

How can brands observe Ramadan and celebrate Eid with the Muslim community during a pandemic

Nazirah Ashari

WARC[^]

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TBWA's Nazirah Ashari looks at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how Muslims around the world will be observing Ramadan and celebrating Eid this year.

- The pandemic is changing the ways Muslims observe this period and under these circumstances, the core of Ramadan will be missing.
- For brands, this period of uncertainty calls for one thing and one thing only: Less talk and more action.
- Use this trying period to revisit your brand purpose through actions that will create a meaningful Ramadan.

Marketing in the COVID-19 crisis

This article is part of a special WARC Snapshot focused on enabling brand marketers to re-strategise amid the unprecedented disruption caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

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Why it matters

The Islamic month of Ramadan is traditionally accompanied by much social mingling from tarawih prayers to food bazaars – but this year will be very different thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. Brands will need to take a very different approach to messaging and actions if they want to connect with the Muslim community.

Takeaways

- Ask how your brand can help keep Ramadan and Eid activities and traditions alive despite the situation.
- In the time of COVID-19, any Ramadan-related CSR effort needs to work harder to address real issues of the underprivileged.
- Ask how can brands help Muslims make their home more comfortable for spiritual activities and when Eid comes, a place of celebration, modestly.

Ramadan won't be the same this year.

This sentiment is widely felt among Muslims around the world as we wait in anticipation for the holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to begin on 23 or 24 April.

As countries activated efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 and people adjusting to the new normal, we begin to see how the pandemic is changing the ways Muslims observe this period and under these circumstances, the core of Ramadan will be missing. To many, a time of collective spiritual observation, celebration and love could instead be a very lonely one.

What role can brands play?

Ramadan is a global moment where Muslims (a 1.8 billion-strong extremely diverse group of people) observe ritualistic activities making it a perfect marketing opportunity for every brand in markets with sizeable Muslim population. Generally during this period, there are behaviour shifts, along with sleep and work schedules, allowing for more self-improvement, worship and community. Thanks to the COVID-19 situation, Ramadan now has an additional element that makes up its essence: solitude.

For brands, this period of uncertainty calls for one thing and one thing only: Less talk and more action. This aligns with the essence of Ramadan that focuses on actions (fasting, praying, giving, etc.).

Understanding what has and will change for Muslims

- **Families separated; traditions interrupted:** Lockdown during this period will result in more people being separated from their families at a time when being around family is most important. Many family and community traditions that shape the spirit of Ramadan and Eid will be paused this year.
- **No more comfort and spiritual guidance from the congregation:** During a period when Muslims can be more in touch with their spiritual side, observing Ramadan without the mosque or their community can feel alien to many. They will need to find alternative mechanisms to keep their faith strong - to connect to God in isolation, as one, instead of as a collective.
- **A simpler Ramadan and Eid:** No more massive *iftar* feast, no more surplus of food, no more one-upping each other's faith. The focus will now be on individual spiritual and emotional requirements more than it is about being extravagant in celebration.

But one thing will not change and will most likely increase during Ramadan especially during this difficult time – giving back.

A core principle of Islam is helping others in need; this is heightened during Ramadan as giving back or charity lies at the heart of the holy month. It also doesn't require human contact most times.

Here's how your brand can carry the spirit of Ramadan and participate in the action of making this season meaningful in the age of COVID-19:

Start with your own people

Take care of those employees who are observing Ramadan. Be mindful of the situation they're in. Are they parents working from home or those having to continue working to ensure people get their essentials?

Be reminded that in addition to living in this new reality of the pandemic, they're also fasting for 11 to 16 hours a day depending on where they live in the world. Understand the shifts in their behaviour; waking up as early as 4am for *suhoor* (pre-dawn meal), preparing food for *iftar* with the family and performing daily *tarawih* prayers at night, just to name a few. They are making major changes to their lives in this period of restrictions on top of delivering their best as a member of your workforce and they deserve your attention too.

Ask how your company can make it easier for your Muslim employees to perform their religious duty, family and work responsibility at the same time.

Show that your brand is supporting the nation's effort to fight this pandemic

While not unique to the Muslim community, there is an expectation for brands, big and small to support national and global efforts in battling the pandemic. Is your brand in a position to **support hospitals and front liners**? Finding ways to being helpful to government or community efforts are even more welcomed during this period. Once again, remember that Muslims are also make up the force on the pandemic's frontlines and they would probably be observing Ramadan while on duty too.

Ask how your brand can play a part in providing support to entities or movements that are driving efforts to fight the virus at any level.

Help keep Ramadan and Eid familiar

This drastic lifestyle change of isolation and distancing is unnerving, as Muslims transitioning to full-on Ramadan mode are realising some traditions will no longer be practiced, with the love and comfort of family and community removed. Brands can play even bigger role to help them keep this period as familiar as possible.

Familiarity not only helps keep people sane but for Muslims, familiarity on a religious level can help strengthen their faith which is what they need more than ever now.

Ask how your brand can help keep Ramadan and Eid activities and traditions alive despite the situation. What meaningful action could provide tangible benefits and help your audience by bringing the familiarity of...

- Praying at the mosque (complete with an Imam) on a virtual tarawih prayer experience that Muslims can follow at home. Hello, tech companies!

- Going to Ramadan bazaar where people can not only get their traditional favourite iftar foods from but also support local businesses who are probably struggling right now. Imagine platforms like Uber Food or Grab Food setting-up an online Ramadan bazaar that bring together bazaar traders on top of the usual food shops they have on database;
- The first day of iftar with the family;
- Their favourite Ramadan and Eid flavours;
- The festivity when Eid marks the end of the Ramadan journey; and many more.

Help make home a spiritual place for Ramadan, a festive place for Eid

With no mosque to turn to for prayers and other form of community gatherings, home will now become the place for spiritual solitude, whether for individuals alone or a family living together through tough times. Once Ramadan comes to an end and Eid arrives, turn home into a place for celebration... but in moderation, and this brings me to my next point.

□ Ask how can brands help Muslims make their home more comfortable for spiritual activities and when Eid comes, a place of celebration, modestly. Is your brand in a position to help make life somewhat easier for them to get what they need for their homes?

Remind Muslims to observe Ramadan responsibly

The issue of food waste during this period is nothing new. Every year, we see several predominantly Muslim countries [report](#) vast amounts of [food going to waste](#), leading to calls for more sensible practices during the period. But Ramadan in the age of COVID-19 will most likely change that.

As a community, Muslims need to take this unprecedented situation as an opportunity to reflect and act on our irresponsible behaviours that's not only abhorred by the religion but can also cause more harm to the environment. Ramadan in the time of COVID-19 can be the beginning of a new journey that will transform our way of living for the better.

□ Ask how your brand can encourage and help every Muslim household cut down on their food waste and consume what they need. Your brand too needs to be able to demonstrate some level of responsibility through action. Is your business cutting down on unnecessary waste and practice right way of recycling?

Help vulnerable communities observe Ramadan and celebrate Eid too

The Prophet said in a *hadith*: “He is not a believer whose stomach is filled while the neighbour to his side goes hungry” – a saying that rings true especially in the fasting month as we reflect on our charitable effort and selflessness.

Yes, it is common for brands engaging with the Muslim communities to activate their CSR efforts during Ramadan but in the time of COVID-19, this effort needs to work harder to address real issues of the underprivileged. Put your brand in the shoes of the community and think about people who are less fortunate,

probably struggling to put food on table for *iftar* after hours of fasting.

□ Ask how your brand can help Muslims who want to help others by becoming an aggregator or hub to channel voluntary charity ('*sadaqah*') to fellow Muslims who are affected by the situation. Keep your effort transparent and make sure all help gets to its receivers.

Time for Muslims to rediscover the spirit of Ramadan... and maybe your brand too

There's an ongoing sentiment that stems out of fear that COVID-19 will ruin what we love most about Ramadan. With closure of mosques – the centre of community for Muslims; separation of family members and loved ones and the idea of financial certainty that once was a promise of this blessed month now becomes uncertain. The thought of that this could be the most challenging Ramadan ever, can be scary.

But in every single disaster and calamity, one will eventually find the positives and the good. One example that we're already seeing is how COVID-19 has reminded Muslims about the importance of cleanliness in Islamic teachings, with *fatwa* calls for adherence to all public health directives and regulations as well as advice to frequently washing hands with soap and water.

Ramadan has always been a time for reflection on those who are less fortunate and on individual '*Deen*' (faith) and deeds. And if it takes a crisis to get Muslims to evaluate what is important in life and help other people in whatever way we can then perhaps Ramadan in the age of COVID-19 could be the best opportunity to rediscover its spirit so that when we do return to normal, our faith will be stronger than ever before.

The same with brands. Allow Ramadan and this trying period to revisit your brand purpose through actions that will create a meaningful Ramadan. Be sincere in your approach and before you know it, your brand will become one with the community.

About the author

Nazirah Ashari

Strategy Director, TBWA\Kuala Lumpur

Nazirah is a former journalist turned hybrid strategist, specialising in digital and social media strategy.

At TBWA\Kuala Lumpur, she leads Malaysia's budding all-female strategic planning team. She's also leading a regional project to develop the network's specialisation and expertise on the influential global Muslim segment.

She is part of the research team at TBWA\Asia, commissioned to study the Muslim travel segment and much of her best work has connected brands like Libresse, U Mobile and Maybelline, with this audience.

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Americas: 229 West 43rd Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10036, United States - Tel: +1 212 201 2800

APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6UF, United Kingdom - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

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