

THIS YEAR IS NOT ABOUT REINVENTING THE WHEEL, BUT AMPLIFYING THE CLASSIC CODES OF CHRISTMAS

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In the last Collaborative report, we wrote about Crystal Ball Planning – built on firm predictions of changes to customer behaviour – versus [Compass Planning](#) – built on what we know doesn't change about human needs and a brand's unwavering purpose. And we suggested that in these times of (hackneyed phrase warning) unprecedented volatility, we're helping clients by guiding them with the latter.

So stepping from lofty theory to looming practical challenges, how does Compass Planning help us think about how brands might approach Christmas with Covid (season 2)?

Unlike WW2 where VE day marked a clear end, this crisis won't have a hard stop. But as the double-jabbed become the masses and restrictions dissolve, people are pinning their hopes on Christmas marking the closing of a sombre period, and the start of a more joyful one.

People have been through the wringer, and brands should tread carefully – this festive season will be a frivolous celebration for some, but not for all. The array of competing emotions and financial abilities, paired with the unpredictable climate, makes it difficult to plan ahead.

But by thinking about unchanging versus changing needs, there are some key moves to help marketers strike the right tone this Christmas:

...
BE A TIME MACHINE

...
BE AN ANTIDOTE

...
BE AN ADVOCATE



BE A TIME MACHINE

The thing about the festive season is that human behaviour doesn't change much over time at all. In fact we value tradition, familiarity and rituals higher at this time of year than any other. People struggle to distinguish between their Christmases, with every year playing out so similarly that they all roll into one memory. There's a sanctity to it – we shun any deviation from the Noël norms, and are overprotective of our Christmas routines. We've all had the annual 'Yorkshires or not?' debate.

But after a period of perpetual change, people are craving the comfort of festive familiarities more than ever, which is why nostalgia will be a highly pertinent code this year. In times of crisis, it's a tried and tested coping strategy. Just recall the jubilation when Budweiser catapulted us back to better days with the timely revival of 'Whassup' in lockdown one.

Our challenge as storytellers will be in tapping into nostalgia, while bringing originality. We need to borrow from the past, not replicate it, especially as the fight for festive mental availability will be intense this year.

Remember that this Christmas is a story in itself. The classic 'quest' story arc follows a protagonist on a mission to reach a destination or prize, and overcoming adversity along the way. Our audiences will feel this: experiencing a greater degree of jeopardy than any other year of their lives, will make this Christmas feel momentous.



BE AN ANTIDOTE

This will not be a time for reinventing the wheel: during COVID-19, everything has been so different and uncertain. Instead, it will be Christmas magnified: with the classic codes like togetherness, nostalgia, magic, and generosity presenting; but with an added charge after what we've been through, and with consumer optimism blooming.

The data from the IPA (figure 2) tells an interesting story on what Christmas shouldn't be about. Christmas last year was so traumatic that no one wants to hear about it. Only 5% of people want Covid in their Christmas ad.

Advertisers must be selective about what they reflect on, what they ask people to do or care about after a time of being asked so much, and if purposeful messages strike the right tone this year. Think carefully before putting that Zoom call scene in. Forced altruism and interaction (the ad equivalent of your mum handing you the phone to speak to your great aunt Maggie) are at the bottom of people's Christmas wish list.

BE AN ANTIDOTE

Christmas is a time of generosity, and entertainment is the best exchange of value we can offer to people giving us their attention.

The form that entertainment takes is our job to decide, but winning hearts will be done by charming people, making them laugh, and helping them escape – providing an antidote to the seriousness of everything. O2's 2020 festive spot transported us to a magical wonderland through the imagination of a young girl, as she acted out her dreams gliding across the ice.

We need to ask ourselves not just what we can get out of Christmas, but what we can give to it. It might be a year to keep things simple and make it about the one C everyone actually cares about: Christmas.



BE AN ADVOCATE

By enforcement last year, Christmas was small. It's easy to believe that big social celebrations, overindulgence and togetherness will be everyone's intention, if given the chance.

But if these times have shown us anything, it's that you cannot anticipate what is going to happen, or how people are going to feel. People themselves don't even know. The IPA data shows that as a nation, we're split on how we're going to do this year, because no one is quite sure what's around the corner.

Figure 1

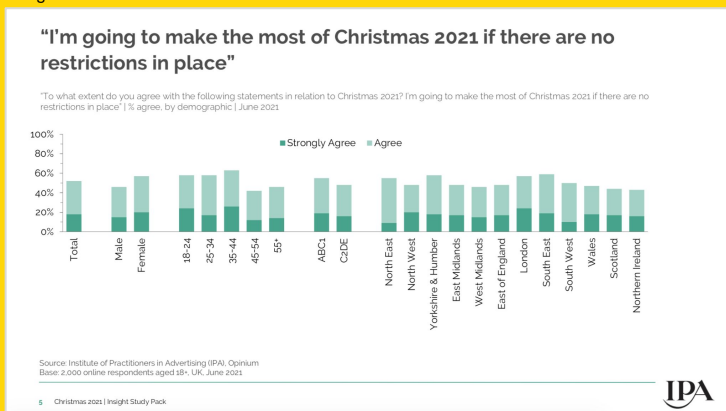
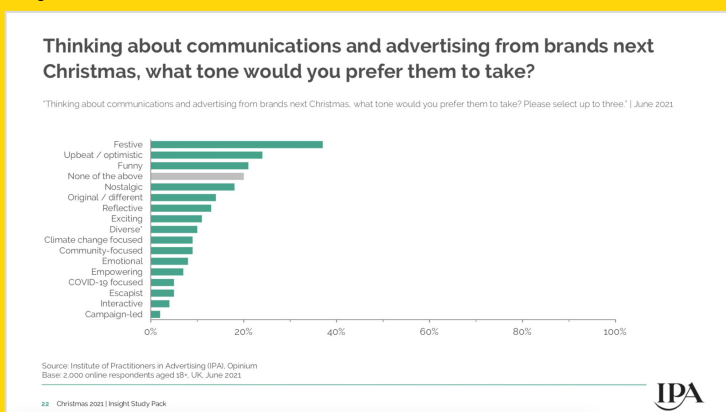


Figure 2



Source: IPA Opinium Christmas 2021 research
Base: 2,000 online respondents aged 18+, UK, June 2021

We're conflicted on going all out for Christmas, on doing more this year, even on whether we want humour. The fourth most common answer for 'what do you want from Christmas advertising?' was 'none of the above' (figure 2).

History will tell us that Christmas 2020 was cancelled, but in fact many enjoyed a more low key crimbo – 50% of Brits said they didn't mind not seeing other households over Christmas (YouGov).

So instead of assuming the ideal Christmas and prescribing it, brands should reflect varying values – encourage and enable people to do Christmas on *their own* terms, how *they* want to. Tesco's 'No Naughty List' spot last year encouraged people to do whatever it was they wanted, guilt-free. They gave permission to indulge, in big and small ways, without putting pressure on.

Advertisers will have to get creative to cover off varying circumstances – but they should consider how to balance messaging in what will be a celebratory juncture for some, while offering empathy for those with less to celebrate, or who are doing things differently.

CONCLUSION

With ad spend down last Q4, we're hoping that this season will mark the renaissance of brilliantly creative festive advertising, the return of Christmas spirit, and the year of getting back to the holiday the nation loves. Applying Compass Planning – returning to the unchanging human needs that Christmas serves – rather than trying to find answers in the Crystal Ball, is the best way brands can achieve this.

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Collaborative is VCCP's insight platform, showcasing the collaborative thinking of its strategists from across the VCCP Partnership which include specialists in media, communications and experience design.

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