



HAND-WASH & BODY-WASH BEHAVIORS SUSTAINING NEW HABITS

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COVID-19 and Hand-wash Category

In light of COVID-19 epidemic, businesses across the world are slowing down. Sectors such as travel and hospitality are already experiencing severe slowdowns. Others like retail, consumer goods, financial services will face pressures on demand and supply side¹.

Not all CPG categories are facing equal pressures - in fact some categories are booming! Nielsen reports that sales of hand sanitizer (four weeks ending on March 7) increased 228% when compared to the same period last year². With 64% of Americans (correctly) believing that washing hands with soap is better than using hand-sanitizers, we can expect hand-washing behaviors to also be higher in current circumstances.³



Will these new behaviors sustain when eventually the disease is no longer a threat?

Context Driven Behaviors

Contrary to traditional views that people weigh desirability and likelihood of outcomes and alternatives, people process risk as feelings⁴. Such an assessment is colored by salience of events and our emotions. Compare the risk of dying from a shark attack (a minuscule 1 in 3,748,067) to that of a car accident (1 in 84) with the perceived risk!⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a necessary environment of information overload and an atmosphere of fear. This fear has been useful in driving short term behavior change. Hand-washing and body-washing behaviors are expectedly increasing. The key question is whether these newly acquired context-driven behaviors and habits will sustain when anxiety and fear levels decrease?

Habit Decay

Some of the new behaviors are part of a collective - social distancing, quarantine, and hand wash. When components of such a context-dependent package cease to matter, cues that trigger other associated behaviors disappear, leaving people to depend solely on their motivation to sustain other behaviors. Such a situation decreases durability of new habits, leading to a decline in levels of hand-washing and body-washing over time. Anticipating this decline, it is imperative that businesses take measures to institute programs that drive sustainability of new practices.



Change Behavior and Sustain Habits

Current hand/body wash routines are intertwined with salient disease risk - it is a coping strategy to adapt to and control aspects of the situation which people can control. This automatic association needs to be broken (at the right time) for habits to sustain when the context changes.

While we know that communication has a huge role in disassociating these habits from disease context and behavior, we do not know which framing works best. Some of the possible framings are:

- **A self-image framing** (“Washing hands is the right thing to do as a responsible citizen”)
- **A descriptive norm framing** (“Most people in your locality continue to wash hands every hour”)
- **A de-contextual framing** (“Corona or SARS or MERS is likely to be a recurring phenomenon and therefore more hand-washing is required”)
- **A power-oriented framing** (“YOU have the responsibility and the power to stop the spread”)

CPG manufacturers need to work with some of these moderations in their campaigns to drive sustainability of newly acquired behaviors.

¹ <https://fractal.ai/covid-19-impact-on-cpg/>

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/business/hand-sanitizer-sales/index.html>

³ <https://www.bradleycorp.com/handwashing>

⁴ <https://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/sds/docs/loewenstein/RiskAsFeelings.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/shark-attacks/odds/compare-risk/death/>
