



A 2021 GROWTH PLAN

EXPERT INSIGHTS AND
PREDICTIONS TO DRIVE
LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Kelton

A
MATERIAL+
COMPANY



The total disruption that defined 2020 has carried forward into 2021, leaving brands across categories unsure of the right next move. Is now the right time to launch “X”? Where should we focus our strategic energies? What initiatives should we press pause on (or keep paused)? How have consumer behaviors changed over the last twelve months (and how do these changes affect my brand’s potential growth)?

These are the questions we’ve been hearing — and to arrive at some answers, we put them to our team. As you work on your growth plan for 2021 and beyond, we believe these expert insights and predictions — covering brand strategy, innovation, CX, and more — will help pave the way to long-term success.

Kelton Global, a Material Company, is a consumer insights and brand strategy consultancy that helps businesses grow and thrive. We combine market research with creativity to help companies all over the world answer the question: what comes next?



AMY ROGOFF DUNN

INSIGHTS
& STRATEGY

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Marketers should take the time to sharpen their brand positioning and make sure it's fit for the new era we're in — even if that new era doesn't feel totally settled yet. Understandably, many held off on this in 2020, but have since decided they can't keep waiting for a sense of stability that could still be a year off. Don't wait around while your competitors push their brands forward.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

It's as important as ever to understand consumers' shifting behavior — but with limited budgets, marketers may be wise to forego infrequent deep dives that get into the minutia of behavior. Instead, invest in more frequent, higher level behavioral research. While things are still in flux, broad changes are more important to track than every last detail.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

In the context of brands, I sense we're starting to see in consumers a new level of sensitivity and critical eye towards overly lofty brand promises. Brand purpose is still important and brands should

continue to elevate from their functional promise to something more emotive. But consumers — even those who aren't Gen Z — are calling out brands when their promises are over the top, as the events and realities of the past year have pushed us towards more brutal honesty in our everyday communications and interactions.

Don't wait around while your competitors push their brands forward.

What are consumers looking for right now?

Hope. People are completely overwhelmed by negativity in the press, hostility in social media interactions, and the despair that comes with the ongoing crises we find ourselves in. They just want a bit of hope and a bit of joy.



JOHN WISE

CULTURAL INSIGHTS

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Regrouping and rebuilding. The light at the end of the tunnel is visible, and it's time to start thinking about the next few years ahead.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

Above the line advertising. Platforms are volatile right now, and people are spending their time in other ways.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

A big shift to digital — telehealth, remote work, online shopping, etc. Behaviors that were emergent are now mainstream.

What are consumers looking for right now?

The fuel to keep going. The fatigue from the past year is still being felt by companies and consumers, and the need to grow and move on is being hampered by a sense of exhaustion. Consumers are looking for wells of motivation.

Behaviors that were emergent are now mainstream.



ELIZABETH REAL

INNOVATION

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Company over brand. You (and your customers) need to know what your organization is going to stand for in this world, and not just what products you're going to sell. If you've been absent while the world has dealt with a pandemic, racial injustice, natural disasters, etc... Then consumers aren't going to have much patience for promotional messaging while they try to return to some semblance of normal.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

Snarky competition. No one wants to hear about your own rivalries. We need kindness and cooperation right now.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

Americans, particularly, have become aware of how much impact large corporations can have on their communities — often more than government. The bar has been raised on what it means to be useful.

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What are consumers looking for right now?

1). Tools to get through these last waves of the pandemic ("help me maintain my sanity now and help me emerge from isolation a little better, smarter, more knowledgeable, more balanced..."), and 2). Companies that listen. Be ready to adapt to consumer needs. Avoid broadcasting one-sided monologues.



JACLYN BRANNON

INSIGHTS
& STRATEGY

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Giving consumers reasons to feel hopeful, giving them something to look forward to. People need a sense of energy and change right now. They feel very stuck, and the end point keeps moving back. They're craving progress — and a finish line.

I also think consumers are going to be looking for more vulnerability and resilience from brands as a proof point of authenticity.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

They should not rush to re-assert normalcy. The entire country is basically going through PTSD from all of this, and brands have to be aware of — and sensitive to — people's mindsets.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

COVID has accelerated the shift from “valuing things” to “valuing experiences” — especially as it concerns loved ones. More time with family has been wonderful, and there's almost a new appreciation for making space for relationships.

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There's more focus on the quality of the interaction vs. what you're actually doing.

COVID has also accelerated the trend of loosening the requirements for self-presentation, especially among women. The idea of feminine self-care shifting from external to internal has only amplified with this more comfortable, more vulnerable, and more unfiltered acceptance. It's much more about feeling good vs. looking good.



MARK MICHELI

EXPERIENCE
INNOVATION

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Anticipating behavior changes in the return to a "new normal." The "old" economy will start to pick back up, but with some major changes. Brands shouldn't expect boom times, but should be preparing for how to keep gains made during the pandemic... or how to dig out of a long period of disruption.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

I would hold off on major technology and design changes that are meant for "this moment" of the COVID era. More change is coming. If you're playing catch up still, it's time to look to the next major behavior changes and ensure your innovation roadmap and operations are prepared for what's next.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

Digital is here forever. Seamless, easy UX is what will differentiate brands trying to win over or keep customers. Finding ways to bring humanity back into this new service era is going to be crucial as we move beyond merely functional experiences and transition back to those that meet higher-order emotional and strategic needs.

What are consumers looking for right now?

Accountability and reliability — plus some healthy distractions along the way.

Seamless, easy UX is what will differentiate brands trying to win over or keep customers.



KUBA KIERLANCZYK

INSIGHTS
& STRATEGY

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

While the end of the pandemic seems in sight, there is still a long road ahead before we reach a vaccination rate that means life can start looking like it did before. With that in mind, it's best to take advantage of the current opportunities: at home experiences to be enjoyed by small groups of people for the remainder of the winter, and thinking about what sort of engaging and safe outdoor experiences can be created for the spring/summer. The first wave of the pandemic was a trial run for businesses trying to figure out what they could do. But now that we already have one pandemic summer under our belts — and know what the opportunities and limitations are — I think people are going to want and expect a lot more from the experiences brands offer.

What should brands hold off on for now, and why?

Thinking this is all almost over and planning for life to return to exactly what it was. As I said, I think it's going to be a while before things feel "back to normal" due to infrastructure challenges, and even then there will be fundamental societal changes. There's a lot of opportunity in finding ways to best meet consumer needs in the present.

What foundational consumer shifts have occurred in response to the events of the last year?

The rapid shift to remote work has been the biggest change that I think will have the most lasting impact. Now that we've gotten used to working from home, I don't think we'll see people flocking back to busy city centers or crowded office buildings.

People are going to expect a lot more from the experiences brands offer.

What are consumers looking for right now?

Relief. We've been dealing with this pandemic and everything it's brought to light for almost a year now. While I imagine many have established routines and gotten used to a new reality, that doesn't mean the pandemic has become an easy thing to deal with. There's still a need for simplicity, comfort, indulgence, and experiences that can be enjoyed safely.



WAYNE MORRIS

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

What should be the number one focus area for brands through the first half of this year?

Brands should renew their focus on two things: 1. Delivering an exceptional experience to their customers at every touch point in the journey and doing it consistently — every interaction (whether human or digital, every employee, for every customer, every time. And 2. Creating an environment for employees that allows them to be actively engaged and intrinsically motivated to go beyond fulfilling the function of their job and to make an impact on the lives of their customers and team members.

What are consumers looking for right now?

Consumers are looking for the brands they admire to go beyond focusing solely on the rational value proposition (i.e., products and services, features and functionality etc. and to focus equally on the emotional value proposition (i.e., focusing on how

a customer feels and the kind of memories created, etc.). Consumers want to be treated as human beings across every channel, not as account numbers or cases. Especially now. Consumer expectations have never been higher. They expect brands to "get them" and connect with them deeply. They are looking for brands who align with their purpose and that can be a partner to them — not just provide the commodities that they pay for.

Consumers want to be treated as human beings across every channel.

**Want to know what
your brand should do
next to drive growth?
Let's chat.**

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