

Clever lockdown ads

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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One of the less appreciated benefits of the world slowly emerging from the chrysalis of lockdown is that we will no longer have to be bored to tears by the advertising that the coronavirus crisis has spawned.

The cliché bank long ago ran out of supplies for copywriters around the world.

Among them – let's stay together by staying apart (one of the first times this was said publicly, by the way, was at the beginning of March by the Irish Prime Minister announcing he was cancelling the St Patrick's Day parade ... but which has been jumped on by scribblers all over the world); unprecedented times; darkest just before the dawn; we're here for you.

Blah, blah, blah.

In America, someone put together a video montage of all the touchy-feely Covid-19 videos done by blue-chip brands – and they all echoed each other to such an extent, they ran together.



Covid-19 advertising, a video supercut shows it's all the same

Jessica Tennant 24 Apr 2020



And, when your ad is indistinguishable from your competitor's, it doesn't work. Advertising 101.

Yet, in all of this, there have been some standout moments of creativity – made all the more impactful because there is so little real material to work with.



McCann Health, a New York-based media and health services marketing and communication agency, did a really striking piece of work, which underlines that to get your message across, you don't always have to use video (and many of the marketing clevers will tell you that is the future, or a future which is already happening).

There are four, simple graphic executions, which reprise the clichéd idea that not all superheroes wear capes (another idea done to death in this pandemic, if you'll excuse the phrase).

In this case, though, the superheroes' outlines are superimposed onto simple drawings of people doing ordinary things – at home in lockdown.

The tag line, on all of them is: "Staying home isn't exciting, but it saves lives".

At the bottom is the only commercial nod, to cold and flu medicine maker Mucinex, for whom the work has been done.

So, an Orchid firstly for Mucinex, for taking a back seat to the public service message (and being a facilitator – something the egos of many a brand manager prevent from happening, with adverse effects ... but that's another story).

And another Orchid to McCann Health, for a head-turning piece of work.

One thing about spending so much time on the internet during lockdown is that you get to see, first-hand, the idiocy of some of the key planks of the much-touted digital advertising business.

American ad commentator Bob Hoffmann dubs digital advertising as the second-biggest global criminal enterprise after drugs ... because advertisers have little or no control of where their messaging goes and because there is so much out-and-out fraud and misdirection when it comes to numbers.

Most of us long ago surrendered our privacy for the privilege of using platforms like Google (its Chrome browser and its Gmail), WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook.

All of them spy on your every keystroke – not to be evil you understand, but to help 'enhance' your online experience and, specifically, the ads which are served to you.

But it seldom makes much sense.

So, on Facebook, I have got ads from cattle auctioneers and, most recently, an offer of doing an online course in, I kid you not, ear acupuncture.

Nope, you really cannot make up this stuff.

Where on earth I would have search for cattle auctions, or even ear acupuncture, heaven only knows ... but Mark Zuckerberg's clever algorithms clearly know me better than I know myself.

This week, I even got served an ad in a foreign language, when I was looking for something on [The Citizen](#).

It appeared to be for fashion suits and, after some Googling, I found the language was probably Czech.

Again, I wondered.

I'll grant you that I could probably do with a fashion suit or two, but I have never put anything remotely related to that in writing online.

Could my intelligent computer be listening to all conversations in our house while it is switched on?

That's scary – because the only time the subject of clothes has arisen was when my wife told me she couldn't wait for the lockdown to end completely so she can take me clothes shopping...

Still, these bizarrely misdirected ads are annoying more than amusing.

But they also show that the much-vaunted digital paradise is, in many ways, a chimera for marketing.

So, a generalised Onion for the entire principle of programmatic advertising which uses a clever algorithm, rather than human common sense, to decide what to advertise to you.

ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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