

# COVID-19 Advertising During A Crisis

How Social Values can help create  
meaningful connections with  
consumers

*April 2020*

Ogilvy

ENVIRONICS  
RESEARCH

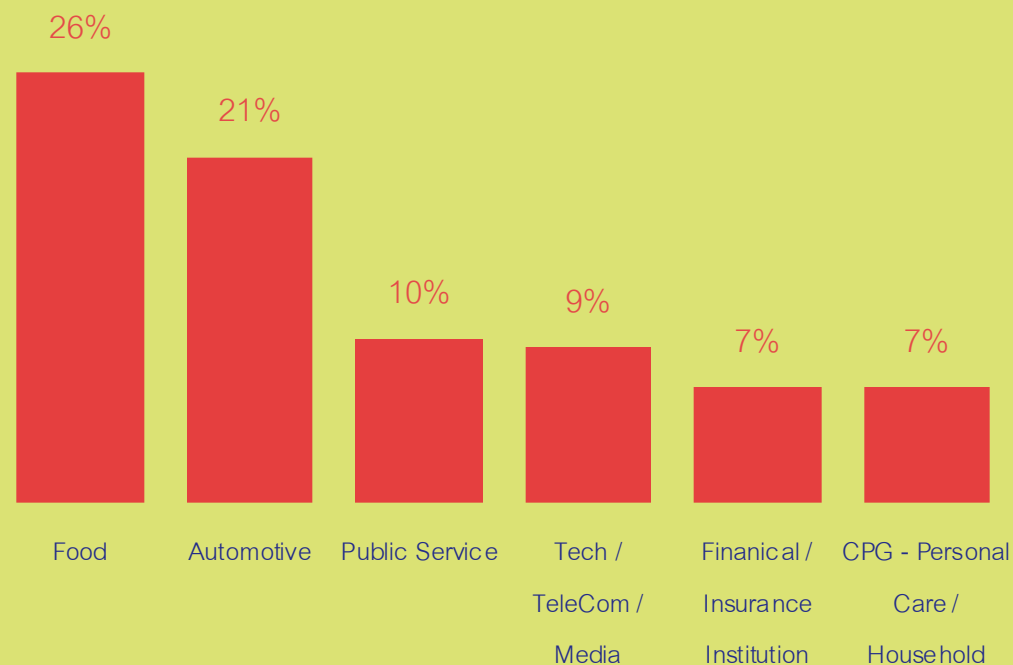


# *Executive Summary*

We are currently living through unprecedented times. Non-essential businesses have been forced to close temporarily and individuals are being urged to stay home. This has resulted in an increase in media consumption, and therefore advertising exposure. A great deal has been said about how advertisers should respond during these times, but the extent to which these messages are resonating with consumers was unclear until now. This report will help you understand consumer perceptions and attitudes toward advertising during this time; and provides insight into the underlying motivations that inform the context with which consumers receive your message.

1. **Advertising needs to stay optimistic – if not always positive – in difficult times.** Consumers are looking for positivity and positive actions from brands. The most memorable ads had a positive and uplifting message. Consumers also appreciated messaging that thanked front-line workers or employees, and talked about safety.
2. **Brands will be rewarded for showing how they are making a positive impact.** But, specifically, in ways that have immediate effects, such as changing products to directly attack COVID-19 and keeping staff employed during the crisis.
3. **Not everyone should be advertising right now.** But for most brands, it's still okay to advertise. Consumers expect to see ads from brands; however, luxury brands and companies that sell big-ticket items should find a way to help in this crisis and avoid trying to sell product. It's better for these brands to demonstrate how they are part of the solution (e.g., perfume companies retooling to produce hand sanitizer).
4. **Discounts and product superiority are key drivers of product trial.** With the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis, consumers are most interested in value; the two facets of value being price and quality of product.
5. **Appeal to social values to develop messages that resonate.** Values set the context for consumer choice. By developing an understanding of the context with which your message will be received, advertisers can deliver greater ROI for their campaigns.

# What's Getting Noticed



Food advertisements (fast food, food delivery services and food products – not including grocery stores) were noted as the most memorable ads that respondents recalled seeing/hearing in the past week; advertisements by A&W largely drove this category.

Automotive closely followed memorable food advertisements, as many respondents recalled a Subaru commercial that repurposed their ad space to thank essential workers.

Consumers noticed advertisements that are addressing the crisis in one way or another. Brands should consider taking this into account as they update old advertisements or create new ones. People are living this crisis every day – and when brands ignore it, they risk being ignored by consumers.

← **Question:** “What was one memorable advertisement you saw/ heard in the past week?” (Top 6 by industry)

## *What's Getting Noticed*



IMAGE CREDIT:  
UNSPLASH

Respondents demonstrated higher recall of ads from brands that had specifically pivoted and made mention of the pandemic than those that failed to do so. Others described their most memorable ads as those from brands that have adjusted their services (most often, these were food delivery services); and a small handful remembered seeing advertisements for new products.

Brands that were mentioned most often tended to be brands that have had historically strong advertising. It's not surprising that brands with strong advertising and a strong sense of purpose were able to hit the right tone in their advertising. This helps them maintain a consistent message even in unusual circumstances. Brands should look to their brand purpose to direct how they should act during the crisis and in the recovery period after the crisis.



# Who Should Be Careful Advertising

“

*[Automotive] ads  
seem inappropriate...  
when so many people  
have been laid off,  
who is going to buy  
a new vehicle?*

”

VERBATIM INSIGHT:  
ENVIRONICS RESEARCH

Only 12 percent of respondents indicated that the most memorable ad in the past week conjured feelings of anxiety, sadness or anger. These sentiments were most often associated with public service announcements about COVID-19 or automobile commercials. Given Canada's relatively solid handling of the COVID-19 crisis, consumers want to feel positive momentum and forward motion. Advertisements with negative messaging were more likely to be ignored by consumers.

Luxury brand and big-ticket product advertising (like auto) wasn't received well by consumers. This aligns with a broader trend in the market of concern with economic inequality, and the disconnection of the wealthy from the rest of us. Look no further than the online backlash against celebrity responses to physical distancing measures to see that now is not the time for ostentatious consumption, or advertising luxury goods.

## *Who Should Be Careful Advertising*



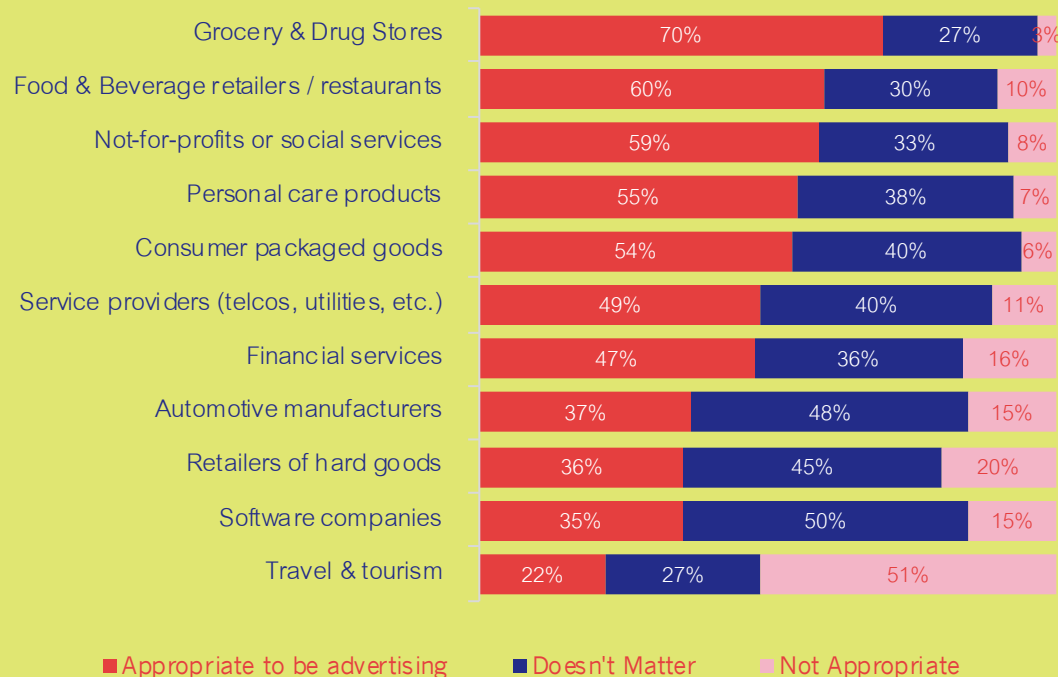
IMAGE CREDIT:  
UNSPLASH

This is not to say luxury brands and companies that sell big-ticket items should abandon advertising during the pandemic. Instead, they should pivot their messaging away from the product and focus on how the company has contributed to their employees or society during the pandemic; another avenue is to consider thanking front-line workers.

People want to see direct action in tough times and are indicating that they are receptive to brands that have quickly pivoted their efforts to make a difference; they repeatedly noted Subaru as the gold standard for appropriate messaging in this space during this time. Still, be wary of making “copycat” and opportunistic ads.

For brands that have continued to pay their employees, offered relief to their customers or shifted their efforts to make PPEs, there is fertile ground for advertising those efforts for brand-building advertising.

# What's Appropriate & What's Not



One in three Canadians generally agree that it's appropriate to advertise across most categories (travel and tourism is the exception).

Only one in six Canadians believe that it's not appropriate for most brands to advertise during the current situation (exemptions only given to food, grocery and drug stores). The values underlying this sentiment include the desire to keep their lives simple, concern about their financial future, placing little value on brand names, and feeling anxious about technology. The following pages describe the Environics Social Values measurement system, and define key values of those Canadians who find advertising inappropriate at this time.

← **Question:** "Is it appropriate for businesses in each of the following sectors to advertise given the current situation?"

# *What Are Environics Research Social Values?*

The Environics Research Social Values measurement system seeks to understand the structure of social values in a society and monitor changes in those values over time. These values represent a person's mental posture or fundamental world view, and set the context for someone's reactions to situations, events, opportunities or challenges.

Values set the context for consumer choice. Two customers who might be demographically identical can be fundamentally different from a psychographic perspective. Social Values (psychographics) relate to people's values, motivations and attitudes. These reveal why consumers do what they do and complement traditional demographics.



# *Social Values Of Those Currently Resistant To Advertising*



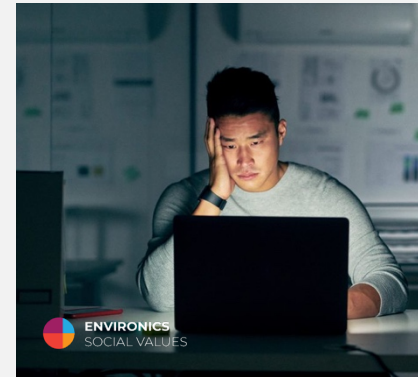
## **FINANCIAL CONCERN FOR THE FUTURE**

The feeling of insecurity about one's financial future, particularly in old age, and of being personally responsible in this area..



## **AVERSION TO COMPLEXITY**

A desire to keep one's life simple and predictable. People strong on this trend are intimidated and threatened by the changes and complexities in modern life and values. They look for stability and simplicity.



## **TECHNOLOGICAL ANXIETY**

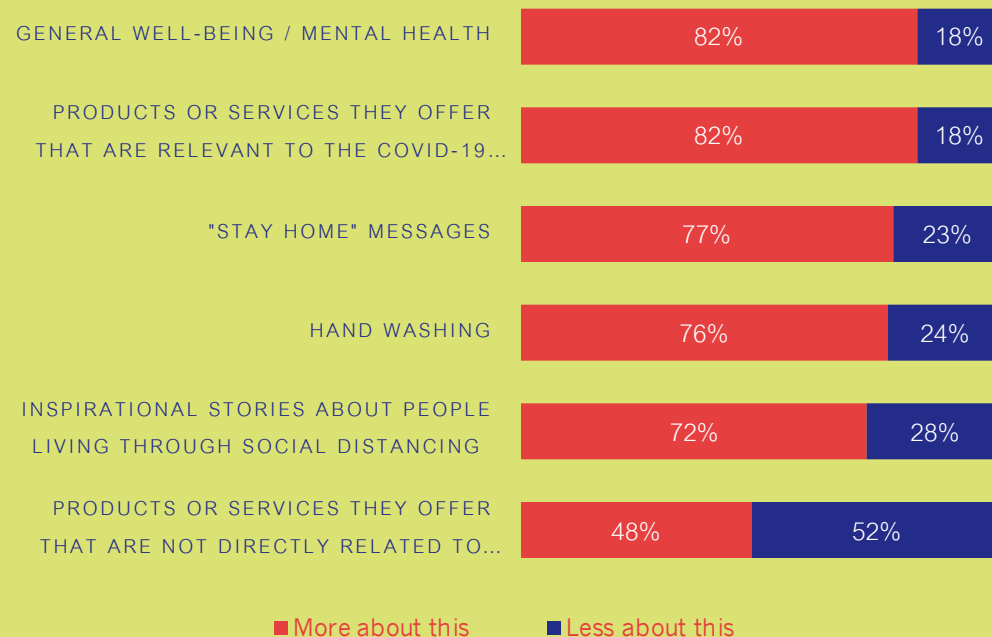
People strong on this construct are intimidated and threatened by technological changes and express high concern regarding the ethical and moral dimensions towards which science is advancing.



## **BRAND APATHY**

Placing little importance on the brand name of a product.

# What's Appropriate & What's Not



Most consumers want brands to continue to focus on COVID-19-related messages and advertisements. They are divided on whether they want to see messages that speak to products or services not directly related to COVID-19 at this time.

Canadians who want to see more product and service advertisements that are not directly related to COVID-19 are those who adapt well to the complexities of modern life and seek out intense experiences. They view advertisements for their aesthetic properties and receive intense gratification through the purchase of consumer goods. The following pages define the social values of those Canadians who are open to more general advertising during the pandemic.

← **Question:** "What would you prefer to see in current advertising?"

# *Social Values Of Those Who Are Open To More General Advertising During The Pandemic*



## **ADAPTABILITY TO COMPLEXITY**

Tendency to adapt easily to the uncertainties of modern life, and not to feel threatened by the changes and complexities of society today. A desire to explore this complexity as a learning experience and a source of opportunity.



## **PURSUIT OF INTENSITY**

Desire to live intensely. Also, a tendency to be guided less by reason and ideology than by one's own emotions, feelings and intuition. A need to constantly experience new sensations



## **JOY OF CONSUMPTION**

Intense gratification through the purchase of consumer goods (rather than basic necessities). Enjoying consumption for the pleasure of consumption. People who are strong on this construct are often more excited by the act of buying than by the use of the products they buy.



## **ADVERTISING AS STIMULUS**

Tendency to enjoy viewing advertising for its aesthetic properties; to enjoy advertising in a wide range of venues, from magazines to television to outdoor signs and billboards.

# *What's Annoying Consumers*



IMAGE CREDIT:  
UNSPLASH

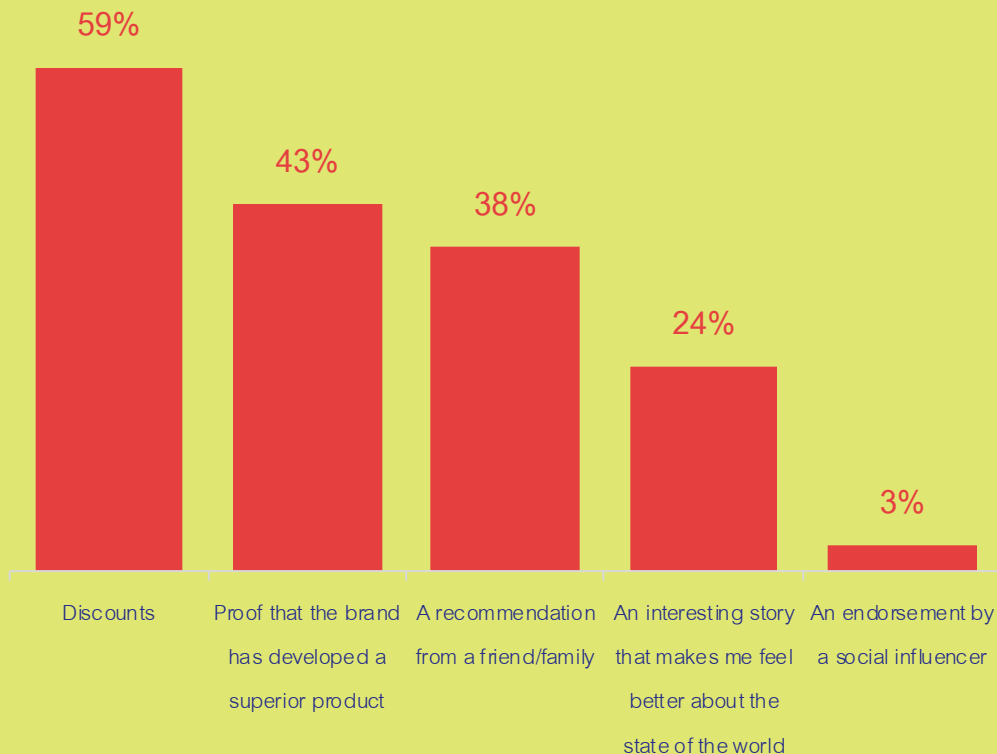
Equal proportions of Canadians expressed frustration with advertising that mentioned the pandemic (roughly 14%) or with advertisements that did not acknowledge the current crisis.

Advertisements by companies that respondents deemed 'non-essential' or felt were not sensitive enough to the current situation were not viewed positively; some of these included travel, automotive, luxury goods and credit card companies.

Perhaps more importantly, 50 percent of respondents had the opposite reaction; they have not been frustrated by any advertising so far or indicated that they had not been watching TV. Therefore, brands shouldn't be afraid to advertise, but should be aware of the tone and imagery in their ads.



# What's Driving New Product Trial



During a time when Canada has seen its worst job losses in any month on record, it's more important than ever to understand what motivates Canadians to purchase new products or services.

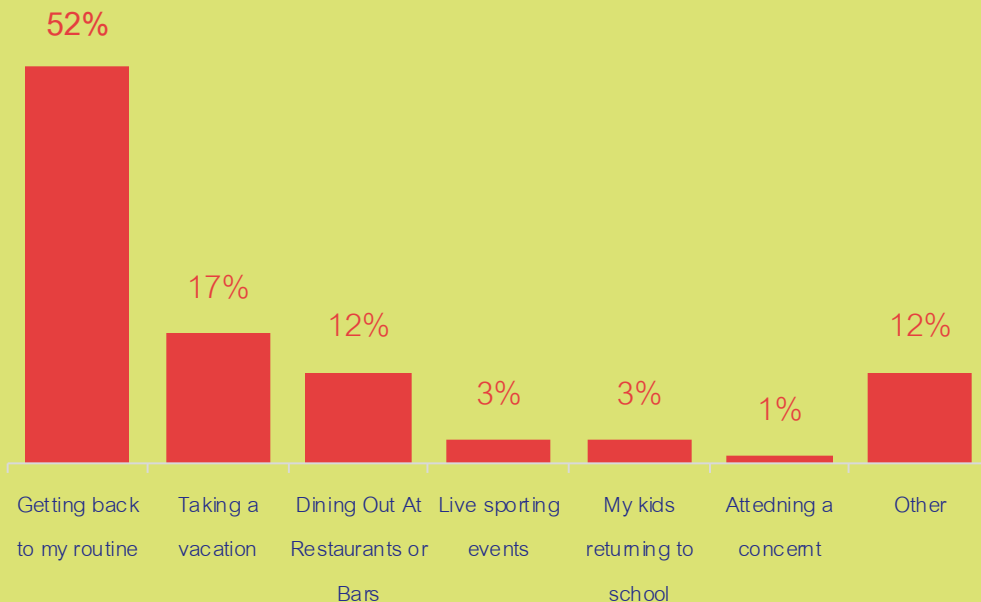
Unsurprisingly, discounts and value ranked as the top two prompts to try a new product – men were more likely to cite “discounts” than women (63% vs. 54%); and those aged 45 or older were more likely to cite “proof of a superior product” than those aged 18 to 44 years old (50% vs. 33%).

When advertising a new product, ensure that Canadians understand its value by highlighting your product's superiority or offering a discount to incentivize trial. Things to think about when conveying your product's added features: convenience, sanitization and effort to maintain physical distance, etc.

← **Question:** “What would prompt you to try a new product or service during this current situation?”



# What Are Canadians Looking Forward To?



Understanding what Canadians are looking forward to when the pandemic is over can provide brands with insights into the type of content that will resonate. Half of Canadians indicated that they are most looking forward to getting back to their routine – this underscores the significance of values like Aversion to Complexity, that ring true for a significant proportion of the population.

Canadians suggested that ads that are bright, upbeat and illustrate simple family routines are well-received. In particular, Tropicana's "That Tropicana Feeling" ad that depicted families playing outside elicited feelings of happiness. When re-purposing pre-pandemic ads, consider whether the ad illustrates routine in a way that circumvents physical distancing fears (e.g., crowds, touching face, not washing hands).

← **Question:** "What are you looking forward to most when the pandemic is over?"

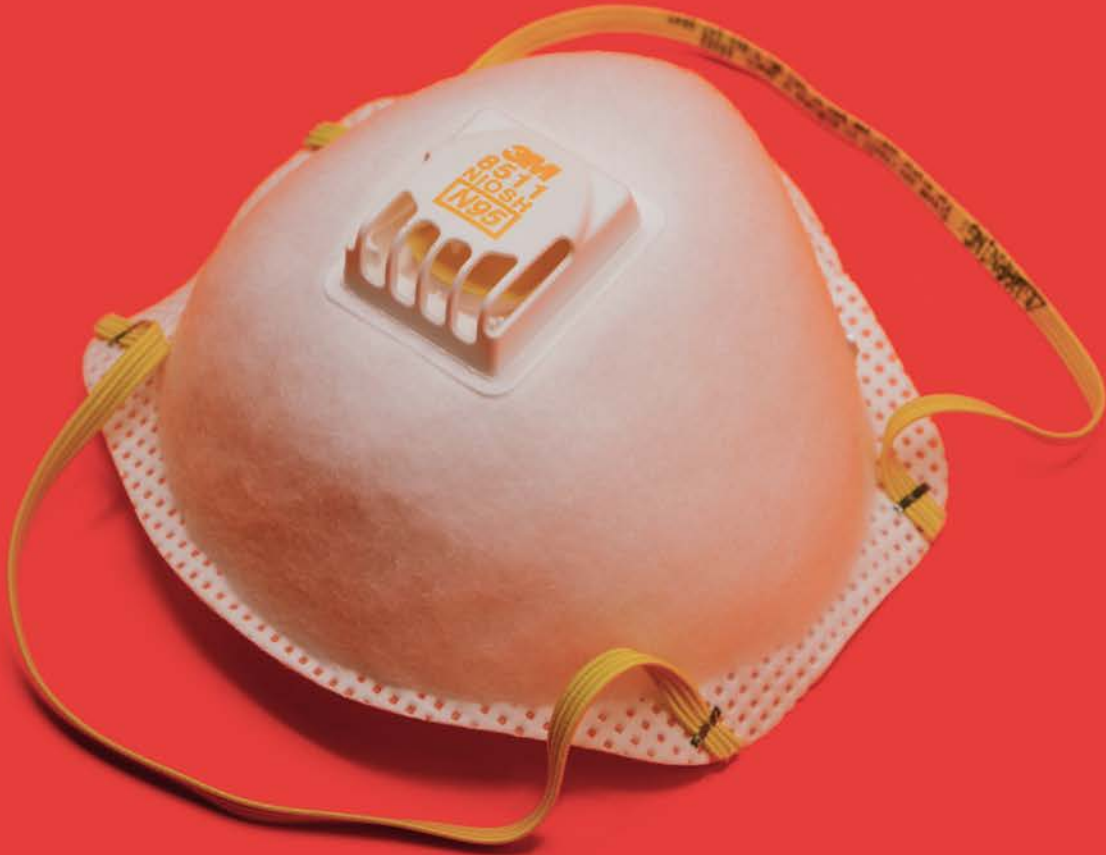


IMAGE CREDIT:  
UNSPLASH

“

*Coming out of this crisis there will be winners and losers. The brands that win will be the ones who responded with compassion and helped support people with positive actions.*

—John Killam, CEO of Ogilvy

”

# *Conclusion*

In uncertain times, it's difficult to know just how to reach consumers. Many brands have stayed in market with advertising, and we have seen winners and losers over the past four weeks. Consumers have told us that they want to see positive advertising that's sensitive to the times we live in – and, if possible, helping to solve the problems arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that most Canadians expect to see advertising and are happy to hear from brands, brands should think about their brand purpose to figure out what role they can play in helping Canadians through this crisis. Whether that's through donations, adapting business models to manufacture needed products, delivering great value for the products they advertise, taking care of their employees, or just being sensitive to the current climate of physical distancing and changing hygiene norms – brands contributing to positive impacts and 'good news' during these uncertain times will resonate .

Canadians are looking forward to getting back to their routines after the crisis has passed; but, our "new normal" will mean, advertisers' old routines won't be enough. Brands will need to work harder to connect with consumers in away that resonates with their individual values.

# *About This Research*

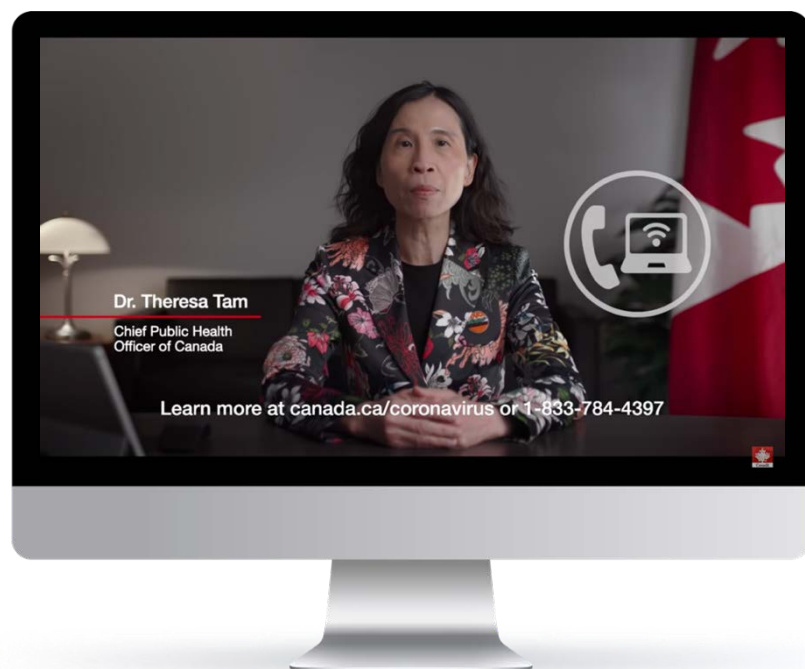


IMAGE CREDIT:  
ENVIRONICS RESEARCH /  
GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

This study was the result of a collaboration between Environics Research and Ogilvy Canada. Between April 3 and 5, 2020 we surveyed 756 residents of English Canada aged 18+ regarding their reactions and perceptions of advertising during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey was conducted among a panel of Canadians from Environics' Social Values Monitor – an annual survey of over 10,000 Canadians and Americans. By linking to social values, we've enabled insight into the underlying motivations of consumers and the fundamental drivers of their responses to advertising.

# *About* Ogilvy

Ogilvy has been producing iconic, culture-changing marketing campaigns since 1948. We are an award-winning integrated creative network that makes brands matter for Fortune 500 companies as well as local businesses across 132 offices in 83 countries. In Canada, Ogilvy operates in Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City. Ogilvy was named Agency of the Year in Canada's 2019 Effie Awards for advertising effectiveness.



# *About*

## **ENVIRONICS** RESEARCH

Environics Research provides organizations with actionable, evidence-based solutions to real business problems. Founded in 1970, Environics Research delivers solutions and insights to clients working in a range of sectors and industries. Our team is drawn from many disciplines – from business and marketing, to sociology and urban affairs. This mix makes Environics Research a creative and intellectually vibrant research and consulting firm, where methodological rigour and unrivaled analytical capabilities come together.

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