

COVID Consciousness

Product Blue Position Paper

We must not *go back* to normal. We must *go forward* into a new way.

Outline:

1. Possible animal to human transmission origins of COVID-19
 - a. Data to support this claim
 - b. If this is true, why that viral transaction occurred
2. Perpetual desire for more of everything quickly yields error
 - a. Why we must listen to and utilize a pandemic for Earth's sake, and concurrently ours
 - i. Pandemics will most likely continue to happen if humans do not shift their consumption habits
 - ii. A global pandemic as a predecessor to global climate tragedy
3. Product Blue being one of the answers to this complex issue
 - a. Overconsumption breeds destruction, but sustainability offsets overconsumption
 - b. Product Blue as a tangible route for people to take once realizing they can survive with limited consumption
4. Messaging Product Blue in a post-COVID 19 market
 - a. Not blaming consumers for adopting consumption behaviors of urgency and disposal, but celebrating their agency in an era where change is critical
 - b. Who and how to communicate post-pandemic justified by consumer surveys and real-world marketing examples

Possible COVID-19 Origins

COVID-19 was originally detected in the Huanan Seafood Market, a now infamous wet market that was operating in Wuhan, China. Nothing is confirmed, but blood samples are being drawn from various wild animals in hopes of tracing the virus' origins. Professor Lu Jiahai of the Public Health School of Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China stated "we want to understand how animal to human transmission happened." Responding to Prof. Lu and countless other concerned individuals' eagerness to detect the virus' origins, biologists have been scouring past and uncovering new data that can give insight into COVID-19's roots. BioRxiv conducted a study analyzing genome sequence identities among COVID-19 and several animals: "The

nCoV-2019 (COVID-19) has been reported to share 96% sequence identity to the RaTG13 genome, a coronavirus isolated from an intermediate horseshoe bat (*Rhinolophus affinis*).” BioRxiv said this horseshoe bat genome had the closest relation to nCoV-2019, but wanted to explore other viral metagenomic datasets for coronaviruses with RBMs close to nCoV-2019. Their study consisted of trimming, filtering, and reading sequences with VirMAP technology to detect coronavirus genomes in the viral metagenomic dataset. BioRxiv’s final results showed 90.5% similarity between the Pangolin-CoV draft genome and nCoV-2019. “We report evidence of a coronavirus recovered from a Malayan pangolin (*Manis javanica*) viral metagenomic dataset that shares a higher sequence identity at a crucial segment of the genome involved in host infection. This result indicates a potential recombination event and a more complex origin for the nCoV-2019 strain.”

How Could This Have Happened?

If the findings from this study, and many others like it, are true, it only strengthens the already widely-accepted theory that COVID-19 erupted from the Wuhan Market of Hubei, China. The now closed Wuhan Market dealt with live, exotic animals, its employees working at a rapid pace to ensure their myriad of customers were receiving their food as quickly as possible.

Jeremy Hurewitz, Opinion Contributor at USA Today, is a journalist who lived in Shanghai during the mid-2000s. He was fascinated with China’s culinary relationship with animals, and continues to dissect the ramifications of such treatment to this day. Although Hurewitz is an opinion writer, much of his stories report facts. When referring to him and his experiences in China, I will only acknowledge what is fair and objective.

Hurewitz began to examine this food culture after the SARS crisis when he moved from Shanghai to Guangdong. Hurewitz recalls seeing unorthodox animal meat for sale at these wet markets, such as snakes, frogs, and turtles. Other exotic animals like wolf cubs, monkeys, and civet cats (reportedly the origin for SARS) recently stopped being sold. “Before SARS, the markets were a Noah’s Ark of terrified animals of seemingly every variety, often sick and/or injured, housed closely together before being slaughtered in unsanitary conditions. It was a perfect birthplace for novel viruses to intermingle and leap and mutate to humans.”

During his time in China, Hurewitz even experienced some of these wet markets being shut down, but not for long. Why did they reopen? Demand. Even though China is heavily connected to COVID-19, their consumption habits aren’t unique. They are only a

sample of this deadly condition that humans have embraced, and even defined life by: more.

Facing the Music

A pandemic is a pause in the people's grand song. It's the halt that breaks up all the industrial noise. These rests are what make a cluster of noises distinguishable as a song; without pauses, any tune is simply a constant note. Alike, a prolonged, quiet moment allows humanity to reset. It's an opportunity to reflect and pivot, making a population of people distinguishable as a humankind.

Simply using the terminology "when things go back to normal" or anything of that nature is negligent and invites the return of the uninterrupted note that led us to disaster's doors. We have to change our ways, or catastrophe will return time and time again.

It has become clear that a break from human activity has come with a break for the world. The journal *Nature Climate Change* published an article stating, "Daily global CO₂ emissions decreased by -17% by early April 2020 compared with the mean 2019 levels, just under half from changes in surface transport. At their peak, emissions in individual countries decreased by -26% on average. The impact on 2020 annual emissions depends on the duration of the confinement, with a low estimate of -4% (-2 to -7%) if prepandemic conditions return by mid-June, and a high estimate of -7% (-3 to -13%) if some restrictions remain worldwide until the end of 2020." However, as the Head of the UN Environment Programme Inger Andersen said, "visible, positive impacts, whether through improved air quality or reduced greenhouse gas emissions, are but temporary, because they come on the back of tragic economic slowdown and human distress." Andersen goes on to say this is no one's ideal way for the environment to mend itself. However, that doesn't mean some people won't view it as a miracle. Especially in the eyes of those who are skeptical, this greenhouse gas hiatus will be more than a complete justification to fully revert back to "normalcy". Because that's what everyone wants, right? Hasn't this break from perpetual production done wonders for our planet?

Greenhouse gas emissions are one thing, but this pandemic has increased waste of medical supplies and hazardous substances with the influx of hospital visits and abundant production of personal protection equipment. For example, the *Ocean Conservancy* published an article outlining the aftermath of constant PPE production: "Reports are coming in from around the world of massive amounts of personal

protective equipment like masks and gloves clogging sidewalk drains and washing into waterways. In places where waste collection has temporarily shut down, people are taking matters into their own hands, dumping potentially hazardous materials into the environment.” And although immense, rapidly expanding wounds (like COVID-19) require immediate and primarily effective treatment, our endeavors to recede the virus have advanced something else: the destruction of our environment. It’s a perfect storm, as PPE provided to the public is designed for single use; saving, sharing, and even removing PPE and allowing it to touch other objects defeats the purpose of isolating and suffocating the virus. This method clearly isn't working in favor of the environment. COVID is urging us to reinvent. The current state of affairs was and is not working, and it led us to this grim reality that we’re tragically beginning to accept. In order to be better prepared for the next life-altering pandemic, people need to face the music right now, and pivot. Despite these overwhelming downsides, one concept has emerged seemingly perfectly engineered for a problem such as this: sustainability.

Product Blue is the Answer

At-home washable, higher quality, multi-use, more effective. All of these attributes make for more sustainable PPE products that fight both problems of virus-killing and Earth-saving with a more powerful punch. Yes I am using masks and gloves as a specific example, but I want to make clear that this is an ideal *concept* for Product Blue to adopt. While the coronavirus may continue to win, it will eventually slow down and ultimately lose. The opposite is true for climate change. “We can't go back to normal: how will coronavirus change the world?” from *The Guardian* writes, “There is no getting around the fact that the impacts of climate change are more gradual than those of Covid-19. Most people do not feel they or their loved ones could die from the climate crisis this month, and so emergency mode is harder to activate and sustain. As [Margaret Klein] Salamon pointed out to me, if we truly accepted we were in a climate emergency, then every day the news would lead with updates about which countries were reducing their emissions the fastest, and people would be clamouring to make sure their leaders were adopting the policies that worked.” This will never be the case for climate change. Climate change by design is gradual, as ice caps melting is only jarring with fast motion effects, and temperatures increase so slightly we cannot feel the difference. Yes, we can see the *impacts* of those and any many other natural calamities, but since the majority takes place in third world countries, other regions do not deem it as a threat. However, with the coronavirus, consequences are seen clearly and consistently in every corner of the Earth.

We have all heard, the impacts of climate change can still be made less bad. However, as a result of people's general inability to see climate change as certainly as COVID-19, I predict that the human race will ignore climate change signs until the text reads "you're too late. You should've done more" at the capitalistic rate we're going. Product Blue can help slow down overconsumption, buying us all more time.

A *ScienceDirect* article "Minimising the present and future plastic waste, energy and environmental footprints related to COVID-19" contains messaging strategies for reducing plastic usage: "Rethinking the strategies on minimising the impact of plastic yet make use of its merits: The focus should not be targeted on plastics (as being fundamentally bad) but society (appropriate utilisation) and post-consumer plastic treatments." This notion strongly reminded me of the theory of incrementalism. Because, at its core, plastic is a fundamentally bad material, especially when there are dozens of existing and emerging alternatives. Despite that, fully applying the blame to something inanimate evokes a political split: some will defend its functionality and convenience, while others fight for its banishment. The truth is, plastic will always be around. We need to focus on how we *deal* with it during and after its lifespan, how much we use it, etc. The same goes for overconsumption. We will always crave more, and scolding people to give up that natural tendency would render accusatory and useless.

If the potential origins of COVID-19 (as outlined earlier on) are true in any sense, neglecting proper animal treatment in the name of *food* consumption is the equivalent of neglecting sustainability in the name of *product* consumption. Both cases of neglect share a common denominator of excess. We can make climate change's impacts less bad by positioning sustainability and proper treatment of materials as the attractive choices for consumers. One positive that COVID-19 has shown us is that we can survive without flying to another state on a weekly/monthly basis, visiting H&M for all our clothing, or going out to eat a burger with our friends every weekend. Product Blue can be a driver in *showing* people that more isn't always a good thing, and that they can enjoy life with adequacy.

According to *Ipsos Global Advisor's* "Earth Day 2020" report, 79% of the 28,029 people across 14 countries aged 16-74 agree with the statement "I will seek out products that are healthier and better for the environment" in regard to the long-term impact of COVID-19, with 70% of Americans in agreeance with the statement. It is clear that many people have the intent to make a change in consumption, but require the vehicle. Product Blue can own this department, as we will not just be a single product, but a marker on many.

Messaging Post-Pandemic

When COVID-19 is at the point of being a significantly less threat, it'll look like we prevailed victorious in every regard. However, that's not the truth. Even though GHGE temporarily decreased and everyone claimed they saw more bunnies hopping around their neighborhoods, our planet was still fighting for its life in more ways than one. Climate change is the endgame and people need to be reminded of that so they can play their parts as responsible consumers. But how do we effectively remind them?

“Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting” by Julio Vincent Gambuto describes a surreal post-COVID 19 environment where brands gaslight people to regain their tendencies for constant fulfillment in the shape of products. This article is frightening, as brands undoubtedly hold the responsibility to discuss the realness and even sadness of the virus and its repercussions. A beautifully poetic portion from this piece of writing reads, “The greatest misconception among us, which causes deep and painful social and political tension every day in this country, is that we somehow don't care about each other. White people don't care about the problems of black America. Men don't care about women's rights. Cops don't care about the communities they serve. Humans don't care about the environment. These couldn't be further from the truth. We do care. We just don't have the time to do anything about it. Maybe that's just me. But maybe it's you, too.” COVID-19 has given many of us time. Time to reflect and consider what truly matters to us, whether that be our families, our health, our community, our beliefs, or even our sanity. The point is, we care. And one of the worst things that can come from this is that we are forced to forget that we care. Product Blue's messaging post-pandemic needs to position sustainability as an avenue for people to act on their desire to care, not just for the planet, but for people.

Instead of ignoring the impacts of COVID-19 (as this article states may happen), what if we highlighted them? What if we celebrated people for their accomplishments during quarantine? Even if they've been small, many individuals and families have been forced to shift their lifestyles. So instead of telling them they should do *more* of that behavior post-COVID 19 (which feels like it's glossing over a time period of serious struggle), let's celebrate their sacrifices and growth. This would have people associate sustainability with a positive message, possibly one of the few positive messages to arise from all this filth. Of course we want their sustainable habits to continue and improve, but the messaging following an era of such gloom needs to be uplifting or it will register as insincere. That's where the theory of incrementalism applies. As it's more effective to positively *encourage* people to treat plastics more responsibly instead of blaming the

material as a whole, *applauding* people for their achievements during this time is more effective than ignoring or blaming COVID-19. If we want people to change, it has to be about people.

For a lot of us, these habits of limited consumption were not willingly adopted; they were forced upon us. We were forced to rebudget down to the dime and treat toiletries as gold ingots in what felt like overnight. We can stop the virus of climate change by examining our habits now, embracing the slowness and sustainability. It may have been mandatory to partake in and difficult to endure, but many of us will make it out the other end as more conscious consumers. In order to make allies with consumers rather than enemies, because climate change is somehow such a politicized matter, post-COVID messaging needs to applaud people for their actions during what they've deemed a hardship; they deserve ample recognition. How can these people conveniently stick with their new realizations and habits while simultaneously being celebrated? Product Blue and its commemorative messaging.

As most messaging *during* this pandemic isn't entirely up to par to what it should be, messaging *afterwards* should attempt to hit these same expectations that consumers have claimed they wanted to see in the first place, as they may have been left unsatisfied. A blog post from Adobe describes their outlook on how messaging should take place *during* a pandemic, which like I said, can be extended to *after the fact* due to its lack of ideal presence at this current moment. Aligning with Product Blue's core values, their first suggestion is for brands to be/remain authentic: "The advertisers who will excel during this time are the ones who will remain true to their brand and values. According to the Kantar COVID-19 Barometer report cited in this Adobe post, "64% of consumers want brands to communicate their values through their messaging." Product Blue has a position in both of these desired communication strategies that are desired by consumers; remaining/being true and clearly communicating values. Even though Product Blue's products aren't for purchase just yet, their *intent* to "help new everyday life" is a preparation for future events like this; limiting overconsumption now will allow for less mistakes to be made in the future. The Blue Climate Fund is also an "effort to face the situation", as COVID-19 and climate change aren't all that different when examined under a microscope: both are uphill battles humans must conquer in order to survive. Unruly conducted a COVID-19 consumer survey representing people 18-55+ and their desired methods in which brands should connect with them. From 2,556 consumers in the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, Singapore, and Japan, 49% want *informative* content, 37% want *warm or happy* content, and 33% want to be *inspired*. Yet another reason for post COVID-19 messaging not to remain in this *dismal* state

focusing on the negative impacts of overconsumption. That's not to say our actions haven't been consequential, they've just been beaten to a pulp and are generally non actionable. Product Blue can capitalize on the 49% of consumers wanting information they can unpackage and apply to their own situations. Although this data is from March 2020, the emotional aftermath of this pandemic will most likely call for brands to remain just as considerate. Regardless, alike *during* such misfortune and sadness, *afterwards* will be no time to promote the brand alone; it's an opportunity to connect the brand's *mission and core values* to what people want to see change in the world through cultural relevance.

On behalf of anyone with a television or mobile device, we're all sick of the overplayed optimistic instrumental, looped over a reassuring voice telling us that "we're all in this together during these unprecedented times". Although this strategy doesn't reach a state of being offensive, it comes across as artificial when the brand completely changes their tone. Most advertising messages have fallen on deaf ears, replaying the same note that tells consumers to hold onto hope. Hope isn't lost, but it may not be as apparent as Salesforce's TV ad claims it to be. The most positively influential messaging that has stuck *during* the pandemic is authentic, on-brand, and simple. Chickfila's COVID-19 advertisement is a great example of how simplicity and upholding brand identity is most effective. Yes, there is a cheery melody playing in the background and a pleasant-sounding woman speaking, but it's nothing new; it's the same music and voice actor they've used a million times before. All they added were details on how their ordering system has changed, ending with a straightforward note advising people to "take good care of each other." They are not trying to be anything they aren't. They aren't falsifying hope or pushing optimism with too heavy of a hand; it's informative, simple, and consistent with the brand's pre-pandemic tone. This idea is consistent with another insight from the Unruly survey: "Consumers want brands to continue to advertise during the pandemic, and there is a clear desire across all age groups for brands to provide a sense of continuity and normality. This reveals an opportunity for brands to engage audiences without reinventing their messaging." On a slightly different vein, Facebook's COVID-19 TV ad is saddening. It shows people crying, distraught, and even sick. Instead of slapping an "everything is okay" sticker on the situation, they underline the damage we're all facing. We all know Facebook isn't perfect, but relative to the alternatives, this message is one of the raw few that reflects our reality.

Knowing *who* we're marketing to is equally as important to *how* we're doing it. Buying sustainable is and has been a habit of the more affluent; this will most likely remain true and even fortify given our recent economic downturn. An article from Springer Link states, "a survey completed by ICOM Information and Communications

found that consumers over 55 years of age were the most prolific users of green products in the United States. Leading the way was the 55–59 year-old female demographic, which was more than twice as likely as the average consumer to use green products. Males from 65 to 69 years old were more than 1.7 times as likely to use green products as the average American.” What do these findings mean for Product Blue? More capital and less frantic lifestyles allow for these demographics to choose products that are more environmentally-conscious. These types of products already carry a more hefty price tag, a common belief as to why green products have difficulty selling. However, I argue this could work in Product Blue’s favor. We could initially position our products as hyper-luxurious, justifying the price with the merit and urgency of our mission. This will make these routine green shoppers feel as if their purchasing decisions are elevating and differentiating them, as they have the desire to buy it and (more likely than other demographics) the funds post-pandemic to do so. This isn't to say that generations other than Baby Boomers desire eco-friendly products. First Insight conducted a more recent survey from January 2020 of over 1,000 US respondents, asking people if they *prefer* to purchase from sustainable brands, and the the results are as follows: 62% of Gen Z said yes, followed by 62% from Millennials, 54% from Gen X, 39% from Baby Boomers, and 44% from the Silent Generation. More novel studies show the youth has a passion for environmental shopping, but their lack of capital discourages them from keeping that mindset when face-to-face with larger purchasing decisions. And if Product Blue is planning on entering the market through appliances, vehicles, etc., it may be worth considering Product Blue as a choice for the elderly, wealthy people who have accumulated great consumer-guilt. We can identify these individuals by observing their current spending habits, as their decisions essentially have them identifying themselves. For an exaggerated example, a retired oil fracker may be very philanthropic in their later days, having built a recent pattern of Earth-conscious purchases due to their newfound desire to right some of their wrongs, if you will. “The feelings of consumer guilt: A phenomenological exploration”, an article from *ResearchGate’s Journal of Business Economics and Management* states, “In their Regret Regulation Theory, Zeelenberg and Pieters identified four regret regulation strategies; goal-, decision-, alternative-, or feeling-focused that are implemented based on their accessibility and their instrumentality to the current goal... Decision-focused strategy includes undoing or reversing, justifying the decision that led to the regretted consequences or denying responsibility for it.” Product Blue needs to identify those who desire justification for their old habits and thus grant them, even if it’s just fractional, release from their guilt. These people exist and will be most properly equipped to buy from us post-pandemic.

Messaging as in traditional advertising is important following a pandemic, but messaging as in action is crucial. The Kantar study also found that, “A clear majority of

consumers expect advertising to make a positive contribution to society: ‘Talk about how the brand is helpful in the new everyday life’ (77%) ‘Inform about their efforts to face the situation’ (75%).” People want to see brands take action and innovate new ways of thinking after events such as pandemics. Product Blue can position themselves as a company that observed and listened to these consumer requests without even being fully built yet; we can establish ourselves as a brand that helps people in new everyday life and innovates new ways of thinking. What if Product Blue employees started their jobs under a Work-From-Home Friday schedule? A concept like this plays into the theory of incrementalism, helps the environment, holds the power to inspire and influence other company’s, and is entirely on-brand for a mission central to climate consciousness. What if Product Blue hired some people who were laid off because of the pandemic? Initiating a culture with a philanthropic intention also adheres to Product Blue’s authenticity and desire to help humans. With actionable ideas such as these, Product Blue could more so address the demands that consumers have for corporations.

I’d like to conclude with an anecdote from my faculty advisor for this position paper, Dave Koranda. I sent Dave the recording of one of our Product Blue Zoom meetings where we discussed COVID-19’s overall impact as being up to par with 9/11. He sent me this in response: “9/11/2002, the temperature was the same as the day the year before. The sky was exactly the same. There was an eerie feeling running through Manhattan and there was a sense of everyone looking over their shoulder. I went to a deli to get something for lunch. For, I think, the first time in the years I lived in NY, a stranger smiled and opened the door and held the door for me. I was a little stunned. Something changed.” After reading this, I deduced that the thing that had changed was people feeling the *need* to demonstrate the care and compassion they had for others.

9/11/2001 was such a damaging day, and the paranoia was still being felt a year later. I predict something similar will happen following COVID-19. Product Blue’s messaging needs to exist and communicate with the precaution of COVID-19 continuing to be on people’s radar and their desire for it to *not* be there, while still understanding that it’s presence is because people care about their well-being and the well-being of others. What more vital reason to care for others is there than to do one’s humane duty in preserving the home that we all share? If Product Blue’s messaging could be ‘purchasing Blue being is an act not just for the buyer’s sake, but for the sake of humanity’, it may engage people’s empathy on a level that they’ve become familiar with during this pandemic. If 9/11 got a New Yorker to show compassion through a smile, COVID-19 has and will continue to send shockwaves of kindness throughout the world. Product Blue’s marketing launch has the timely opportunity to authentically capitalize on that positivity, being a path for people to figuratively hold the door open for their

neighbor. We must not *go back* to normal. We must *go forward* into a new way that takes the time to open the door and show compassion, rather than idolizing progress and consequently overconsumption. Through our messaging, Product Blue can be a pioneer in this 'new way', congratulating people for involuntarily assisting the planet during this pandemic.

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