

Insights for brands on earned media during the current crisis

There's one story dominating the media agenda. Every journalist is grappling with how best to cover it and every comms professional is wrestling with what's appropriate to do or say in the current climate.

As ever, we've been obsessively following the news this week. But we've also been forensically analysing the editorial output of different publications across the media spectrum to help us gauge how to engage with journalists and what might be relevant and/or suitable to engage with them about.

Today, we've seen an announcement from City A.M. that it'll be moving to online-only for the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen whether other publications will follow suit, but it reaffirms the fact that the media is a constantly evolving landscape, now more than ever.

What follows is an overview from this week's analysis plus our key out-takes for brands.

NATIONALS

News media, understandably, is largely fixated on coronavirus. Print editions of the broadsheets and mid-markets are devoting the first 14 pages, on average, to the pandemic and the sports pages at the back are speculating on the ramifications for various sports and major events.

In the business sections of these titles, both print and online, the focus is again heavily on coronavirus – in particular, reactions to the latest government announcements on tax relief and interest rates and highlighting the effects on particular industries that are most affected, such as hospitality and supermarkets. We've had lots of journalist requests for small business case studies, and how our clients are working with SMEs to manage the effects of COVID-19.

We know that business writers are receiving a lot of pitches around home working from all different angles and they've advised us that many of them seem quite glib. Given the majority of stories strike a more somber tone focused on ensuring businesses don't go under, or that supermarket supply chains aren't disrupted, companies should avoid these types of stories for the time being.

Lifestyle features are focused on a plethora of topics related to the virus, including working from home and self-isolation, which presents various opportunities for relevant brands with something useful to contribute. The Times 2 section this week has included features on cooking with tinned food and a diary of a week in isolation. On Thursday, the Telegraph launched a new six-page section called 'You Are Not Alone', which seeks to help readers get through the crisis (how to look after pets, how to home school). The Daily Mail's Femail section has stuck to some normality, including its usual fashion and beauty fare alongside features on how the online dating scene is more chivalrous in these times of COVID-19.

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While a large proportion of the tabloids is coronavirus coverage, they are including a few 'softer' stories from brands – photography competition winners, the odd motoring or personal finance survey – content that delivers a touch of light relief, while not appearing frivolous. Riskier to pitch as they could be seen as out of kilter with the current situation, but the tabloids are seemingly more receptive.

No doubt the national supplements will be following suit this weekend. Although some will have a longer lead time, YOU magazine has already said it's keen to strike the right balance between serious and soft features. Its online outlet, YOU Mag Online, has been featuring heartwarming, real-life stories to lighten the mood. Indeed, the Entertainment Editor has identified TikTok as a huge trend right now, as people who are social-distancing look for a way of reaching friends, while relaxing and being silly.

Interestingly, many print editions are offering up to 12 weeks free delivery – a helpful gesture for older readers confined to their homes and no doubt a move to mitigate further falls in print circulation.

TRADES

The story is much the same in the trades. Coronavirus is the main focus on the homepages, with each and every publication reporting on how this global pandemic is impacting their particular industry. Editorial teams are diverting most resource to covering this issue, while many freelancers have advised that they're not pitching any other topics at the moment. Most inbound journalist requests are again centred around COVID-19, seeking comment on how businesses are adapting.

Some disparity does exist dependent on the industry. Unsurprisingly, the likes of Retail Week are completely dominated by this topic, with very little space for anything else. Meanwhile, in some of the technology trades, including IT Pro Portal, other news stories are cutting through the noise. However, these stories either have an indirect link to how businesses can operate in the current climate or they are industry-specific reports that are largely time sensitive.

LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle publications are also using COVID-19 as the main hook. This week, Grazia Daily has looked at the impact the virus is having on people's work / life routine, as well as how isolation is affecting relationships. Most of the content on Red Online contains more practical tips for dealing with social distancing, such as how people can create a home office and suggestions of celebrity workouts that you can do at home. Stylist has a longer lead time compared to many of the print weeklies and there was just one article this week alluding to the virus, with ideas for how to fill your day if you're stuck indoors, but we expect to see an uplift in similar articles filling its pages in the next edition.

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OUT-TAKES FOR BRANDS

1. Initiatives that are likely to end up being covered by the media should be motivated first and foremost by genuine altruism: what companies can do for the greater good; how they can marshal their resources to help those in need; projects that are genuinely going to make a difference to people in their communities in these unprecedented times.

Sainsbury's and Iceland's 'elderly hours'

Pret's hot drinks and discount for NHS workers

Banks' initiatives to support at risk businesses

2. There is also a role for brands to develop initiatives or earned media content that helps people or businesses cope with the new realities of our lives. To do this, a brand needs to be relevant and its product or service useful to the issues consumers and businesses are facing in the current climate.

Barry's Bootcamp

Football Manager

3. Some brands are well-positioned to reveal something insightful about our lives and the way we do business in this new coronavirus world. But these insights need to have a credible link to the realities with which we're now faced. This story from Womanizer hits the spot:

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/11199862/self-isolation-sex-toy-sales-rise-by-during-coronavirus/>

4. At this stage in the crisis, we need to ensure the stories we're pitching don't appear flippant or tone deaf to the current situation. While in the coming weeks, there may be a role for brands to supply some respite and light relief in national and lifestyle publications, it's not appropriate in this period of adjustment and uncertainty.

5. Brands need to be mindful that their customer communications are likely to be scrutinised by the media, so it's important to spend the time getting that message right.

For more information contact your account team or email info@brands2life.