

# Prudent Prepping for a Reopening in Canada

A Q&A with Caroline Moul, the President of PHD Canada

## ARTICLE |

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**A**s brands prepare for a reopening of the economy and a boost in consumer spending in Canada, media agency PHD Canada has a front-row seat on the timing and tone of campaigns set to kick off.

PHD's president Caroline Moul spoke with us about the right tone in messaging during trying times, what ad vehicles stand to gain for the balance of the year and how campaigns should build in flexibility in the event of a subsequent wave of the pandemic.

### **How did brands react in the initial throes of the shutdown?**

For the vast majority of clients, it was an immediate pause for at least four weeks to wait and see. Some industries have been hit much more significantly than others. In the worst-case scenarios, we've seen them pull out for the majority of the year. But we've also seen other clients keep messaging in market as long as they can, as long as their products were still available for sale and the consumer marketplace was willing to buy. We did have some that paused and quickly recalibrated in terms of how they could come back to the market to show strength and solidarity with Canadians with a message appropriate for the times.

### **In light of an imminent reopening of the economy, are campaigns kicking off now?**

Some campaigns are gearing up, and some dates are set. If we haven't already started booking the inventory, we will within the next week. Some advertisers are ready to go, not necessarily with a bang as you would at a launch, but ready to go with healthy budget weight levels. Others are going to turn the taps on slowly and they will start with the most hardworking dollars first, mainly search and performance media budgets, where it's easy to turn it on and off.

What's pivotal for marketers is the ability to turn it off quickly should things relapse or their message fails to be accepted in the marketplace. That's probably the biggest concern that we have right now as we gear up for things to open back up.

**We're seeing a lot of campaigns with messages like "We are here for you." How wary are you of that messaging, and how do you guide brands to insert practical elements in messaging?**

We guide our clients to be empathetic right now .... It's the value of authenticity and showing what you're doing as opposed to saying, "We're here," and it's an empty message. From a more practical perspective, you can tell people you have a product; you can give them a discount, but brands should be conscious of the purpose and the value of those offers. Based on the consumer studies that we've seen, they want to know that a brand stands for something. They don't want a brand to be opportunistic.

**How have clients' research needs changed?**

One of the things that we've quickly discovered during COVID-19 is that consumer data has about a one-week shelf life. Pre-coronavirus, you would never see that much change to warrant a weekly cadence of providing updates and what the numbers are doing. Clients are trying to understand what's going on from a media consumption perspective, but they are also asking if there are implications for pricing in the marketplace. There's also been a lot of requests around competitive activity. As brands get ready to turn things back on from a marketing perspective, they're also asking how to build in flexibility because of the potential of subsequent waves.

## **What will be the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on the ad market?**

From a negative perspective, out-of-home is going to be hit the hardest. It's going to have the longest recovery time because of delays in getting back to walking around openly or driving from destination to destination.

On the flip side, we'll ... see increased cross screen time become a consumption pattern that stays. It will propel us into making sure that we work through cross-screen strategies appropriately.

## **How's the media mix likely to change for buyers?**

Pre-coronavirus, we were overindexing on performance vehicles in the pursuit of short-term sales over long-term branding aims. What COVID-19 has made clear is the importance of long-term objectives. We've got to move away from the short-term sales mindset as we recoup and recover. This time can be a reset mechanism that will reshift that balance.