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A global pandemic. Economic uncertainty. Political limbo. Racial inequality. To say 2020 is an “annus horribilis” unlike we’ve ever experienced would be an understatement.

But in the words of our co-CEOs, we viewed these obstacles as a clarion call for simplicity. Our collective responsibility was to find new ways to remove the complexity from the challenges before us—both for our clients and colleagues. As we look to the year ahead, what’s top of mind for branding experts? Our practitioners weigh in on how companies can differentiate themselves in 2021.

NEW YORK

Empathy—delivered—takes center stage

As the global economy begins to rebound from one of the most challenging years in modern history, brands that lead with empathy—and deliver it with action—will win the hearts and wallets of customers and colleagues. After a year of personal and professional hardship in almost every industry and region, the days of merely talking about doing good in the world are over. “For-profit” organizations need to integrate a “not-for-profit” mindset into the core of their brand-building strategies and experiences. Take Bombas, for example: for every pair of socks purchased, a pair is donated to someone in need. As we move into 2021, this type of demonstrable commitment to “doing well by doing good” will be one of the key factors distinguishing great brands and organizations.

—[David Srere](#), Co-CEO + Chief Strategy Officer

Established brands lean into their legacy to overtake disrupters

In 2021, the battle on the disruption front will heat up between upstarts with fresh ideas but limited resources and established iconic brands recognizing the urgency of the moment. We will see a ten-fold increase in innovations launched by category leaders who recognize they can rethink how they exploit and evolve core competencies. By capitalizing on their size, networks, technologies, geographic footprints, and knowledge to bundle and deliver product and service innovations at scale, badged by known and respected brands—they will disrupt the disrupters.

—[Howard Belk](#), Co-CEO + Chief Creative Officer

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Focus on sustainability to unlock value creation

2021 will be a transition year on many fronts, none more significant than the interconnection between brands and sustainability. The COVID-19 crisis has shone a spotlight on business actions, and all stakeholders have elevated expectations. Customers, employees, boards, investors, and regulators are all signaling that they will reward the brands that commit to sustainability actions—from racial equity to climate change. The implication is that companies have both intensified pressure and permission to play a meaningful role in addressing societal issues, in addition to their profit mandate.

Expect to see a more intentional connection between brand purpose and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments. Enlightened CMOs will revisit, reset, and rearticulate a clear brand purpose and anchor it in measurable ESG goals. They will become more interested in the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), and double down on mapping brand purpose to the best-fit goals, measuring and communicating progress according to this framework. ([Listen](#) to our recent CMO panel on sustainability to hear from brands on this journey.)

—[Margaret Molloy](#), Global Chief Marketing Officer + Head of Business Development

Brands will battle to be inclusive or else get left behind

We've seen this disruption happen in fashion and beauty. Now we'll witness a surge in community-based ownership and patronage as underserved populations seek alternatives to discriminatory behavior and lip service, and technology removes barriers to entry. Finance is just one sector where this will play out. With systemic denials of mortgages, identity and lending—along with discriminatory rates—the industry has done little to endear itself. An influx of new inclusive brands shows a different way; among them, LGBTQ-owned and run bank Daylight, Killer Mike's Black and LatinX Greenwood and female-owned First Women's Bank with its focus on the women's economy. Their services are designed to ensure members get more while giving back, and their data-driven approach will allow them to adapt quickly. Look for "established" brands scrambling to move beyond tokenism in marketing and recruiting, as they are finally forced to prove their commitment through relevant products and meaningful actions.

—Melanie McShane, Senior Director of Strategy

Creative pivots become a necessity

Given the uncertainty of 2020 with COVID-19 and the continued failure of pollsters to accurately predict election outcomes, predicting anything for 2021 could seem foolhardy. However, all clouds have silver linings. 2020 has taught businesses and brands many new lessons and practices that they will likely carry into 2021. A noteworthy one is the ability to pivot quickly: most brands, from those providing essential services to those brought to a standstill, realized how fast they could react, change and adapt strategies and tactics in the face of the pandemic. In some instances, these pivots enabled new customer acquisition strategies and unearthed revenue streams. I predict that this higher decision-making risk tolerance and

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–[Brian Rafferty](#), Global Director, Business Analytics + Insights

A spike in virtual worldbuilding

Gaming was once seen as a subculture, but lockdowns and restricted movement during the pandemic saw non-gamers enter into virtual worlds seeking community, entertainment, and competition. The result is an industry boom, transforming gaming into a core culture for many. In the absence of live music events, artists have become digitized characters and performed in games like Fortnite. In this new era of gaming, virtual goods will become just as valuable as physical currency. Whether buying tickets to a show or outfits (“skins”) for avatars—there are endless opportunities for companies to leverage beyond media and traditional sponsorship. On a recent Siegel+Gale panel, Twitch CMO Doug Scott said, “people need community; they need a place where they can show up for one another, and that’s what we’re building.” In 2021, savvy brands will strategize on how to capitalize on a billion-dollar business.

–[Jared Fink](#), Group Director, Experience

Breaking down silos to foster seamless experiences

As we enter 2021 and slowly begin to return to a semblance of normalcy, brands will need to retain the nimbleness they were forced to cultivate over the past nine months. COVID has taught us that consumers don’t just have a preference for seamless products or experiences—it’s a necessity. In order to deliver that consistency to customers, there needs to be a heightened focus on the importance of organization-wide collaboration. Silos create friction, not only internally but also in the overall experience you aim to deliver. Whether you’re a fledgling startup or established heritage company, you need to think holistically and provide your customers with a one-stop-shop—from purchase to solution—in whatever it is you’re offering.

–[Steffanie Haase](#), Group Director, Creative Services

A return to shared sensemaking

2020 made clear that the Age of the Algorithm has broken our information ecosystem, disintegrated shared societal beliefs, and, in many cases, waged war against truth itself. As our nation heals from a devastating year, I expect a renewed interest in shared sensemaking. We’ll seek a deeper understanding of our information, factual and cultural divides, and (hopefully!) devise brilliant new ways to bridge them. We’ll give more people tools they can trust to understand the world and build a renewed sense of shared purpose. Of course, brands will have a significant role to play—supporting platforms that bring people together, not those that tear us apart.

–[Matt Egan](#), Executive Director, Strategy

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Across every industry, 2020 has demonstrated the importance of consistently rethinking how companies go-to-market. As offerings shift and evolve, the one constant is the integral role that design plays in storytelling. Forced by necessity this year, we have witnessed a significant shift in embracing technology to create more human-centric visual identities. In a new era of post-COVID brand building, we will see more real-time collaboration and feedback from our clients when developing the logos and symbols that drive preference and loyalty for customers. The output is the next era of design, built for play, unified but never uniform.

—Douglas Sellers, Executive Creative Director

A toast to trust

After four years of untruth, a botched pandemic response and an overdue reckoning with racial injustice, all of us are seeking something simple: honesty. No spin, no distortions, no excuses. What does this mean for brands as they look ahead to 2021? It means creating conversations that build trust. When brands communicate with a clear purpose, they gain credibility. When they make their goals and ambitions clear, they can better align them with the goals and ambitions of their clients and customers. And when they ask for feedback and then act on it, they do something crucial—they demonstrate the importance of following through on a promise.

—Billy Kingsland, Group Director, Brand Communication

LOS ANGELES

The return of the Roaring '20s

It is apropos that as we begin 2021 and see a potential end to the pandemic, it marks a full century removed from the Roaring '20s. Starting in mid-2021, America will again unleash itself from the constraints of a pandemic and once again enjoy travel, leisure and social activities, and trigger the boom for another decade of historic growth and cultural advancement. Once a vaccine becomes widely distributed, consumers will enjoy the excesses of society they were deprived of for 12-18 months: travel, celebrating in person, dining out, outdoor activities such as sports, parties and a return to our cultural institutions (theater, sports venues, etc.) in droves. Brands need to cater to and celebrate America's newfound desire to be free, uninhibited and indulgent. Optimism, personalization and social sharing will be paramount for brands who seek to ride this new wave of growth.

—Jason Cieslak, President, Pacific Rim

Time is a luxury: Simplicity and data-driven decisions will be essentials in 2021

Every decade, there tends to be a major event that transforms our perspectives and behaviors; COVID-19 has made 2020 one of those transformative years. In business, tighter budgets and continued uncertainty

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you stand for and how you prioritize adds stability to so much uncertainty. Early in the pandemic, brands like OpenTable moved quickly, implementing a grocery feature and adding bars to its system to help customers pivot to a new reality—all possible because they had both insight into their audience, and extreme clarity about their brand. As we move into 2021, brands will continue to rely on insights that allow them to simplify, clarify and have the greatest impact.

—Lisa Kane, Group Director, Strategy

Clear and relevant have never been more, well, relevant

Our needs have changed. What was taken for granted is no longer a given. We've learned not to have concrete plans, to pivot as we go along, and to critically evaluate where we spend our time, attention and money. We've had to focus on what we care about. And it's gotten smaller (our families and close friends in our official and unofficial bubbles) and bigger (systemic inequity around race and income, national and global politics, the future of the environment and the health of the world we live in). Understanding why a brand exists and why it matters to each of us is imperative. In 2021, brands need to go back to the basics to clearly communicate their value propositions in ways that resonate with the people they hope to reach.

—Gina Kim, Group Director, Brand Communication

Humanizing the brand experience

Today's unpredictable business landscape has taken customer-centricity to new heights. Gaining the trust and loyalty of modern customers has become more challenging than ever, and traditional strategies are slowly losing traction. The impact of this last year has demonstrated that brands need to show compassion, listen to their customers, solicit their feedback and integrate the human touch (in a virtual world) in order to turn consumers into loyal and engaged brand ambassadors. Case in point: Netflix's release of the Google Chrome extension Teleparty is a fast reaction to shifting entertainment consumption behaviors driven by pandemic-induced lockdowns. As entertainment became the medium of choice to virtually connect with loved ones, Netflix's Teleparty allows users to watch shows together live with synchronized video playback and a group chat feature. In 2021, the most essential brands will employ empathy and humanity at every touchpoint in the customer journey.

—Shana Orth, Group Account Director

Digital access is essential to progress

Quarantined in the physical world, businesses and customers turned to technology to find new ways to connect. For business, necessity forged innovation. Digital experiences were more than just things— websites, apps, etc.—and instead were viewed through the lens of what they could do—save a business, drive a relationship, and power a movement. For customers, digital interactions were not just about

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as a society, from entertaining widgets to operational requirements, luxury nice-to-haves to absolute necessities. But the digital divide in society is more apparent than ever. For brands to continue to learn and build from the digital transformation they've undertaken this year, they will need to take on responsibility in making technology access as available and essential as water.

—[Jenna Isken](#), Associate Director, Experience

SAN FRANCISCO

Not everything needs to say “connected”

As the pandemic begins to wane, there will be a surge of new product and service innovations. But there will likely be some COVID-19 era naming and branding trends that carry forward. Because we've all craved human connection and the warmth of a smile or hug in person, expect to see companies over-index and capitalize on names that communicate the themes of humanity, approachability, warmth and connection. While a new file sharing app or web conference service might benefit from a name with these themes, your sparkling water, yoga mat and fancy sweatpants probably don't need to jump on the “human connection” bandwagon.

—[Aaron Hall](#), Group Director, Naming

Mirror, mirror: What happens inside gets done externally

The world's most prosperous companies are led from the inside-out. Successful brands in 2021 will invest in a renewed internal emphasis on recognizing individuals as individuals. Treating all people justly, meeting them where they are and where they come from is an imperative. Treating employees as individuals drives better customer experiences. Organizations need to be extremely focused on prioritizing and delivering hyper-personalized and customized experiences to build and strengthen their relationships with employees. Creating employee experiences with the same broad-brush stroke will fail because one size doesn't fit all. A company can't say externally to the world, “We're a brand that recognizes this,” if they don't walk the talk internally. This year taught us that customers see through inauthentic actions. They won't trust the external promise of a brand that says, “We honor this,” if they aren't living it internally.

—[Gretchen Huestis](#), Director, Employee Engagement

SHANGHAI

A surge in M&A to seize post-crisis opportunities

The pandemic presented business challenges we've never encountered, but we have still seen many companies growing rapidly, such as Amazon and Disney. In China, we witnessed M&A activity rebound to pre-COVID levels as companies focus on maximizing resources. In 2021, organizations that prioritize brand

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consistent brand touchpoints helps maintain continuous interaction with consumers, which is more conducive to helping brands stand out in a competitive landscape.

—[Johnson Gu](#), General Manager and Executive Creative Director

LONDON

Hard-won lessons for 2021

No prizes for suggesting that 2021 might be the year that learns more from the preceding year than any other. But the brands that thrive or simply survive will be putting those lessons powerfully to good use. Like those that really know who they are and why they do what they do—and can express that with ease and originality—will compete harder, resist unwanted change and enjoy stronger, more progressive cultures. Said differently, having a purpose that connects customers, colleagues and communities, even when human interaction is limited, with a personality that is not only authentic but not beholden to the diet of word-salad that would make Orwell turn a particularly unpleasant shade. Those are the brands that will lead, adapt at will, innovate naturally and triumph whichever adversaries or adversity come their way.

—[Philip Davies](#), President, EMEA

Swapping dynamism for family values

When COVID hit, besides the toilet paper rush, baking materials were one of the biggest sellers. Brands like B&Q saw profits shoot up as other industries were furloughing staff. It was a telling sign of how much value we put in the idea of home and the sense of security it provides. For the longest time, businesses have pushed to make their brands edgier; more dynamic. After nearly a year of turmoil, I question whether customers still seek dynamism. I believe it's the brands that double down on their heritage and family values that will be the winner in 2021. The complexity and unpredictability that's currently flowing through society is something that brands can calm by taking a trip back to simple, home-spun family values. As people strive for consistency in their lives, it'll be a move away from the push for dynamism and be replaced by simplicity.

—[Sophie Lutman](#), Executive Creative Director

Brand experience here, there and everywhere

2020 has completely altered how most of us work and play. This shift to digital has made brands scramble to adapt to radically different behaviors in industries as diverse as healthcare, retail, travel and hospitality. While some of those changes are here to stay, consumers will crave human interaction more than ever before, and they're going to be more selective in how they choose to spend their time and money. They're going to demand simple, more human experiences that flex to suit the moment they're in, leading to

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Brands that seamlessly integrate digital touchpoints into physical experiences or augment digital experiences with human interaction will win hearts (and greater shares of wallet) in 2021.

—[Amale Ghalbouni](#), Experience Director

Brands need to continue to walk the walk

2020 turned our relationships with brands upside down. Low-interest brands in sectors we took for granted became high profile influencers on our well-being. On the other hand, 'must-have' lifestyle brands largely became irrelevant with no-one around to signal to as we took a collective slide down the hierarchy of needs. As we clamber back up sometime in 2021, some fundamentals will remain altered. We think differently about a brand when we've realized it plays an essential role in our lives. Supermarkets, for example, will need to consider how to exert their power for good. The more discretionary brands we'll keep returning to, meanwhile, are those that have demonstrated the continued strength of their purpose. When its aspiration can survive or even flourish amid, say, an enforced transition to a digital experience, a brand is well-positioned to thrive amidst further tumult and behavioral change.

—[James Withey](#), Executive Director, London

2021's tagline: Carpe Diem

2020's forced shift in consumer perspective created an unusual, continued window for experimentation. Brands need to act quickly to leverage new (and, for a time, more flexible) mindsets and behavior patterns, creating compelling and relevant experiences. Be direct: Speak to your customers' needs with simple, empathic understanding. You don't have to be right about everything. Authentic dialogue is effective dialogue. Take action: Think deeply about what today's evolved understanding of and urgency for inclusiveness means for your brand, and prioritize actions. You have the permission to start small, dedicating to an ongoing journey of expansiveness and change.

—[Liz Olsen](#), Senior Strategy Director

Retaining authenticity as experiences evolve

In 2021 brands will have to focus on one big challenge—accommodation. As people return to “normal life,” everyone will move at different speeds. Brands need to ensure every possible customer feels comfortable to engage with you again. This will come from a deeper understanding of who customers are, what motivates them and how people's hearts and minds have changed in 2020. A pandemic, a racial awakening, a need to connect your home and work life—many factors have changed consumer behavior and decision-making. Brands need to widen their scope to reach the widest audience. For example, Pret A Manger launched an innovative coffee subscription so people ready to get their daily java fix have a brand that's willing to reward them for it. On the flip side, they've made enhancements to the delivery process. So

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–[Nick Miller](#), Senior Strategy Director

A zen employee is a productive one

Working behavior has changed as of 2020: we have embraced the interconnectivity while remaining in our own spheres. With this, business owners have had to adapt their workplace culture and architecture to accommodate the challenges it has produced for staff. This includes schemes and systems that promote the value of colleagues and their achievements, allowing them to avoid the newly emerged issue of not being seen, feeling invisible and stunted in their role. Given the financial setback many organizations would have seen as a result of 2020, a method of praise and recognition will start to develop outside of monetary packages. Given the immense benefits experienced as a result of working from home in lock-down, this will likely be in the form of an improved work/life balance, which will, in turn, improve productivity and job satisfaction, allowing for longer periods of staff turnaround.

–James Moretti, Insights Analyst