depth of your consumer's world, not just how they interact with your brand but how their values and beliefs contribute to how they make choices that affect themselves, your company, and society, then you need to create a space where they feel comfortable to speak openly about their experiences and emotions and listen to their stories. Our Original Inquiry yielded deeply personal truths about people's experiences with the pandemic because our methodologies lean into the power of memory and the way our brains use narrative patterns to receive, store, and retrieve critical data. Any brand that desires to be part of rebuilding a sense of trust and fairness among our diverse national community must begin by genuinely asking the right questions and listening deeply to the whole response with empathy, and not by assuming, or hearing only the parts that align with their beliefs and goals.

## 02. Clarity

**TAKE A DEEP LOOK TO SEE WHERE YOUR BRAND CONVERGES WITH, OR DIVERGES FROM, WHAT YOU KNOW TO BE TRUE OUTSIDE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S FOUR WALLS.** Just as any trusting relationship requires you to know yourself and the other party so that you can assess the alignment of goals, interests, and intentions, so too must a brand know not just its customer but also itself. This requires a level of introspection that not every organization is prepared to put forth. But when you do, you have the opportunity to arrive at an authentic, enduring purpose for your brand, one that can guide all of your decisions and actions with crystalline clarity. The pandemic pulled back a curtain of faith consumers had in many institutions, including businesses, and revealed a void. This realization means brands are now judged by a more discerning set of criteria. It's no longer enough simply to deliver a product or service on time and with a good price, nor even to project an attractive aura that people want to be associated with, although, of course, these cannot be ignored. Leading brands must now show evidence of their purpose aligning with wholistic value, and then connect that purpose to the value proposition they make to their customers.

## 03. Action

**THE MOST PROFOUND INSIGHT—THE MOST ELEGANT AND DIFFERENTIATING STRATEGY, NONE OF THESE REALLY MEAN ANYTHING IF A BRAND DOES NOT TAKE ACTION TO BRING THEM TO LIFE.** A truly aware brand is one that commits itself philosophically, strategically, and actively to bringing about positive change. These changes can be large, such as when Nike took a risk by placing the power and the fate of its brand firmly on the side of social justice and racial equality through actions like the Colin Kaepernick ad. Or they can be small, such as when Delta Airlines hoped to calm travelers' fears by keeping middle seats open during the pandemic, even when it didn't support the bottom line or even necessarily comport with the epidemiological science. The result was a massive boost in NPS scores in the middle of one of the travel industry's biggest disasters.<sup>8</sup> What your brand does will have far more impact and live far longer in the hearts and minds of those you serve, than anything you say.

## Change

**THIS IS THE THREE-STEP PROCESS THAT LEADS TO BRAND AWARENESS AS WE HAVE BEEN DEFINING IT.** Each phase of the process will differ for every organization, but the guiding principles hold true across regions, categories, and business size. First, immerse yourself in the truth. Second, define what is most true of your brand and where it can intersect most powerfully with what is true of the market and society with a crisp clarity of purpose. And finally, do something about it. By elevating your brand's own awareness, you will drive consumer awareness, choice, and loyalty towards your brand, enabling you to meet the extraordinary demands of our current moment while also positioning your company for enduring brand relevance and success.

### 01 'COMPANIES THAT DO GOOD MORE LIKELY TO DO WELL'

*In August 2019, months before the pandemic significantly scaled back economic activity, the Business Roundtable issued its "Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation." Signed by 181 top CEOs, it countered the long-held view that businesses exist to create ever-increasing profits for shareholders. It stated that customers, employees, suppliers, and communities are equally as important. (<https://hbr.org/2019/08/181-top-ceos-have-realized-companies-need-a-purpose-beyond-profit>). That premise was borne out as the pandemic took hold over the spring and early summer 2020. A BlackRock analysis showed that investment funds tracking businesses identified as emphasizing environmental, social, and good governance performed better than others. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/josiecox/2020/06/08/climate-crisis-coronavirus-b-corp-business-esg-do-good-to-do-well/#46cf61735578>)*

### 02 TRUST IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

*The Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Trust and the Coronavirus found that nearly two-thirds of consumers surveyed said companies and brands have a critical role in the fighting COVID-19, and more than half say companies are better than government in responding quickly and effectively. And the author of a Harvard Business Review article (<https://hbr.org/2020/05/marketing-meets-mission>) wrote "that brands can and must play a critical role in tackling global health issues, from violence to infectious disease to poor fitness and diet. Most of these problems can be prevented—often through the adoption of new behaviors and positive norms."*

### 03 BRANDTRUST ORIGINAL INQUIRY

*Respondents were interviewed in late April 2020 and screened to include only those who say they are abiding by governmental-recommended social isolation requirements. The pool is equally divided by gender and comprises a mix of ages, geography, household income, ethnic diversity, household makeup, professional status, and political affiliation. Half the respondents reported that they or a family member was affected by COVID-19 health impact; half said they have not been affected.*

### 04 A VIRUS OF HATE

*In a globally distributed message that was posted on the United Nations website, Secretary General António Guterres called for an end to hate speech that consumed the world with anti-foreigner rhetoric, conspiracy theories and racism. (<https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/we-must-act-now-strengthen-immunity-our-societies-against-virus-hate>)*

### 05 DEPENDENT YET WARY OF OUR INSTITUTIONS

*The Edelman Trust Barometer survey published in January 2020, just before the pandemic hit, indicated that while our dependence on government, business, NGOs, and media has never been higher, our trust in them continues to deepen. (<https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>)*

### 06 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BRAND LOYALTY

*A paper from economics faculty in the Department of Marketing at the University of Valencia in Spain ([https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1806-48922019000300395](https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1806-48922019000300395)) argues that corporate social responsibility has a direct and positive influence on consumer loyalty, brand awareness and consumer satisfaction. In addition, a groundbreaking "Strength of Purpose" study of 8,000 consumers around the world (<https://www.zenogroup.com/insights/2020-zeno-strength-purpose>) showed that brands demonstrating a strong sense of purpose enhance their reputations, leading to better bottom lines.*

### 07 NFL RESPONSE BACKLASH FOLLOWING GEORGE FLOYD DEATH

*NFL commissioner Roger Goodell was accused of hypocrisy and insincerity in his response to the death of George Floyd and the protests that followed across the country. Critics pointed to the league's handling of Colin Kaepernick and his protest against police brutality in 2016, saying Goodell and the league had deliberately stifled Kaepernick and so had no right now to appear to be siding with protesters and their cause. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/shame-you-nfl-s-roger-goodell-slammed-statement-george-floyd-n1220331>)*

### 08 COMMITMENT TO CARING ENHANCES REPUTATION

*The Nike brand is arguably stronger than ever, thanks in no small part to the company being out in front on supporting Black Lives Matter. According to a Harris poll in June 2020, Nike's reputation with the general public has strengthened over the past two years since the campaign release and public support of brand ambassador quarterback Colin Kaepernick. (<https://www.marketplace.org/2020/06/25/nike-colin-kaepernick-brand-advertising-racial-justice/>)*

*Delta Airlines CEO Ed Bastian said that a "commitment to mask compliance, electrostatic fogging, and blocking middle seats" has led to record-high customer service satisfaction scores. Before the pandemic, the average Net Promoter Score (NPS) for airlines was 44, on a scale of 100. Since instituting measures to allay coronavirus fears, customer satisfaction jumped to 75. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-28/covid-on-planes-delta-american-united-jetblue-recovery-plans?ref=vzfHGg2P>)*

A person in silhouette is looking out a large window at a city skyline. The scene is dimly lit, with the city lights visible through the glass. The person's shadow is cast on the window pane.

## Business challenges are human challenges, and humans are complicated.

Brandtrust is a research and strategy firm that utilizes applied social and behavioral sciences to solve complex business challenges. Our methodologies are designed to unlock the nonconscious needs and desires of customers, providing insight-driven strategic direction for brand development, innovation, customer experience, and behavior design.

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