

## THE GREAT TRIAL: “TRIAL BY FIRE”



*“Sometimes it takes trials and tribulations to strengthen you for the glory ahead. It’s been a trying last few weeks but I’m ready.” — Anonymous*

In short order, this pandemic has changed everything, including our cherished marketing conventions. It has simultaneously exploded then imploded the classic awareness-trial-conversion funnel beyond recognition.

What once took weeks or months now happens in an instant. I’ve noticed it in my own behavior as well as my family’s: I see something we need urgently, or which solves our quarantine shortages in a new way, or even serves as a welcome distraction, and I click-to-buy immediately.

At the same time, if a product from my favorite brand is not available, my loyalty becomes a perishable commodity.

For readers who don’t necessarily consider themselves devotees of behavioral psychology, what’s happening here is that my “fast brain”—which Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls “System 1”—has taken control. It’s the impulsive, cortex-free component of System 1, activated by the pandemic, that’s reduced the funnel to rubble. And it is within this era of System 1 decision-making where incredible opportunity awaits smart brand owners.

It’s also important to point out that cost often takes a back seat when our fast brains are running the cerebral show. I find that while I am usually a frugal guy—“cheap” has been used to describe me more than once—I am less cost-conscious than usual when my funnel lays in ruin. While millions are now unemployed and counting pennies, they will still be purchasing more immediately than before the crisis.

To help marketers understand where they fit in our New Immediacy, I present a framework that identifies three categories of needs. (I’m open to others, of course.) As I see it, the first is stay-well products—preventive wellness items ranging from immune-boosters and face masks to disinfectants and air sanitizers. These address survival, the first of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

In times of need, creative marketers and product designers will find new ways to transform their merchandise into essentials. In fact, I recently saw a glove manufacturer launch a disinfecting mitt. There are fast brains, and then there are fast brands.

The second category is staples, e.g., the toilet paper and paper towel shortages we've all read about if not experienced ourselves. As I mentioned, traditional notions of loyalty are vanquished in this era of shortages. If I were the CEO or CMO of a company suffering inventory shortfalls, I would make sure we clearly communicate with consumers our plans for action to prevent them from making their temporary brand choices permanent.

Success thus requires empathetic, transparent messaging of what we're doing to address these scarcities, as well as how we're committed to protecting the lives of our manufacturing and distribution workers while we increase production efforts, discourage the temptation to hoard or panic-buy, and offer a timeframe within which we can reasonably expect supply to reach satisfactory levels.

The third "needs framework" is comprised of a range of products and services that exist now—and will continually innovate—to address our new lock-down lifestyles.

We've obviously witnessed an explosion in sales of stay-at-home products and services that range from Netflix and other streaming services to family games, activities, and video conferencing solutions. Each of these creates an opportunity for generating post-purchase loyalty, as well as cross-sells and upsells, that extend well beyond the immediate crisis. Every System 1 purchase presents the opportunity for System Forever.

I've also been reading about a new generation of in-home services like

hairstyling, mani/pedi's, and more. Existing business sectors like house-call veterinarians will skyrocket. The consumer hunger for new solutions and immediate gratification—again, the funnel is ancient history—creates enormous opportunities. Even in a contracting economy.

Of course, the macro trends that were with us before the pandemic—the desire for purpose-driven brands, demand for transparency, and emphasis on emotional connection—remain constant. They will however be expressed differently in this brave new world (and will for longer than we would like). As such, the Fast Brain decisions we as customers make, and the new brands we embrace, will depend on heightened cultural and personal relevance.

Some say the world is on fire at the moment, which is why I titled this piece "Trial by Fire." While we socially distance from one another, we find ourselves somehow closer to brands. Is yours ready?

I hope you'll check back in for Part 3, "The Great Loyalty," where we explore the moments when your brand can transform performance in the now into leadership for the long-term.

---

*Dan Aks, President of Undertone, is a recognized innovator in the education and media industries. Formerly a C-level executive of several media and educational enterprises and a former board member of public, private, and not-for-profit institutions, he is deeply experienced in digital media, digital platforms, linear TV, music, and print media through community newspapers and magazines. Aks is also a former partner in a leading management consulting firm, where he specialized in media strategy and operations efficiency.*