

Togetherness, instead of labelling, will help us fight the virus

Tailor your message to your audience – that is rule number one for any successful marketer.

But what if your audience is already overwhelmed by fear of a virus outbreak and angry at the way it is being handled, and your message is a plea for empathy and solidarity that has been repeated *ad nauseam* by others? Will people listen?

Last Tuesday (11 February), a local media outlet posted on Facebook the Equal Opportunities Commission's [appeal to the public](#) to avoid a NIMBY (“not-in-my-backyard”) attitude towards quarantine centres and clinics for persons affected by the novel coronavirus.

The Commission also reminded shop owners that under the Race Discrimination Ordinance, it may be unlawful to indiscriminately turn away Putonghua-speaking customers, as certain ethnic groups, including Chinese, may be unable to meet such a language-specific requirement and therefore subject to unfavourable treatment.

Within an hour the post had drawn a heated response from netizens. They argued that residents are resisting the facilities *not* because of a NIMBY mentality, but because they feel that they haven't been consulted earnestly, and alternative siting proposals haven't been given due consideration.

The contagion, they believe, is being fuelled by delays and inadequacies in border control more than anything else. As their logic goes, preaching empathy misses the point and is akin to sitting on a moral high horse, dodging the “real issues” on the ground.

The EOC is not trying to force-feed compassion to Hongkongers. If anything, our previous studies about the siting of [mental health](#) and other [social welfare facilities](#) have stressed the need for the Government to take the lead in dispelling myths, engage in genuine dialogue with the local community and, where appropriate, incorporate their views into its decision. We believe there can be, and should be, rational discussion, debates even, about governance, policies and consultation processes.

But there is a clear line between constructive criticism and unhinged bigotry. When that boundary is blurred, the same space where people exchange views on public policies

can easily devolve into a breeding ground for prejudice, hatred and xenophobia, whether it is social media, messaging apps or online forums.

Put simply, it is one thing to discuss stricter border control; it is another to ridicule the cultures of an ethnic group or reject a customer because of the language she or he speaks. The former contributes to the city's battle against the epidemic; the latter is just racism.

The problem, of course, is global. From boarding school students getting attacked with eggs in the United Kingdom to the headline "Yellow Alert" in the French newspaper *Le Courrier Picard* and the trending Twitter hashtag #ChineseDon'tComeToJapan, Chinese (and in some cases, Asians) around the globe are being equated with the virus itself – the kind of sweeping generalisation that defines racism and ignores reason.

Back home, as much as the rapidly-spreading virus is stirring up new disputes and old grievances, we Hongkongers have shown ourselves to be capable of compassion, regardless of our differences: a group of medical students have produced a video about everyday precautionary measures with subtitles in Tagalog, Urdu, Hindi, Nepali, Bahasa Indonesia and other ethnic minority languages; NGOs have made similar videos in sign language for those with hearing impairment; people are donating masks to elders who live alone and have trouble going out to secure protective equipment; the EOC also operates the Facebook page [EMBRACE](#) to share coronavirus updates in ethnic minority languages.

It is this sense of togetherness, not labelling and stigmatisation, that will help us put up our best fight against the virus. This may be an unpalatable message, but it is one that the EOC will always stand by.

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