

Cracking jokes in a post-coronavirus world: too soon?

Written by

[Yu-Ting Lin](#)

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Can marketers refer to the COVID-19 pandemic in anything other than the most sombre of tones?

People like a laugh. It releases tension, weakens anxiety, and generally makes them happier. But is it too soon for business to try and raise a smile in a post-COVID world?

Take the [short video](#) posted online by the Marsh family of Kent on 30 March: Ben, Danielle and their four children went viral (and raised more than a few laughs) with their cover of “One More Day” from Les Misérables – carefully reworded to reflect the frustrations of a family in a lockdown. The video accumulated a million views within 24 hours and was picked up by [The Guardian](#), [The Telegraph](#), [Metro](#), [the BBC](#), [NPR](#) in America, and even [Classic FM](#).

When it comes to business and jokes, things are predictably a bit complicated

With its humorous lyrics, timeliness and unlikely associations (Les Mis isn't exactly a laugh-a-minute), the video was the perfect example of how you capture the zeitgeist. But it's not the only example from the current pandemic – and when it comes to business and jokes, things are predictably a bit more complicated.

Take Corona beer, owned by Constellation Brands. Early in the European outbreak, [videos circulated online](#) of supermarket shelves emptied of alcohol as shoppers stocked up for the long haul – save for unwanted stacks of the unfortunately named brand. Yet Ad Age reported [sales for Constellation Brands were up 39 per cent](#) – led by Corona, which was up 50 per cent. Clearly, the humorous associations of the product had done wonders for brand awareness.

And if there's such value in raising a laugh in a post-COVID world, firms might start pondering what kind of marketing communications they could be sharing.

It's the way you tell 'em

To answer this question, researchers at Imperial Business School teamed up with scholars at INSEAD and the University of Leeds. The upshot of our current findings is that, for managers, the key is to realise – in the greatest tradition of comedy – it's not so much what you say, but how you say it. And timing. There's a lot of noise on social media and your gag needs to cut through if it's going to land.

But remember, jokes are powerful things. A good one – or a bad one, for that matter – doesn't just affect your social media metrics: as Constellation Brands found out, it can have a measurable impact on the objective metrics of your firm's stock returns. You want to see your managers and shareholders smiling too.

Tesla's managers and shareholders weren't smiling following the unveiling of the company's new Cybertruck last November. Lead designer Franz von Holzhausen appeared on stage to prove the strength of the vehicle's "armour glass" by pitching a metal ball straight at one of the windows – [and smashed it](#). Twice.

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Lego got a bit more out of the mishap, though, when [it posted](#) a picture of a single, wheeled, brick across social media. The witty caption: “The evolution of the truck is here. Guaranteed shatterproof”. The timely tweet alone received almost 28,000 retweets and over 100,000 likes.

The Danish brickmakers were far from alone in cracking some jokes at the windows’ expense, with Tesla CEO Elon Musk seemingly anticipating the gags as he pulled funny faces in front of the damaged vehicle. Taking risks by improvising and relinquishing control of the message can pay dividends in viral marketing and keep brands on the right side of the joke – it’s telling how many of the images of the smashed truck featured in press coverage were owned by Tesla – but they remain risks. Encourage people to make a joke of you, and they may just do it.

How coronavirus affects relationships

Conflicts, breakups and once-in-a-generation events such as coronavirus interrupt all sorts of relationships – whether it’s with a new partner or a favourite brand. And just as with that new boyfriend, girlfriend or even a long-term relationship like with our family members, these interruptions make us pause and re-evaluate the state of that relationship. Are their services or products that important to me? Do I take these offerings for granted without getting my gratitude across to them? Do I approve of the way they’ve responded to what’s going on? Can I put up with their annoying laugh? It’s the way those interruptions are handled that determines how the relationship progresses.

As the Marsh family showed, something good exists in every bad situation – even if it isn’t always obvious. People still appreciate a smile, perhaps even more so post-COVID-19.

*This article draws on findings from [“Improvised Marketing Interventions in Social Media”](#) published in the *Journal of Marketing* by Abhishek Borah (INSEAD), Sourindra Banerjee (University of Leeds), Yu-Ting Lin (Imperial Business School), Apurv Jain (Harvard Business School) and Andreas B. Eisingerich (Imperial Business School).*

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About Yu-Ting Lin

Doctoral 2018

Dr Yu-Ting Lin is a Research Associate at Imperial Business School. She holds a PhD from the Business School, a BBA degree from the National Chiayi University, and MS degree from the National Chengchi University.

Read [Read Yu-Ting's profile](#) for more information and publications.

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