Consumer Behavior in Times of Uncertainty: Insights for Brand Strategy

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Executive Summary

Today's consumers are living through an era of chronic uncertainty. Multiple overlapping crises, from economic instability and inflation to political conflicts and global health threats, have created a pervasive sense of volatility (Erdem, 2023). Surveys confirm that people perceive "a tremendous amount of uncertainty" in the economy and see more downside risk than upside in the foreseeable future (Institute for Social Research, 2025). This fragile sentiment translates into cautious spending: consumers tighten their wallets, postpone big purchases and prioritize essentials when the future looks unclear (Dahlhoff, 2025). At the same time, they gravitate toward familiarity and safety, leaning on trusted brands and seeking emotional reassurance to cope with the unknown (Edelman, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020). In uncertain times, shoppers don't stop spending altogether—they **reprioritize**, **focusing on core needs and value** while looking for brands that can provide comfort, empathy and stability.

For brands, volatility poses undeniable challenges but also potential opportunities. History shows that strong brands are capable of not only surviving upheaval but even thriving during crises (Erdem, 2023). Research suggests that companies which directly address consumers' needs and anxieties in difficult times can both sustain sales and strengthen long-term loyalty. In other words, while uncertainty is threatening, it also "means opportunity" for businesses agile enough to respond (Walter, 2025).

The strategic imperative for marketers is twofold: **empathy** and **agility**. Brands that act with authentic empathy by understanding consumers' mindsets and providing genuine support while staying agile, adapting quickly to changing conditions and consumer behaviors, are best positioned to not only weather the storm but emerge more trusted and resilient.

This report examines the enduring patterns in consumer behavior during times of crisis and the emerging shifts in expectations (such as digital trust and values-based scrutiny), and it offers actionable guidance for brands. Key areas of focus include building emotional connection and trust, delivering value through pricing and segmentation strategies, calibrating advertising tone and messaging and making agile yet principled tactical decisions. The goal is to help senior business leaders navigate uncertainty with insight-driven strategies that foster brand resilience through agility and empathy.

Defining Consumer Uncertainty and Its Contemporary Drivers

Consumer Uncertainty Defined. Consumer uncertainty refers to the perceived ambiguity in one's environment, whether financial, health or social, that makes decision-making riskier and less confident (Mitchell, 1999). In practical terms, uncertainty is the "constant backdrop" of volatility that now colors everyday economic life (Erdem, 2023). Several contemporary forces are driving this uncertainty. Industry research highlights four primary domains of turmoil: **economic**, **political**, **health-related** and **environmental** (Walton & Perkins, 2017; Edelman, 2020). Economic shocks such as recessions or inflation spikes trigger widespread caution, reduced consumption and more value-seeking behavior (Nielsen, 2009). Political instability—for example, major geopolitical events or policy upheavals—can erode consumer confidence, especially in markets with pre-existing institutional distrust (Walton & Perkins, 2017). Large-scale health crises like pandemics heighten risk aversion and cause consumers to retreat to brands they deeply trust for safety and reliability (Edelman, 2020). Meanwhile, environmental and societal challenges (such as climate change or social unrest) are reshaping consumer values, particularly among younger generations who increasingly expect sustainability and ethical responsibility from the brands they support (Westcott et al., 2023). In short, uncertainty has many faces, but their combined impact is a consumer base that feels on unsteady ground.

A "New Norm" of Volatility. These concurrent crises have led experts to observe that *"uncertainty may be the new norm,"* making it difficult for anyone—consumers or businesses—to plan ahead with confidence. The result is a prevailing mood of caution. Consumers frequently report pessimistic expectations about the near future, dampening their willingness to spend or invest (Institute for Social Research, 2025). When two-thirds of consumers expect negative economic outcomes (e.g., higher unemployment or continued inflation), as recent surveys show, a defensive mindset takes hold (Institute for Social Research, 2025). This mindset is characterized by guarded finances and a search for stability. People respond to uncertainty by trying to *"guard wealth [and] health"*—cutting back on discretionary expenses and shoring up resources to ride out the storm (Dahlhoff, 2025; McCarthy, 1997). Notably, personal well-being needs come to the forefront as part of this response. About one-third of consumers report actively prioritizing wellness, mental health and social connection when uncertainty rises, effectively turning to self-care as a coping mechanism (Dahlhoff, 2025). In other words, when external factors feel beyond control, consumers focus on controlling what they can: their household budgets and their personal health and relationships.

Cognitive and Emotional Strains. Uncertainty doesn't only affect *what* consumers buy; it affects *how* they decide. Psychologically, ambiguity introduces **cognitive overload**—an excess of worry that makes decision-making more taxing. Under such strain, consumers simplify choices by relying on heuristics, gut feelings and familiar options (Murphy et al., 2020). For instance, rather than meticulously comparing every product feature or price, anxious shoppers are more likely to reach for brands they *know* or that carry a sense of trust and comfort. According to Deloitte research, in times of crisis consumers lean more on trusted brands and emotionally resonant cues (like a company's perceived purpose or past behavior) rather than parsing detailed product specifications (Cutten & Cousins, 2021). In essence, when the environment feels unpredictable, people seek anchors, whether that is a brand they have depended on before, or a message that provides hope.

Emotionally, uncertainty often triggers heightened anxiety and fear of the unknown. Consumers experience a strong **yearning for stability** and reassurance; they want to feel that someone (or something) solid is on their side when "everything else feels shaky." This leads them to desire support and guidance from the marketplace as well as from personal networks. In fact, a recent global study found that in periods of instability, nearly half of consumers actively want brands to offer them reassurance and hope—46% say they seek financial confidence (practical assurances that things will be okay), 44% look for practical solutions to immediate problems and 43% appreciate a hopeful vision for the future (Oberlin et al., n.d.). When their own outlook darkens, people look to brands for a semblance of steady guidance and optimism.

Similarly, many consumers crave small moments of positivity to cut through the gloom: over one-third say brands should deliver meaningful experiences *today*, 35% value the little "everyday" joys, and roughly one in three welcome even modest indulgences that make life feel worthwhile (Oberlin et al., n.d.). All of these findings underscore that consumer uncertainty is not simply an economic condition. It is a psychological state. In uncertain times, consumers are not purely rational actors weighing every transaction on price or utility; they are human beings seeking **safety, empathy and meaning** in their choices. They become cautious and price-sensitive, yes, but they also gravitate toward brands that address deeper emotional needs alongside functional ones.

Aversion to Loss. Uncertainty triggers several well-documented psychological biases and behaviors that drive consumers' decision-making. A cornerstone insight from behavioral economics is that people disproportionately fear losses relative to gains. This phenomenon, known as the *endowment effect* (or relatedly, loss aversion), means that individuals value what they might lose far more than an equivalent potential gain (Kahneman et al., 2008). In classic experiments, researchers found a "wide disparity" between how people price something to avoid losing it versus to acquire it, with losses weighed significantly heavier (Kahneman et al., 2008). This ingrained bias persists across repeated trials, indicating it is a deep-seated aspect of human psychology (Kahneman et al., 2008). In times of uncertainty, the endowment effect goes into overdrive: consumers become extremely risk-averse, preferring to hold onto what they have (savings, existing assets) rather than spend on new or uncertain outcomes. The result is fewer voluntary transactions and a general hesitation to make purchases—a behavioral tendency directly observed during volatile periods. In essence, when the future is ambiguous, the default consumer mindset is to *play it safe*.

Enduring Patterns of Consumer Behavior in Crisis

Economic and societal crises—from the Great Depression to the 2008 recession to the COVID-19 pandemic—have consistently triggered shifts in consumer behavior. While each crisis has unique aspects, many consumer responses are *psychologically rooted constants* that resurface time and again. These enduring patterns are driven by basic human instincts: avoiding loss, mitigating risk and seeking reassurance. Below, we outline three core behaviors that reliably emerge under uncertainty.

Frugality and Value Orientation

"Back to Basics" Spending. A near-universal response to uncertainty is a pullback to essential spending. Consumers instinctively cut discretionary expenditures and refocus on necessities when their economic outlook darkens. From the 1930s to the present, this flight to affordability, practicality and utility is repeatedly observed (Kantar, 2020; Nielsen, 2020). Historical anecdotes abound: during the Great Depression, for example, families prioritized basic goods and became intensely loyal to products that offered durability and value, which is a behavior that famously helped Kellogg's overtake Post in cereal sales by doubling down on radio advertising while others went quiet (Surowiecki, 2009). In the stagflation of the 1970s, brands like Levi's and Kodak succeeded by reinforcing messages of product longevity and emotional comfort rather than novelty, aligning with consumers' prudent mood (Olu, 2024; Regaudie, 2021).

Modern data echoes these patterns. Following the initial shock of COVID-19, 74% of consumers globally reported they were prioritizing essentials and affordability in their shopping (NIQ, 2022; see also Charm et al., 2020). This value-conscious mindset persisted through the inflationary cycle of 2022–2024, as rising prices pressured household budgets. Surveys in late 2023 found that 62% of global consumers had even switched brands to save money (Ipsos, 2023). The current inflation has also resulted in widespread changes in consumer purchasing habits, regardless of income level. A recent survey found that shopper anxiety is notable, with "56% of all shoppers not confident in the economy," driving more extensive product research (Hotz, 2025). In addition, in the current climate, impulse buying has sharply decreased from its peak in 2022, more than halving monthly impulse purchases (Hotz, 2025).

Critically, however, consumers *don't stop spending* in a crisis—they **reprioritize** it (Nielsen, 2009; Kantar, 2020). Money once spent on luxuries or new experiences might instead go toward savings or practical home goods. After the 2008 recession, for instance, thrifty behaviors went mainstream in Western markets. Suddenly it was "trendy to be thrifty," and value retailers thrived. Yet even in lean times, certain categories see **counter-cyclical spikes**: small treats and affordable indulgences, home entertainment or DIY projects, and health and self-care purchases often get a boost as consumers seek comfort or self-improvement at home. This means that while overall spending contracts, the *allocation* of spending shifts. Brands that offer either a strong **value proposition** or a justifiable little luxury can still win a place in tightened wallets. Recent research confirms that **consumers are looking for value, not necessarily the lowest prices**. This study shows also that global values, such as family and honesty, can enable brands to remain connected with consumers in spite of economic uncertainties (Bonert, 2025).

Trust in Familiar Brands

Flight to Safety in Brands. In uncertain periods, **trust becomes a primary currency** in the marketplace. Consumers show a marked tendency to stick with familiar, well-established brands that they believe will be dependable when everything else is not. Edelman's global data during the COVID-19 crisis indicated that 60% of consumers turned to brands they were "absolutely sure they can trust" during the pandemic (Edelman, 2020). More broadly, the Edelman Trust Barometer reports have found that a majority of consumers now evaluate brands based on trust attributes. For instance, 58% say they will buy or boycott companies depending on the brand's values and conduct, expecting businesses to step up on issues like climate change, public health or equity in times of societal pressure (Edelman, 2022). In other words, **people not only seek reliable products, but they also seek brands whose values and behaviors reassure them in a crisis**.

During past downturns, the brands that remained visible, communicative and helpful often deepened their trust advantage. A classic example is Kellogg's maintaining advertising and a positive presence through the Depression, which won them lasting customer loyalty. Similarly, in more recent memory, some companies that responded generously or flexibly during COVID-19 earned goodwill that has outlasted the pandemic itself. Studies in 2025 noted that simply offering discounts is not enough to secure loyalty. **Personalized engagement, consistency and shared values** are what deepen long-term trust (Bloomreach, 2025). In the late 1970s "high-friction" economy, brands like Levi's remained culturally relevant and emotionally resonant, which sustained their appeal despite economic turmoil (Olu, 2024; Regaudie, 2021).

The lesson is clear: when uncertainty rises, consumers flock to brands *they believe in*. Trust becomes a critical differentiator—a kind of insurance policy in the consumer's mind. Brands that have cultivated trust through quality, transparency and good corporate citizenship tend to retain and even grow their customer base as anxious consumers play it safe. Conversely, any breach of trust during these times (such as a poor crisis response or a product failure) can be devastating, as negative word-of-mouth will be amplified by the heightened emotions of the moment. Consumers have long memories for brands that either stood by them or let them down when stakes were high.

Emotional Anchoring and Reassurance

Seeking Empathy and Connection. Beyond practical and financial concerns, consumers in crisis are driven by a profound need for emotional reassurance. Uncertainty flips on an inner "survival mode" switch: people feel threatened by the unknown and naturally seek sources of comfort, hope, and belonging. As a result, **emotionally resonant brands**—those that convey empathy, authenticity and optimism—hold special appeal. Research shows that in high-anxiety periods, advertising that speaks to unity, stability or positivity significantly outperforms hard-sell or purely product-focused messaging. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, marketing campaigns centered on themes of togetherness, national pride and emotional well-being resonated far better with the public than standard promotional ads (Reel 360, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumer insights firms repeatedly found that messages of empathy ("we're in this together") and support were more effective than urgency or scarcity appeals (Murphy et al., 2020; Kantar, 2020). One analysis of 2020 advertising noted that **empathy outperformed urgency**—brands that acknowledged the difficulty of the moment and offered understanding saw stronger engagement than those pushing "act now" or novelty-driven slogans. A notable creative example was Guinness's St. Patrick's Day ad in 2020, which forwent the usual celebratory tone; instead of encouraging parties, it urged quiet reflection at home and patience until "we can all march again"—striking a chord by aligning the brand with the sober reality (Petrat, 2020).

In uncertain times, consumers also look for **authenticity** and humanity from brands. They are quick to sense (and dismiss) anything that feels opportunistic or insincere. Brands that communicate with genuine warmth can foster an emotional bond. One study of COVID-era advertising found that when consumers perceived a brand's message as authentic, it significantly boosted their sense of the brand's *warmth*, essentially making the brand come across as more caring and relatable, and this led to more positive brand attitudes and higher engagement intentions (Yang et al., 2023). Authenticity signals that the brand "stands by the consumer's side" and truly understands their struggles, which in turn builds trust (Yang et al., 2023). Thus, enduring consumer behavior in crisis includes a greater openness to brand communications that provide psychological safety: people want to hear "we understand what you're going through" and "we're here to help." Campaigns that hit these notes—from Procter & Gamble's heartfelt "Thank You, Mom" tributes reinforcing the importance of care (Brandvertising, 2024) to any number of companies highlighting community support initiatives—tend to win not just attention but genuine appreciation in tough times. In fact, Accenture (2021) reported that the pandemic prompted many consumers to re-evaluate what matters most in their lives, with purchasing decisions becoming **more driven by personal values and emotional**

connection than by price or quality alone. When everything feels uncertain, the **feelings** a brand can evoke often matter as much as, if not more than, the functional value it offers. Even in current polarized times, the world's top global values are stable, and brands should leverage these universal values, such as family, honesty, self-reliance, self-esteem, authenticity, and enjoying life, in marketing products and services (Bonert, 2025).

Emerging Shifts in Consumer Expectations and Digital Trust

While foundational consumer instincts (value-seeking, trust, emotional comfort) remain consistent, each new crisis era also brings **evolving behaviors** shaped by current technologies, cultural trends and the specific nature of the turmoil. In recent years, a few notable shifts have emerged in how consumers evaluate brands and make choices under uncertainty. These include changes in the **channels of trust and information**, elevated expectations around brand values, and more fragmented, even polarized, consumer responses due to the compounding of multiple crises.

Digital-First Trust Ecosystems. With the rise of digital media and e-commerce, the way consumers form trust has increasingly moved online. During earlier crises, people often leaned on traditional media or in-person reassurance (for instance, radio was a dominant medium for trust during World War II). By contrast, in the 2008 recession and especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns, digital channels became the primary interface between consumers and brands (Nielsen, 2021). With stores closed or restricted, consumers flocked to online shopping, social media and streaming platforms for both information and retail therapy. This has made factors like user experience (UX), online reviews and influencer credibility much more pivotal in shaping trust. Recent research affirms that consumers are demonstrating an increased reliance on social media for discovery and shopping, with a third of all consumers likely to purchase via social media platforms (Bonert, 2025). In addition, consumers are using multiple digital behaviors simultaneously, making shopper journeys complex and integrated rather than linear. The average shopper has 10 touchpoints on their journey to purchase (Hotz, 2025).

In uncertain times, a clunky website or unresponsive online customer service can undermine trust quickly, whereas a seamless digital experience and visible positive reviews can reassure wary buyers who can't inspect products in person. Consumers now expect **frictionless, personalized online experiences** as a baseline (Deloitte, 2021). A brand's digital conduct—data privacy, tone of communication on social media, speed of delivery, empathy in chatbot interactions—all contribute to whether anxious consumers feel safe doing business with it. In short, trust is no longer built only through face-to-face interactions or decades of presence; it can be accelerated or lost in the span of a viral tweet or a YouTube review. Brands must recognize that their *digital trust footprint* (from cybersecurity to how they handle misinformation or customer complaints publicly) is under the microscope, especially when people are on edge.

Higher Expectations of Brand Values and Purpose. Another shift is that consumers, especially younger ones, now **expect brands to take a stand** and reflect their values—even in turbulent times. Millennials and Gen Z, in particular, have been vocal that brands should not "sit on the sidelines" regarding social and environmental issues. According to the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, consumers increasingly see societal leadership as a core function of business (Edelman, 2023). They reward companies that are proactive about causes they care about and punish those perceived as indifferent or misaligned. Crises often amplify this scrutiny: a health crisis might elevate expectations around employee welfare or community aid, while political or social turmoil can lead consumers to examine a brand's public statements or lack thereof. Recent surveys show that a significant portion of young adults will cancel brands that conflict with their values, and conversely, they will show fierce loyalty to brands that demonstrate integrity and positive impact (Edelman, 2023; WARC, 2023). This **values-based selectivity** means that during uncertain times, purchase decisions aren't governed only by price or convenience, they are also a form of symbolic choice. A brand that behaves ethically, communicates transparently and contributes to the greater good offers an extra layer of assurance to consumers: it signals, "we're doing the right thing even when times are hard," which can strengthen emotional loyalty. However, it's worth noting that taking stands can be a double-edged sword. In highly polarized environments (for example, the post-2020 landscape in the United States), brand activism can both attract passionate support and provoke equally passionate backlash (Edelman, 2023). The key is authenticity. Consumers can tell when a company's proclaimed values are just for show. In summary, uncertain times elevate the importance of **brand authenticity and purpose**. People are watching not just *what* you sell, but *who* you are and *what you stand for* when the chips are down.

"Polycrisis"[1] Fatigue and Divergent Behaviors. A distinctive aspect of the early 2020s is the *layering* of crises—economic strain, a global pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, climate events—sometimes all happening at once. This cumulative stress is often dubbed a "polycrisis," and its effect on consumers is complex. Rather than producing one uniform reaction, it has led to **fragmentation in consumer behavior**. In other words, people are not all reacting the same way; they are splintering into different coping strategies. For example, faced with ongoing uncertainty, one sizeable group of consumers doubles down on **saving and frugality**, determined to build a personal safety net at all costs. Another segment swings to the opposite: adopting a *"You Only Live Once"* mentality—spending on small joys or once-in-a-lifetime experiences because they feel tomorrow isn't

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[1] The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2023 introduces the term "polycrisis" to describe the interconnected nature of current global challenges, emphasizing that the combined impact of these crises exceeds the sum of their parts. This complex environment leads to varied consumer responses, necessitating that brands adopt flexible and nuanced strategies to address the diverse needs and behaviors emerging from these overlapping crises (World Economic Forum, 2023).

guaranteed (Bender et al., 2024; Oberlin et al., n.d.). Indeed, Ipsos data shows a marked rise in agreement with statements like *"The important thing is to enjoy life today; tomorrow will take care of itself,"* jumping from just over 50% a decade ago to nearly 65% in 2024—with the highest agreement among Gen Z (69%) and Millennials (65%). This reflects a sort of **resilient carpe diem** mindset as a counterweight to prolonged anxiety. Meanwhile, other consumers seek meaning and connection, channeling their energy into supporting local businesses or community projects as a way to find positivity amid chaos. The point is, the more overlapping the crises, the more **heterogeneous** consumer responses become. Unlike a single recession where most consumers might uniformly cut spending, a polycrisis produces some who hunker down and some who rebel against the gloom with indulgences. There are "push-and-pull tensions" between values vs. value, optimism vs. realism, saving for security vs. splurging for happiness (Bender et al., 2024). Recent research confirms this divergence: nearly half of Americans increased their savings in late 2023—many to build an emergency fund (48%), others to afford future indulgences when possible (45%) (Ipsos, 2023).

Simultaneously, measures of consumer sentiment (e.g., Deloitte Insights, 2025) indicate that even as macro-economic outlooks improve on paper, many consumers remain cautious about discretionary spending, suggesting a persistent split between the cautiously optimistic and the still anxious. For brands, this fragmentation means **there is no one-size-fits-all consumer profile in uncertainty**. Marketers must be attuned to multiple co-existing mindsets and be prepared to respond with agility. It underscores why traditional demographic or "average consumer" approaches falter in turbulent times. Within the same market, you may find one cohort bargain-hunting aggressively while another selectively splurges on meaningful treats. The onus is on brands to pick up these signals and adapt messaging and offerings to serve different needs without alienating others.

Strategic Implications for Brands

In the face of these consumer behavior patterns and emerging shifts, brands need clear strategies to remain relevant, trusted and resilient. The following sections outline strategic implications and recommended actions for brands across four key areas: (a) building emotional anchoring and trust, (b) delivering value through pricing and smart segmentation, (c) adjusting advertising tone and creative messaging and (d) tactical planning and investment during uncertainty. These insights synthesize industry research and case examples to guide marketers in crafting responses that meet consumers where they are in uncertain times.

Emotional Anchoring and Brand Trust

In an unstable environment, **brand trust and emotional connection are lifelines**. Consumers are fundamentally looking for brands to be a source of stability, honesty and support when much else feels unreliable. For marketers, this means doubling down on strategies that reinforce trust and provide emotional anchoring for customers.

Be a Trustworthy Partner. Trust is hard-won and easily lost, especially under the microscope of crisis. Brands must **prove their reliability** in every interaction. High-trust brands benefit from a "halo effect." Anxious customers will stick with the names they believe in, granting benefit of the doubt even if cheaper or newer alternatives beckon. This is why companies with strong brand equity coming into a crisis often see shallower revenue declines and quicker recoveries (Walter, 2025). To cultivate this resilience, brands should obsess over product quality, consistency and customer experience. *No surprises* should be the rule: deliver on promises, keep service levels high and address issues transparently. Any breach of trust (for example, a poorly handled product recall or a perceived price-gouge) can have amplified negative repercussions when consumers are already on edge, so crisis management and PR must be especially deft. On the positive side, brands that visibly "have their customers' backs" in tough times can create lasting goodwill. This might involve extending warranties, offering generous return policies or publicly standing up for customers' interests. Such actions signal that the relationship isn't merely transactional.

Trust also extends to larger societal roles. As noted, many consumers expect brands to show leadership beyond profits. Communicating a sincere commitment to safety, fairness or community well-being can strengthen trust, as long as it's backed by real deeds. (For instance, if a brand champions climate action or racial justice in its messaging, it should be actively investing in those causes internally; otherwise, perceived hypocrisy will erode trust quickly.)

Show Empathy and Authenticity. Empathy is the emotional embodiment of trust. To be an anchor for consumers, brands need to communicate *with genuine human empathy*. This starts with understanding the consumer's state of mind: fears, hopes and daily challenges. Brands should acknowledge the situation ("we know it's tough out there") without dwelling in doom, and offer messages that uplift or comfort. An empathetic tone involves listening and responding. For example, engaging with customer feedback and adjusting policies to show *"we hear you."*

Authenticity is equally crucial. As discussed, consumers are highly receptive to warmth and humanity from brands during crises, and they are quick to detect insincerity. Communication should therefore use a **humanized voice**, whether it's a CEO letter or a social media post, it should sound like it's from real people who care, not a faceless corporation. Tactics like sharing real-life customer stories or even user-generated content can help convey authenticity (Yang et al., 2023). A recent study found that authentic messaging significantly boosted consumers' sense of a brand's warmth and led to higher engagement (Yang et al., 2023). The takeaway: speak *with* your audience, not *at* them. Brands that mastered this, such as those who answered customer concerns in plain language or even added a bit of self-deprecating humor about the situation, often saw an uptick in loyalty. In contrast, boilerplate "we care about our customers" statements not backed by action tend to ring hollow or even irritate cynical consumers. **Empathetic brands** meet consumers emotionally where they are and offer a sense of camaraderie and support.

Address Key Emotional Needs. Beyond general empathy, research shows there are specific *emotional benefits* consumers seek from brands in times of crisis. Neuroscience research by Steidl (2024) identified four key benefits: **leadership, escape, belonging and action**. Brands that can fulfill some of these needs stand to deepen their connection with customers:

- **Leadership:** A striking 83% of consumers in one 2023 survey said they wanted strong leadership from brands amid uncertainty. They want to see companies take charge, instill confidence and point a way forward. This doesn't mean brands should overstep into politics or policy, but rather that they should project competence and optimism. For example, a brand can demonstrate leadership by providing expert guidance (financial tips from a bank, health advice from a wellness company) or by being an early mover in adapting to new conditions. Simply put, consumers feel more optimistic when they sense "someone capable is at the helm." Brands can evoke this by confidently communicating plans and solutions for customers.
- **Escape:** 76% of consumers said they appreciate brands that help them momentarily escape from stress. This is where a bit of lightheartedness or creativity goes a long way. Tactics like humorous ads, entertaining content or gamified experiences can provide *relief* and a brief distraction from worries. Even small touches, such as a witty push notification or a fun packaging design, can spark joy. During COVID-19 lockdowns, for instance, streaming services and video game companies became vital "escape" outlets, and even traditionally serious brands found success with campaigns that let consumers laugh or daydream. Importantly, escape should be offered in a tone that remains respectful of the context (i.e., fun without appearing oblivious to real concerns).
- **Belonging:** 52% of consumers in the study sought a sense of belonging, a yearning not to feel alone in hard times. Brands can foster this by creating or nurturing communities. This could mean online groups, forums or social media campaigns that encourage customers to share stories or support each other. Some brands have hosted virtual gatherings or challenges that bring their users together (for example, fitness brands doing live group workouts from home). Others have rallied people around a cause, turning customers into a community with a shared mission (such as a charity drive or mutual aid initiative). By behaving like a *facilitator of connections*, a brand can transform into something of a tribe, wherein members lift each other up and the brand is the common thread. This sense of

belonging can significantly strengthen loyalty. The brand is no longer just a product, but a community symbol.

- **Action:** Although ranked lower than the other needs, many consumers appreciate brands that **empower them to take action** in the face of a crisis. This could be simple, constructive actions that give a sense of agency or contribution to a greater good. For instance, a food brand might share easy recipes for using leftovers and reducing waste, implicitly letting customers feel they are helping a broader issue. Or an apparel brand might provide instructions to upcycle old clothes, tying into sustainability. The key is to offer actions that are *easy and immediately rewarding*— small wins that help people feel a bit more in control or helpful. When a brand enables positive action (donating with a purchase, learning a new skill via a product, etc.), it not only improves the customer's self-perception but also associates the brand with empowerment rather than helplessness.

By identifying which of these emotional needs align best with the brand's domain and audience, and then actively addressing them, companies can create a **deeper emotional bond**. The net effect is that when consumers feel a brand genuinely cares for their well-being (be it emotional or practical), they respond with greater trust and loyalty. They remember who provided calm and confidence versus who stayed silent or purely commercial. As one industry leader summarized: those marketers who respond to uncertainty with authentic empathy and inventive value solutions are best positioned to thrive (Oberlin et al., n.d.). Consumers will remember which brands lifted them up, offered help, or simply made them smile when things were tough—and those are the brands they will stick with when stability returns.

Value, Pricing and Segmentation

Economic uncertainty inevitably pushes value to the forefront of consumer decision-making. Brands must therefore reassess their pricing strategies, value propositions and even their target segments to stay aligned with shifting consumer needs. The challenge is to **deliver value and affordability without eroding brand equity**, and to adjust targeting to the new consumer landscape of a crisis.

Reinforce Your Value Proposition. In downturns, consumers become much more price-sensitive and deal-seeking. However, competing on price alone can be a race to the bottom that damages the brand long-term. Instead, brands should reinforce *why they are worth what they charge*—i.e., their unique value proposition. This can mean highlighting durability, quality or cost-savings over time. For example, a marketing message might shift from aspirational luxury to emphasizing how a product saves money in the long run (energy-efficient appliances, fuel-efficient cars, etc.). If your product has a clear functional superiority or a bundle of benefits that justify a premium, spell that out. Remind customers of the old adage "you get what you pay for," but do it by demonstrating tangible value.

Value doesn't always mean lowest price; it means the best balance of benefits to cost. Brands that maintain this focus can defend their pricing even as consumers scrutinize spending. Research cautions against diluting the brand or slashing prices in panic. Doing so might gain a short-term boost but can hurt the brand's ability to recover (Quelch & Jocz, 2009). Customers often interpret deep discounts as a sign of weakness or reduced quality, unless carefully managed.

Flexible Pricing and Tiered Offerings. One smart approach is to introduce **tiered offerings** to cater to varying budgets (Dahlhoff, 2025). This means providing products or packages at different price points, such as a "good, better, best" range, so that cost-conscious customers have an option that keeps them within your brand franchise rather than abandoning it. Many companies that succeeded through the 2020 economic strain did so because they had budget sub-brands or scaled-down versions of their services that value-focused shoppers could downshift to (Dahlhoff, 2025). For instance, a software company might offer a basic version of its app for free or low cost (with the option to upgrade later), or a food company might launch a simpler product line at lower price per unit. The key is to **avoid forcing an all-or-nothing choice** on strained consumers. By offering a spectrum, you enable a customer to stay with your brand at a comfortable price point, rather than lose them to a cheaper competitor entirely. Tiered pricing, if done carefully, can expand your market in tough times and pay dividends in loyalty when purchasing power returns.

"Little Luxuries" and Add-On Value. Counterintuitive as it may sound, even in belt-tightening times people seek small indulgences—the affordable treats that provide a mental lift. Many consumers will cut out big expenses (vacations, big-ticket electronics) but might *allow themselves a $5 treat* as a pick-me-up. Brands can tap into this by positioning certain offerings as **"small luxuries"**—guilt-free indulgences that are inexpensive but deliver outsized delight (Dahlhoff, 2025). For example, gourmet coffee, premium ice cream or a special streaming movie rental might flourish when restaurant dining or travel is down. If you can identify a product in your portfolio that can play this role, consider spotlighting it in marketing. Emphasize the emotional reward it offers ("you deserve a little treat"). This strategy keeps your brand in consumers' lives in a positive way and can generate goodwill. Additionally, look at ways to add *extra value* to what customers are already buying. For instance, bundling a free small gift or bonus service with a purchase. These extras can feel like a luxury even if they cost the company little. The psychological effect of getting something "extra" can boost customer satisfaction without a direct price cut.

Promotions That Build Goodwill. Promotional tactics should be calibrated to show that you're **on the customer's side** financially (Dahlhoff, 2025). Rather than indiscriminate discounts, focus on promotions that address consumers' core concerns. Strategies like *everyday low pricing* (keeping prices consistently fair and not fluctuating), or *loyalty rewards* (extra points, free shipping for members) can encourage continued patronage through tough times. Thoughtful promotions could include "buy more, save more" deals that help frugal shoppers stock up (e.g., bulk purchase bonuses) or trade-in/trade-up programs that acknowledge customers' need to save. It's also smart to target promotions to areas of acute pain: if certain product categories have become more expensive due to tariffs or shortages, a temporary price break there shows empathy for consumers' "pinch points" (Dahlhoff, 2025). The overarching goal is to **demonstrate solidarity**—that the brand is not tone-deaf to economic hardships. For instance, many utility companies have run campaigns waiving late fees or offering budget billing plans during recessions, explicitly communicating "we'll get through this together." Such moves, even if they have a short-term cost, can pay off in loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

Rethinking Consumer Segmentation. Perhaps one of the biggest strategic shifts brands need to make in uncertain times is how they segment and target consumers. Traditional segmentation (by demographics or static personas) often breaks down during crises because **consumer behavior can change rapidly and unpredictably**. Marketers should consider segmenting by *mindset and behavior* under stress. A classic framework from the last major recession categorized consumers into four psychological segments: **"Slam-on-the-Brakes," "Pained-but-Patient," "Comfortably Well-Off"** and **"Live-for-Today"** (Quelch & Jocz, 2009). In brief: *Slam-on-the-Brakes* consumers drastically reduce all spending; *Pained-but-Patient* consumers cut back but with some optimism for recovery; *Comfortably Well-Off* individuals continue largely as normal due to secure finances and *Live-for-Today* consumers carry on spending as usual, being the least concerned about saving. Each of these segments reacts differently to marketing offers. For example, the first group might only respond to essential value deals, whereas the last might still engage with premium products or experiences. Using such a model can help brands tailor their approach (e.g., focusing marketing of lower-priced options to the "slam-on-the-brakes" crowd, while still marketing aspirational items to those relatively unaffected).

More recent research suggests even more nuanced segmentation during a polycrisis. Kantar's 2020 COVID-19 global barometer emphasized segmenting by **emotional response**—identifying who is fearful, who is hopeful, who is resilient—rather than only by age or income, because the emotional state drives their purchasing behavior (Kantar, 2020). Similarly, analysts observed emerging "coping segments" like the **"Protectors"** (very health-conscious and risk-averse), **"Fighters"** (optimistically finding ways to adapt and even thrive) and **"Pragmatists"** (practical and somewhat emotionally detached in their choices) (Murphy et al., 2020). A company might find that its customer base now includes these different mindsets across usual demographic lines. The implication is that brands should **reassess their customer segmentation** at the onset of uncertainty. It's valuable to conduct fresh research (surveys, social listening, customer interviews) to identify how your customers are feeling and grouping themselves. Are they terrified and cutting all non-essentials? Are they coping by treating themselves occasionally? Are they looking for brands that align with their values more than ever? Use this insight to adjust targeting and messaging. For example, a luxury brand might temporarily shift focus to the "Comfortably Well-Off" and "Live-for-Today" segments who are still buying, and pull back mass-market advertising that would fall on deaf ears for the "slam-on-the-brakes" majority. On the other hand, a value brand might double down on communications to the hard-hit segments, emphasizing empathy and practical support. The ability to **dynamically segment**, and even anticipate when consumers will move from one segment to another as conditions evolve, can differentiate brands that maintain relevance from those that miss the mark. In sum, uncertainty demands a more fluid and empathetic approach to segmentation: know the varied faces of your consumer in crisis, and meet each with an appropriate proposition.

Advertising Tone, Messaging and Creative Levers

Marketing communications are often the most visible way a brand interacts with consumers during a crisis. Getting the tone and content of advertising right is critical. The wrong message can seem tone-deaf or exploitative, while the right message can forge a powerful emotional bond. Below are key principles for advertising and messaging in uncertain times, along with illustrative examples:

Stay Attuned and Empathetic. The foundation of crisis-time messaging is **empathy**—showing that the brand understands the consumer's context. This starts with closely monitoring the audience's mood and needs. What are customers saying on social media or in customer service calls? What anxieties or hopes are prevalent? Brands should be prepared to pivot their campaigns in response to these insights. It's a good practice to rigorously *pre-test* ad creative in such times, to ensure it resonates as intended. Any hint of being out-of-touch can be magnified in a crisis. For instance, humorous ads that might work in good times could fall flat or seem insensitive when people are worried about their health or finances, unless that humor is carefully calibrated (more on humor shortly). The mantra **"read the room"** applies: acknowledge hardships where appropriate, and avoid excessive bragging or flashy extravagance that might alienate struggling consumers. Empathetic messaging could be as straightforward as, "We know many families are feeling uncertain right now. Here's how we're here to help…." Such an approach signals *"we get it"* to the audience. During the early pandemic, many brands quickly updated their slogans or content. For example, Coca-Cola tweaked its outdoor signage to encourage social distancing (e.g., spreading out the letters of its logo) as a show of solidarity. While not every gesture needs to be that public, the guiding idea is to **align with consumers' reality**. When a brand's communications demonstrate listening and understanding, consumers are more receptive and even grateful. Indeed, strong communications can even accelerate brand affinity in a crisis, but only if they *genuinely* reflect the audience's situation and values (Erdem, 2023).

Positive Messaging (With a Conscience). Emotional marketing remains as potent as ever during crises, but it must be handled with care. It's important to recognize that the basic ways people react to creative content *don't disappear* in tough times. Humor can still make people laugh, heartfelt stories can still move them to tears. Human emotion is not on pause. As such, brands should **continue to deploy emotional storytelling**, leaning towards the *uplifting* end of the spectrum. Research indicates that consumers particularly welcome messages of hope and optimism when surrounded by negative news (Murphy et al., 2020; Kantar, 2020). **Brands can serve as a light in the darkness**, inspiring people or giving them something to smile about. That said, there is a fine balance: positivity should not come across as naive cheerleading or denial of reality. The most effective ads often blend **optimism with empathy**—a tone one might call "hopeful realism." For example, Prudential's "Now What?" campaign (launched in a period of economic uncertainty) acknowledged the anxieties people had about the future, but then encouraged viewers to take proactive, empowering steps for their financial well-being in a positive light. Rather than playing on fear, it struck an *optimistic but honest* note: yes, the future is uncertain, *but you have the power to plan for it*. This kind of messaging motivates and comforts simultaneously. Consumers respond well to brands that can inspire them without seeming oblivious. The creative guideline is: **be uplifting, but stay grounded**. Use imagery and language that evoke resilience, togetherness and a better tomorrow, while making sure not to trivialize anyone's pain. Avoid clichés like "Now more than ever…" unless you truly have something meaningful to add. And if using user stories or examples, represent the struggles as well as the triumphs to keep it relatable.

Communicate Help and Solutions. When consumers are anxious, they appreciate concrete evidence that a brand is *actively helping*. Over half of consumers say it's a good idea for brands to communicate the specific steps they are taking to support customers or communities in times of difficulty. This might include measures like special financing options, lenient policies, charitable contributions or innovations tailored to the crisis. If your brand is doing something positive—**tell people about it**. For example, if a retailer offers free cancellations or extended return windows to give shoppers peace of mind, that should be highlighted in messaging. If a hotel chain is donating rooms to healthcare workers or a software company is giving free access to remote learning tools, those stories can become part of your advertising narrative. Such messages serve a dual purpose: they demonstrate the brand's values in action (building goodwill and trust), and they also effectively market the service by showing its relevance. Of course, authenticity is crucial here. **Empty platitudes or vague promises will backfire.** Audiences are skeptical of feel-good ads that aren't backed by substance ("We're all in this together" rings hollow if the brand is simultaneously issuing layoffs or price hikes with no show of empathy). So any touted effort should be genuine, concrete and not overhyped. It's better to humbly announce a modest but real action (like donating 1% of sales to a relief fund) than to boast about caring in general terms. When done sincerely, communicating how you are helping can humanize the brand immensely. It frames the company as part of the community, not just a seller. Even purely commercial messages can incorporate this. For instance, an ad can lead with "Here's what we're doing to support our customers right now…" before introducing a relevant product offer. The goal is to make the consumer feel, *"This brand is actually trying to make my life easier in this chaos."*

Maintain Brand Identity and Purpose. Under pressure, some brands are tempted to overhaul their image or tone to chase short-term trends (for example, suddenly trying to appear "cheap" if value is in vogue, or going completely silent for fear of saying the wrong thing). Caution is warranted here: while adaptation is necessary, **abandoning your core brand identity is not**. Strong brands stand for something distinctive and meaningful—those qualities should not be discarded in a crisis, but rather **reaffirmed** in a way that's relevant to the moment. In practice, this means continuing to project your brand's *purpose and values* consistently. If your brand is known for premium quality, you might adjust messaging to emphasize longevity and reliability of your product (rather than luxury for luxury's sake), but you shouldn't suddenly pretend to be a budget player. If your brand's tone is typically fun and irreverent, you can keep some of that spirit—just maybe dialed to a more gentle, supportive humor rather than edgy satire. Consumers still want the familiar comfort of the brands they love, just delivered in a tone suitable for current conditions.

Research from past recessions found that brands which *"double down"* on their core values and differentiation fare better in retaining customer loyalty (Binet, 2022). By contrast, those that went generic or hyper-reactive lost some of what made them special. A crisis is a test of brand authenticity: if you've preached customer-centric values, now is the time to live them. If you've built a reputation on innovation, show how you're innovating your way through the challenge. Maintaining brand identity also aids recognition. In a noisy, confused media environment, a consistent brand voice cuts through and reminds customers why they trust you. Thus, **adapt messaging and tactics, but don't lose your brand's soul**. The most effective approach is a delicate balance: adjust your creative executions to fit the context (e.g., visuals showing family at home instead of large crowds if social distancing is a concern), yet ensure these adjustments reinforce your enduring brand promise rather than contradict it.

Tone and Creativity: Examples of Adaptation. Some of the best guidance comes from real campaigns that succeeded in uncertain times by tapping into the consumer mindset. Consider a few illustrative examples (Oberlin et al., n.d.):

- ***Prudential's "Now What?" Campaign**:* As mentioned, Prudential reframed financial planning during an uneasy economic period by acknowledging consumers' "Now what?" feeling after life disruptions. The ads featured scenarios like starting a new career or family, then posed the question of how to plan for these hopeful life moments despite uncertainty. By coupling a **serious understanding** of uncertainty with an **empowering tone**, Prudential struck optimistic realism. The campaign offered reassurance that planning for the future is still possible and within one's control, which provided both comfort and a motivating nudge. Importantly, it avoided scare tactics about financial insecurity and instead visualized positive outcomes (retirement dreams, etc.), thereby inspiring action rather than paralysis. This approach strengthened Prudential's image as a trusted, empathetic guide in finance.

- ***Heinz's "Irrational Love" Campaign****:* Heinz leaned into the idea of simple comforts by celebrating people's irrational love for Heinz ketchup—a familiar, even nostalgic product. They collected passionate fan testimonials and quirky stories about how much people adore Heinz ketchup on everything. By elevating an everyday condiment into a source of joy and comfort, the brand tapped into consumers' desire for **small delights** during tough times. The campaign's warmth and gentle humor fostered a sense of community among Heinz enthusiasts (essentially saying, "we're all in this together—and isn't it nice that something as simple as ketchup can make us happy?"). It's a great example of finding a *positive emotional hook* in the product truth. Heinz didn't change who they were; they always stood for comfort food and familiarity, but they dialed up that message to resonate with the current emotional climate.
- ***DoorDash's "Self-Love Bouquet" Campaign****:* This food delivery brand used cheeky humor to encourage treating yourself, especially relevant during lockdowns when many were isolated. The idea was a "bouquet" of one's favorite foods that you send to yourself—reframing food delivery as an act of self-care. The tone was upbeat, slightly irreverent (playing on the tradition of sending flowers, but doing it with burgers and fries, for example), and crucially **judgment-free**. It acknowledged that, yes, everyone is stressed and perhaps lonely, and it's perfectly fine—even great—to indulge yourself with something you love. This campaign resonated by mixing empathy (recognizing people's emotional state) with humor (lightening the mood). It positioned DoorDash as a facilitator of small joys and emphasized a message of self-compassion. The brand saw increased engagement, particularly among younger consumers, because it met them where they were emotionally and provided a delightful escape.

Each of these examples succeeded by following the principles discussed: they were **empathetic to consumer feelings, culturally attuned to the moment and focused on delivering either reassurance, optimism or comic relief** as needed. They also each stayed true to their brand's identity—a financial security company gave guidance, a food brand spread joy through beloved taste and a delivery service championed convenience and fun. The overarching lesson is that advertising during uncertain times should neither go silent nor blare the same old sales pitch. Instead, it should **recalibrate**—infusing communications with humanity, emotional intelligence and relevance. Consumers will remember the brands that not only acknowledged what they were going through, but also added value to their day—whether by solving a problem, inspiring a hopeful outlook or simply providing a moment of laughter. Done well, crisis-time advertising can create *deeply loyal customers* who feel a personal connection to the brand story.

Tactical Planning and Investment

Beyond messaging and positioning, thriving in uncertainty requires savvy tactical decisions in marketing planning and budgeting. Brands must balance prudence with boldness—cutting waste and managing risk, but not choking off the investments that will drive future growth. Several expert frameworks and recommendations can guide marketers in making these hard decisions:

Les Binet's Framework: Balancing Risk and Brand Support. Marketing effectiveness guru Les Binet has outlined practical guidelines for marketing in turbulent times, emphasizing that companies should **manage risk carefully while continuing to support the brand** (Binet, 2022). Key elements of this approach include:

- **Reduce Risk with Data and Testing:** In an unpredictable environment, it's wise to rely on evidence over instinct. Use data analytics—like market mix modeling or controlled A/B tests—to understand what truly drives sales and what doesn't. During stable periods, some inefficiencies can hide under overall growth, but in a downturn every dollar counts. Identify which campaigns, channels or segments are underperforming and can be trimmed without significant loss. Conversely, find the marketing activities that are still delivering solid returns and protect those. By testing initiatives on a small scale before rolling out (for example, piloting a promotion in one region), you lower the risk of big mistakes. A data-driven approach provides a safety net for decision-making when intuition might be clouded by stress or bias.
- **Ground Plans in Market Reality:** It's crucial to understand how your specific category is affected by the crisis. Analyze whether your industry is poised to shrink, hold steady or even grow (some categories like certain consumer goods actually spiked during COVID-19, for instance). Also assess **price sensitivities**. Are your customers now extremely price-conscious, or is your product a necessity that people will pay for regardless? If projections show your category is contracting, you might need to adjust growth expectations and refocus on defending share. If inflation is a factor and customers are trading down, maybe emphasize value packs or smaller sizes. The context should inform strategy: a brand in a hard-hit sector may allocate more budget to retention and core products, whereas one in a resilient sector might go after new customer acquisition to capitalize on weaker competitors.

- **Optimize Pricing and Promotions First:** Binet suggests tackling your **pricing strategy and promotions** before making drastic ad budget cuts. Pricing is a very immediate lever. A slight tweak can quickly stimulate demand or protect margins. Review if your prices are competitive given the new landscape. This doesn't always mean dropping list prices; it could involve more targeted discounts, time-limited deals or better promotional bundles that add value. The idea is to ensure you're not losing customers at the point of sale due to pricing friction that can be alleviated. Also, promotions might shift focus: for example, rather than broad brand campaigns, you might temporarily lean into tactical offers that drive purchase from fence-sitters who are looking for deals. However, ensure promotions don't permanently damage price perception; they should be framed as special support or limited-time savings, not a devaluation of the product.
- **Use Brand Advertising to Shore Up Value:** Even as you get pricing right, continue investing in **brand advertising** to reinforce why your product is worth its price. Especially if you've had to adjust pricing or offer deals, brand communications can bolster the perceived value that justifies choosing your brand over a cheaper substitute. For example, an ad highlighting your product's superior quality or your company's heritage can remind consumers why it's worth sticking with you. Brand advertising in a downturn essentially works to **protect your margins** by maintaining willingness to pay and loyalty, so you're not forced into deeper discounts. It's a counterbalance to the necessary value tactics, ensuring you don't train customers to only buy on sale. A classic finding in marketing is that brands which keep up some level of brand-building during recessions recover faster, because they haven't let their brand equity erode.
- **Adjust the Ad Budget, Don't Slash and Burn:** History and research have shown that going completely dark in advertising can be harmful (ARF, 2023; ARF, 2018). If possible, avoid the knee-jerk reaction of halting all marketing spend. Instead, **reallocate and trim smartly**. Look at your portfolio: Are there certain products that are more relevant now and deserve more support? Are there regions less affected by the crisis where spending could still yield good ROI? Similarly, evaluate channels. Maybe expensive experimental channels can be paused, but high-ROI digital retargeting is increased. The idea is to *redistribute* the budget to where it can work hardest, rather than making uniform cuts. Keep a baseline presence so competitors don't steal your share of voice entirely. You might reduce frequency but maintain reach, for instance, or focus on owned and earned media if paid must be cut down. Every brand's situation is different, but a thoughtful adjustment can often achieve cost savings without losing the connection to consumers.
- **Focus on Profitability, Not Just Efficiency:** In a downturn, there's pressure to show ROI on every line item. However, Binet warns that an excessive short-term ROI focus can lead to under-investment in things that drive long-term profit (Binet,

2022). Marketing activities like brand advertising or R&D might have lower immediate ROI than a flash sale, but they are crucial for the health of the brand beyond this quarter. Thus, shift your mindset to **maximize net profit over time**, not just immediate ROI. This may justify, for instance, keeping a foundational brand campaign alive because you know it's preserving loyalty that will pay off in the recovery, even if it's not driving short-term sales spikes. In practice, one might set metrics that include customer lifetime value or brand equity scores, not just weekly conversion. Keeping some investment in these areas is like keeping the engine warm for when the economy improves.

- **Seize Market Opportunities (Media and Share of Voice):** Paradoxically, a crisis can present **opportunistic advantages** for those able to invest. If some competitors are pulling back heavily, the cost of advertising, in terms of media rates, might drop, and there's more available ad inventory. Brands with the financial flexibility should consider *playing offense*: lock in advantageous deals on media buys, or take over sponsorships that others vacated. There's a longstanding adage backed by data that brands maintaining or increasing their share of voice during a recession often capture disproportionate market share during the rebound. Essentially, if you can afford to be more visible when others go quiet, you stand to be much more memorable to consumers coming out of the downturn. This was observed in past recessions where some brands even grew their media presence (taking advantage of cheaper rates) and emerged with higher brand recognition and customer acquisition at a lower cost than in normal times. Of course, this must be balanced against financial realities—not every firm can spend more in a crisis. But at minimum, try to **keep Share of Voice (SOV) near Share of Market (SOM)** to avoid losing ground. If you have 10% market share, aim for roughly 10% of voice in your category's advertising; if others drop, that might require only a modest absolute spend to achieve.
- **Avoid Extreme Short-Termism:** The pressure for immediate results can tempt companies to cut any project that doesn't yield instant ROI. But strategy experts caution that going into survival mode for too long can cripple your future. Binet (2022) emphasizes maintaining a **dual horizon**: win in the short term *and* invest in the long term. This means while you certainly implement quick revenue boosters (like promotions, cost cuts, efficiency improvements), you should not abandon initiatives that build for the future, whether that's brand campaigns, product development or customer relationship programs. Find a balance: perhaps scale back some long-term projects, but don't zero them out. For example, maybe you delay a major experimental campaign, but continue funding your core brand message; or you postpone a new product launch by a quarter, but keep the development on track. The analogy often used is, "don't cut muscle along with fat." You might trim the marketing budget, but preserve the capabilities and critical activities that will drive growth when the environment improves. Leadership must

resist the urge to measure success purely by this month's numbers; instead, set metrics that include future health indicators, like brand awareness or customer satisfaction.

- **Invest in Creativity and Agility:** A dollar spent on a great idea goes farther than a dollar spent on a mediocre one—a truth amplified in tough times. Binet highlights the "irrational power of creativity" to generate outsized results. When budgets are tight, a single clever campaign that goes viral or deeply resonates can provide the kind of uplift that money alone couldn't buy. Brands should encourage their marketing teams (and agency partners) to be **bold and inventive**. This might be the time to break the mold with an unconventional message or a new format, especially if it can earn free media via PR or social sharing. There are many famous examples: in recessions, some brands launched iconic campaigns (think of Apple's "1984" ad during a downturn, or more recently Nike's social-issue campaigns) that struck a chord and ended up boosting the brand immensely. Empower your creative talent to find those emotional or humorous insights that cut through clutter. Also, be **agile**. If a campaign isn't working, pivot quickly. One advantage of digital channels is rapid feedback; use that to tweak messaging or offers in near real-time. Agility in execution, such as trying new things on a small scale, learning and iterating, can uncover surprising wins without big bets. In summary, to maximize every marketing dollar: pair it with an excellent creative and a willingness to adapt on the fly.

By following principles like these, brands can thread the needle between caution and progress. The overarching theme is **strategic flexibility**: trim costs judiciously but keep investing in what matters, focus on the most effective channels and messages, and always be ready to seize advantage when opportunities appear.

Consumer-Centric Agility. In addition to these broad principles, experts recommend specific tactical moves to adjust to shifting consumer behavior (Dahlhoff, 2025). These are largely about being **customer-centric and flexible** in how you deliver products and engage:

- **Offer Tiered Options for Every Budget:** As noted earlier, having a range of price points can retain customers who are economizing. Ensure your product lineup includes budget-friendly choices alongside the premium ones. For example, a cosmetics brand might introduce an entry-level line during a recession, or a subscription service could add a lower-cost plan with fewer features. This way, a customer who can no longer afford the top tier can downgrade *within* your brand instead of cancelling and leaving entirely.
- **Highlight "Small Treat" Products:** This is a time to promote your products that serve as affordable indulgences. If your portfolio has any item that can be framed as a comforting little luxury, bring it forward in your marketing. Quick-service restaurants, for instance, often advertise inexpensive comfort items (like specialty

coffee or desserts) more heavily in downturns because people still permit themselves those. Showing empathy by saying, effectively, "we know you're cutting back, but you deserve a pick-me-up" can resonate strongly.

- **Adopt Friendly Pricing Policies:** Go beyond marketing into the realm of customer policy. Practices like **price matching, price guarantees or everyday low pricing** can reduce the mental load on price-worried shoppers. If people trust that your prices won't suddenly spike or that they're always getting a fair deal, it builds goodwill. Additionally, flexible payment options (installment plans, zero-interest financing, etc.) can be a lifeline for customers managing cash flow. If you ease the financial friction, you not only encourage sales, but you also send the message that you care about customers' financial situation.
- **Reward Loyalty:** It's far more cost-effective to keep existing customers than to acquire new ones, especially in tough times. Double down on loyalty programs: give extra perks, bonuses or exclusive deals to your loyal customer base. This not only helps retention, but it also makes those customers feel valued at a time they might be rethinking all their expenses. For instance, a grocery chain could have "loyalty member appreciation" discounts on staples, or a streaming service might extend a free month to long-time subscribers. These gestures reinforce emotional loyalty ("the brand stood by me when I was pinching pennies").
- **Enhance Customer Service and Communication:** Uncertain times tend to generate more questions and needs for support, whether it's about product availability, delivery times, safety measures or return policies. A tactical must-do is to **ramp up communication and service quality**. Make sure your customer service channels (call centers, live chat, social media) are well-staffed and empathic. Proactively communicate updates that matter: if you have delays, explain them openly; if you're implementing safety protocols, let customers know; if inventory is limited, suggest alternatives. Timely, transparent communication can turn a potential frustration into a trust-building interaction. Many companies saw this during COVID-19. Those that handled surges in customer inquiries with grace and helpfulness came out with higher customer satisfaction, whereas those with chaotic or unresponsive service faced public backlash. In essence, treat customer support as part of your brand's **value promise**. It's an investment that pays off in retention and positive reputation.
- **Align with Evolving Lifestyles:** If consumers are focusing more on health, family time, or DIY activities as a response to uncertainty, see if you can align your offerings or marketing to those themes. This might even mean **pivoting or innovating** new products that meet emerging needs. For example, a fitness apparel brand might develop more at-home workout accessories, or a food brand could ramp up content around cooking easy meals at home. During crises, some companies launched entirely new solutions. Think of how distilleries started making

hand sanitizer in early 2020. While not every brand can do something that drastic, you can certainly emphasize aspects of your product that tie into wellness, safety or convenience at home. The key is to stay relevant to *what matters most to consumers now*. If social connection is lacking, can your product connect people virtually? If mental health is strained, can your service provide relaxation or education? By positioning your brand as supportive of these high-priority areas, you demonstrate empathy through action. Consumers will notice which brands adapted to make their lives easier or better under the circumstances.

- **Plan for the Recovery:** Lastly, even as you navigate the crisis, start preparing for the eventual recovery phase. Crises do end, and when they do, there is often **pent-up demand** waiting to be unleashed. Dahlhoff (2025) advises thinking ahead to capture that rebound. This means keeping your innovation pipeline warm. Perhaps you delay a big product launch, but be ready to deploy it when consumer spending picks up again. It also means maintaining at least a baseline of brand visibility and engagement so that when customers are ready to re-evaluate purchases, your brand is top-of-mind. Some companies craft "welcome back" campaigns or special offers timed with economic indicators improving. Also, consider operational readiness: do you have enough inventory or staff if a surge of business comes? Those who have scaled down too far may struggle to ramp up quickly and could miss the moment. A famous pattern seen after recessions is that brands which maintained relationships with customers are the first to benefit when wallets reopen. Those customers often return and even spend more to make up for lost time, but they will gravitate to the brands that stayed in touch and supportive. So, think of it like gardening through winter: keep the roots alive and plan what you'll plant in spring. The recovery, whenever it comes, is an opportunity to not just regain ground but leap ahead if you've laid the groundwork.

By implementing these tactical steps, brands signal that they are **flexible, responsive and centered on the customer**. Agility at this level—in product offerings, pricing, service and planning—can differentiate a brand's performance in measurable ways (revenue, market share) and immeasurable ones (brand sentiment, customer goodwill).

Regional and Generational Nuances

While many of the principles discussed apply broadly, it's important to recognize that consumer behavior in uncertain times can vary significantly across different regions and generations. Cultural values and generational experiences influence how uncertainty is perceived and how consumers expect brands to respond. Senior business leaders should tailor strategies with these nuances in mind.

Generational Patterns

Different age cohorts bring different outlooks and expectations into a crisis, shaped by the formative events and values of their lifetimes:

Gen Z and Millennials: Younger consumers (roughly teens to late 30s) typically demand more from brands in terms of purpose, authenticity and engagement. They have grown up amid economic turmoil (many Millennials entered the workforce during the 2008 recession) and global challenges like climate change, which has made them both skeptical of institutions *and* expecting those institutions (including companies) to step up. They place a high value on brands taking visible, credible stands on social and environmental issues (Edelman, 2023). This cohort is quick to call out "silence" or inaction. For example, a brand not making a statement on a major social justice event might be viewed negatively. They also reward transparency: brands that openly communicate their practices, admit mistakes and show a real human side gain respect. Notably, Gen Z in particular has been observed to **punish inauthenticity**; they are adept at detecting when a brand is "woke-washing" or merely pandering. On the flip side, when a brand aligns with their values (e.g., championing sustainability, equality, mental health), these consumers can become powerful advocates, amplifying the brand on social media and sticking with it loyally.

Another key trait of younger generations in prolonged uncertainty is the **"YOLO" mindset** described earlier—a propensity to live in the moment and seek joy now, since tomorrow is uncertain. This can manifest in spending on experiences, or supporting edgy, innovative brands that speak to their desire for authenticity and meaning. For marketers, engaging Gen Z and Millennials in uncertain times means incorporating brand activism (carefully and genuinely), fostering community (through digital engagement or co-creation campaigns), and perhaps using a more conversational, relatable tone. They respond to **inclusive marketing** and brands that reflect their identity and values. For example, campaigns that invite user participation, highlight diverse voices, or show the brand's role in making the world better tend to resonate. Given their digital nativity, reaching them also requires a strong social and content strategy. They will often learn about how a brand behaved during a crisis through Twitter, TikTok or Instagram before any official press release.

Gen X and Baby Boomers: Older consumers (roughly late 40s through seniors) generally have a different set of priorities in times of uncertainty. Many Gen Xers might be in their peak earning years but also juggling responsibilities like supporting family or saving for retirement, making them quite pragmatic in spending. Baby Boomers, many of whom are retired or close to retirement, often have fixed incomes or are more concerned with stability. Across these older cohorts, there is a tendency to value **security, consistency and trust** perhaps even more strongly than the young (Cutten & Cousins, 2021). They may be less swayed by trendiness or brand purpose rhetoric, and more by whether the brand has proven reliable over time. For example, a Boomer might stick with a known national brand of groceries or appliances that they've used for years, rather than try a new startup brand, especially in a recession.

Advertising that emphasizes tradition, longevity and competence can be effective with this group. They often appreciate a respectful tone and informational messaging. For instance, clear details on how a service can protect their health or save them money. Gen X and Boomers also respond well to **reassuring messaging** that things will be okay and that the brand will be there for them (think of how many financial institutions craft ads showing mature couples confidently navigating challenges with the institution's guidance). That's not to say they don't care about values. Many Boomers are passionate about causes too, but they might be less vocal or public about it. When targeting older segments, ensure customer service channels like phone support are robust (as they may prefer that over purely digital interactions). Moreover, loyalty programs and personal touches (like a note of thanks for being a long-time customer) can go a long way, because these generations grew up in an era of more personal customer service and often appreciate it being maintained. In summary, **brand reliability and clear value** are paramount for Gen X and Boomers. They want to reduce risk in their choices, so underline warranties, guarantees and experience. Campaigns might feature experts, testimonials from people "like them" or heritage branding to instill confidence.

Regional Variability

Cultural context heavily influences consumer expectations of brands in uncertain times. What resonates in one country or region might not in another:

Collectivist vs. Individualist Cultures: In more **collectivist societies** (common in Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Africa), there is a cultural norm of prioritizing community well-being and group cohesion. Consumers in these markets often expect brands to act as responsible community members and to contribute to societal stability in crises (Newmetrics, n.d.). For example, in many Asian countries, it's looked upon favorably if a brand visibly supports public health measures or community relief efforts—the brand is seen as "doing its duty." Marketing in these contexts can effectively highlight family, community and national solidarity themes. Campaigns might focus on how the brand is helping the community recover, or emphasize collectivist values like unity and sacrifice for the greater good. In practical terms, that could mean a bank running a campaign about financing small businesses to boost the local economy, or a telecom company showcasing how it kept people connected for free during a disaster.

Meanwhile, **individualistic cultures** (such as the United States, Western Europe) place more emphasis on personal choice, autonomy and self-expression. Consumers in these markets often respond to messaging that empowers the individual and respects personal freedom. In a crisis, they may value brands that enable them to maintain control over their lives or express themselves despite adversity. Marketing here can tap into narratives of personal resilience ("find your strength," "your journey") and may highlight customization or flexible options that put control in consumers' hands. For instance, an individualistic-geared campaign for a car might emphasize an individual's road to recovery and how the car gives them freedom to move forward. Brands should be cautious not to copy-paste crisis messaging globally without adjusting for these nuances. A slogan like "we're all in this together" might soar in one country but feel like a cliché in another; conversely, a campaign about individual triumph might inspire some audiences but seem self-centered in a culture that values community consensus. **Tailor the tone**: communal support vs. personal empowerment, depending on cultural expectations.

Economic Resilience and History: Regions also differ in how accustomed consumers are to volatility and how they react economically. For instance, consumers in parts of Latin America have experienced frequent economic swings (inflation, currency crises) and thus may be more **adaptable and opportunistic** shoppers as a result. They might quickly shift to bargain-hunting or informal markets when formal prices surge, showing a kind of crisis-seasoned pragmatism (Nielsen, 2009). In contrast, consumers in markets that had long periods of stability (say, Western Europe post-WWII up until 2008) might react more sharply to a sudden crisis with shock and a prolonged caution ("persistent frugality") because it's outside their norm (Nielsen, 2009). During the 2008–09 recession, for example, Brazil and China rebounded faster in consumer spending, treating the recession as a temporary dip, whereas the US. and U.K. consumers became very thrifty for an extended period, adopting new normal habits of saving and discount shopping (Nielsen, 2009). Understanding these patterns helps brands calibrate strategy. In a country where people bounce back fast, you might be more aggressive in planning early recovery marketing. In a region where consumers remain skittish, you might continue a value-oriented approach longer.

Local Trust Dynamics: Trust in brands versus institutions can vary by region too. In places where trust in government or media is low, consumers might lean even more on brands to fill a leadership void or provide reliable information (this has been noted in some developing markets). Conversely, in regions where public institutions are strong and take the lead in crises (for example, parts of Northern Europe), brands might be expected to follow and support those institutional efforts rather than initiate their own. Also, the types of messengers that resonate can differ—maybe in one country, celebrity voices in PSAs are effective, whereas in another, expert or authority figures are preferred. All these regional traits should inform a brand's local playbook.

In summary, **context matters**. A strategy that succeeds in one market might need modification in another. Global brands should empower local marketing teams to adjust messaging and tactics to fit the cultural and generational expectations of their audience. Whether it's highlighting community solidarity in one country or personal empowerment in another, or addressing Gen Z on TikTok versus Boomers on TV news, nuanced execution will ensure the brand's efforts truly connect.

Conclusion: Brand Resilience Through Agility and Empathy

Uncertainty may well be an enduring feature of the modern marketplace, but with the right insights, brands can transform this challenge into an opportunity to build deeper consumer relationships and competitive advantage. As we have explored, consumer behavior in volatile times is driven by caution on one hand and a longing for reassurance on the other. Faced with economic or political turmoil, consumers tighten their wallets, prioritize essentials and seek safety—textbook rational responses amplified by psychological biases like loss aversion and the endowment effect. Yet simultaneously, those same consumers gravitate toward brands that address their emotional needs: **empathy, authenticity, optimism and a sense of belonging** are more prized than ever when personal and financial certainties are shaken. This duality defines the crisis consumer: frugal and skeptical, but also hopeful and looking for someone to trust.

For brands, the mandate in uncertain times is twofold: **empathy and agility**. **Empathy** means truly understanding and responding to the consumer's state of mind. It requires listening to consumer anxieties, acknowledging their reality and acting in ways that genuinely support them. That could be crafting messages that console and inspire, delivering practical help (like flexible terms or free resources), or demonstrating through every action that *"we're your partner in these tough times."* Consumers notice and remember these acts of goodwill. **Agility**, on the other hand, means staying flexible and forward-looking by adjusting strategies quickly as conditions change, finding creative ways to do more with less and innovating to meet new consumer needs. The brands that remained *consistent, innovative and trusted* have historically outperformed during crises (Walter, 2025). They treat volatility not just as a threat but as a signal to adapt and find new paths to serve their customers. Whether it was a brand pivoting to online channels overnight, or retooling products to fit stay-at-home life, or reallocating marketing spend to where demand spiked—those nimble moves made the difference between floundering and thriving.

Crucially, brands that **balance empathy with agility** are the ones that come out stronger. It's not enough to only feel consumers' pain; a brand must also act decisively on that knowledge. Likewise, agility unguided by empathy could lead to tone-deaf moves. It's the combination—*"heart and savvy,"* as some marketers put it—that builds true resilience. When a brand quickly produces a solution to an emergent customer problem, that's agility; when it does so in a caring way that genuinely puts the customer first, that's empathy. The research and case studies we've discussed all point to this blend. Marketers who responded to uncertainty with authentic empathy and inventive value solutions were best positioned to thrive (Oberlin et al., n.d.). They kept the **consumer at the center** of every decision: whether that meant maintaining open lines of communication, adapting offerings based on feedback or staying true to the brand's values even as they tweaked tactics. These companies navigated the fine line between addressing *immediate* anxieties and reinforcing *long-term* loyalty, often integrating clever short-term moves (like targeted promotions or social media engagement) with big-picture strategies (like reaffirming brand purpose or investing in community building).

Ultimately, the path to remaining relevant and trusted in uncertain times is to act with both compassion and creativity. Consumers will long remember which brands lifted them up, offered help or simply made them smile when things were tough. By being that source of stability or positivity, brands don’t just survive the storm, they deepen the bond with their customers for years to come. In an era where volatility might be the only certainty, the brands that succeed will be those that become a **reliable constant** in consumers’ lives by adapting to change, yet remaining steadfast in their support for the consumer. By fortifying your brand’s trustworthiness and agility now, you create a reservoir of goodwill and resilience that will not only carry you through the present uncertainty, but also position you to leap ahead when the skies eventually clear. As history and current insights alike affirm, uncertainty separates the field: those who panic and retreat often falter, while those who empathize, innovate and stay close to their customers emerge stronger, more relevant and more deeply embedded in the hearts of the people they serve.

Ultimately, while uncertainty often triggers caution and defensiveness, it also serves as a powerful catalyst for innovation, creativity and renewal. Times of disruption compel brands and consumers alike to reconsider old habits, embrace new technologies and explore novel approaches. Businesses frequently uncover unexpected opportunities—such as accelerated digital adoption, innovative product developments and deeper, more authentic consumer relationships—that can yield lasting competitive advantages. In essence, uncertainty challenges brands to evolve dynamically, ultimately fostering growth, resilience and enduring relevance in the marketplace.

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