

How Agile Marketing Offset the Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 flipped our world upside down. Everything changed at home and at work, which for many of us became one and the same.

Sales and marketing teams that relied heavily on in-person meetings and events now rely on computer screens. The benchmarks that were once reliable for our brands – including the best times to send emails, post on social, send news releases, advertise on radio and TV – quickly shifted. As it turns out, there was no playbook for how to conduct marketing during a global pandemic, and there are no best practices to reference as we start to slowly reintegrate into society. However, there was an approach – a philosophy – that made a difference these past couple months and will continue to do so as we move forward.

An Agile Mindset

At its core, agile marketing is a very defined approach to the planning, execution and measurement of campaigns and projects that emphasizes rapid iterations, small experiments with constant testing/evaluation, data-backed decision-making and collaboration over silos. This approach allows marketers to better adapt to changing conditions while maximizing speed, productivity, measurement and accountability.

Throughout this time of social distancing, we have worked in this capacity with clients that span a multitude of industries – banking, healthcare, quick serve restaurants, building, textiles, technology and more – to re-strategize their marketing. Every client faces different challenges and opportunities. For some, the biggest test is how to keep up with a fast-changing situation. For others, the task is bigger, requiring a shift from a traditional marketing model to a more digital focused model. For virtually all, the key is determining when and how to enter the conversation appropriately.

When time and certainty become your enemy, as happened with the onset of the Coronavirus, there are 5 questions you need to ask and answer to develop an effective marketing response:

Agility in Action Case Studies

- [Financial Security In a Time of Uncertainty](#)
- [Giving Back During a Global Pandemic](#)
- [Recognizing Our Healthcare Heroes](#)
- [IoT & Safer Workplaces](#)

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1. What are we trying to accomplish now?

What was attainable for your company, sales team and marketing department pre-COVID (or any unpredictable event) and what is attainable in the middle of a pandemic are likely two different things. For example, comparing year-over-year metrics from sales numbers and website traffic to social media engagement and other marketing strategies will be pointless.

Consider what objectives are SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely – in the current environment. It is critical your executive team agree with the objectives and that all employees are clear about the focus. And since this is a very uncertain environment, continue to revisit objectives as needed.

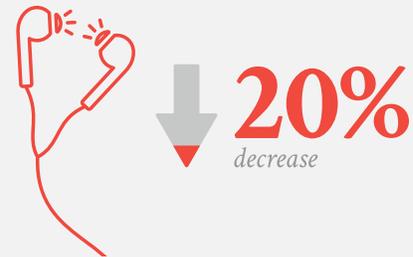
2. Where are my target audiences?

Customer habits have changed since COVID and will likely continue to change. For example, Facebook is experiencing [higher usage rates](#) as people turn to social media to keep in contact with friends and family. [Global Web Index](#) found that more than 80 percent of consumers in the U.S. and U.K. say they consume more content since the outbreak, with broadcast TV and online videos (YouTube and TikTok) being the primary mediums across all generations and genders.

On the other hand, podcast listens in the U.S. have decreased by 20 percent during COVID according to [Voxnest](#). Although some podcast categories like design, food, music and medicine are up significantly. Considering that a large segment of people listening to podcasts tune in on their daily commute, it is no surprise to see a decrease in podcast listens.

Podcast Listening Rate

Source: Voxnest



Facebook Usage | Website vs. App

Source: The New York Times



YouTube Usage | Website vs. App

Source: The New York Times



Surprisingly, more people are also moving away from smart phones and to desktop computers. According to the [New York Times](#), Facebook, Netflix and YouTube have seen their phone app numbers fall as their website numbers have grown.

More importantly, you should evaluate your own data to identify shifts in your customers' behavior. Are you seeing an increase or decrease in social media following and engagement? What about your website traffic? How are email campaigns performing? What about call analytics and sales numbers? Where are your target audiences and what content is most useful to them in this moment?

3. What is the right message right now?

For some businesses, the answer is clear. A textile client, for example, shifted its focus and messaging from being a distributor of industrial fabrics to a producer of PPE for the medical industry, while a regional bank remained focused on helping small businesses secure SBA Paycheck Protection Program loans. For others, however, the waters are murkier, like our IoT client who needed to quickly audit the marketplace in order to strategize the right messaging.

Regardless of your industry and products/services, it is critical to understand what type of information your customers need right now. What issues or pain points are they trying to solve and how is COVID affecting them? A social listening tool will help you identify real-time discussions happening online. Likewise, traditional news and trade media, and hashtag searches can help you quickly identify trending discussions.

Also, audit your sales staff. While they might not be on the road, they are still talking with customers and can share valuable insight into what they are hearing from customers and prospects.

4. What are the best marketing strategies to reach my customers?

Once you have identified your objectives and understand how your target audiences are consuming information, you can evaluate which combination of strategies will be most effective. Some of these tactics might have been part of your prior marketing plans, but now need to be re-evaluated and tested to ensure they continue to resonate. The right mix of strategies will depend on your brand and your objectives.

Video

Time is of the essence.

Seeing and hearing from another human being during a time of isolation helps everyone feel more connected. However, producing relevant and timely video content during this period of social distancing requires brands to get crafty and creative. This could mean repurposing old assets in a way that still tells your story today. It could also mean a more DIY approach with at-home equipment and basic editing assistance. Whichever route you take, it is important to get your content out as soon as you can, as the conversation is changing daily.

Remember all your channels.

Plan ahead for how you can leverage video across all your channels. Slight modifications can help optimize your video for your various social platforms — and these versions will likely look different than the one you put on your website.

Planning ahead for these various versions can help save time in the editing phase and ultimately get your content live faster.

Quality matters (to an extent).

You probably never pictured turning your living room into a mini production studio. Even reporters have converted rooms in their homes to broadcast live. This DIY approach is foreign to many, but what we are seeing right now across digital channels and even on television is much more organic.

Social Media

Be mindful of your tone.

Social platforms can be polarizing environments, especially during a difficult time. It is important to stay positive and neutral and provide content that will interest, entertain and inform your audience. Also be cognizant of what is happening in the day's news and ensure what you are posting is appropriate within the context of what is going on and what people are talking about.

Reevaluate your content calendar.

Did you head into 2020 with an ambitious calendar of social content? Or maybe you just had a goal to start utilizing a content calendar to help organize your social activity? COVID has likely rewritten your existing plans and also changed your mindset on how to plan for future content. Keep your calendars short term and be flexible. You will likely need to make frequent changes and updates.

Keep tabs on your analytics.

Do not rely on that old data (which might not even be that old) since social media habits have changed. Keep in mind that even though many are spending more time online, that does not automatically mean you have more of their attention. Check your metrics often and adjust your content, timing and expectations accordingly.

Media Relations

Seek out the best contacts.

It is important to recognize many reporters are now covering stories beyond their beats. Once you have solidified your pitch, conduct a quick audit of recent coverage and see who is talking about what. You might notice some patterns in someone's recent coverage that would indicate potential interest in your topic or your story might be a great follow-up to something that was recently published.

Be aware of your timing but don't overthink it.

Like the rest of us, news reporters' schedules have changed and if they are working remote they might be a bit more flexible and accessible. That said, it is always best to not overlap with breaking news, if possible. Also try to plan around daily press briefings from national, state and local officials.

Include assets with your pitch.

The easier you can make it for a reporter to share your story, the better chance it will get picked up. This means including relevant images (not just your logo) or even a short

video that could accompany your pitch. Often something shot from your phone will work, so long as it is clear and adds substance to your story.

Email Marketing

Consider an automated approach.

Have an automated program in place that will optimize your email communication. Simple systems like [Constant Contact](#) and [Mailchimp](#) will provide critical insights into your open and click-through rates. Many of these platforms have established benchmarks for these metrics based on industry. More sophisticated marketing automation systems like [HubSpot](#) or [Marketo](#) will integrate with your website, blog and social channels so you can begin to target customers and prospects throughout the customer journey with relevant content.

Know when to hit send.

Be strategic and thoughtful about the cadence of your email communication. Again, you might have some historical data on when you typically receive the best open rates, but schedules have changed, and you need to see what works now. Test everything — your timing, subject lines, content, etc. — and make ongoing adjustments accordingly.

Make it worth their while (and yours).

They opened your email and you have their attention — now what? Including an invitation, special offer or specific call-to-action will help maximize your results and gauge the effectiveness of your email efforts. A useful takeaway or valuable offer to your audience will help build loyalty and entice them to engage with your emails in the future.

5. How do I evaluate results if there is no benchmark or status quo?

You can use your past benchmarks to determine if/how things have changed. But what is actually more important is to see how your content is performing across various platforms. This will allow you to test and re-strategize as needed.

For example, is your e-newsletter securing quality opens and click-through rates? Are you experiencing as much engagement on your social content? Is your website or blog traffic maintaining or increasing? If not, one hypothesis could be the content is not relevant during this time and you need to consider changing the focus based on your customer's current pain points or what they are trying to achieve. Conversely, if certain tactics — such as webinars — are performing exceptionally well, consider conducting more webinars or sharing the content in smaller pieces on social media, on your blog, in your e-newsletters and with media.

The key is to test your marketing strategies and content in real time, create hypotheses on how to enhance the results, make adjustments and retest. This is the beauty of digital, the ability to assess results and make changes in real time.

As people adjust to the new normal, consumers' habits will likely shift again. But one thing will not change. Consumers expect "always on" marketing. They expect brands to be where they are and respond immediately to their needs — or better still, anticipate

their needs. This requires brands to be agile and responsive regardless of what is going on in the world. This unprecedented time has tested the agility of many marketers and brands and uncovered a new ability/willingness to adapt and respond in real time. These new skillsets must be nurtured and rewarded.

This is the ideal time to reflect, retool and reposition your marketing — and perhaps your business. If you'd like to explore the true potential of agile marketing, during and post-COVID, contact me at jennifer@sweeney.agency.

About the Authors



Jennifer Manocchio, President

A well-rounded marketing professional, Jennifer boasts more than 18 years of strategic marketing and public relations expertise. She excels at the strategic planning process, identifying market opportunities and managing flawless execution of the right marketing and public relations strategies to achieve a measurable return on investment. Jennifer started her career at Edelman and has supported high-profile B2C and B2B clients including, Joann Fabric and Craft Stores, Big Lots, Westfield Shoppingtowns, Weiman Products, Goo Gone, Avery Dennison, Assurant, Acuity Brands, Butterball Turkey, CORDURA® brand and many more.



Lisa Pocci, VP of Agency Services

Lisa is a marketing and communications industry veteran with nearly 15 years of diverse agency and corporate experience. Her expertise is strategically developing brands. Lisa joined Sweeney following a nine-year career in real estate development where she led corporate marketing efforts for more than 8 million square feet of mixed-use space for Stark Enterprises and Fairmount Properties. She started her career with Liggett Stashower, a former, leading Cleveland marketing agency, managing national B2B and B2C accounts, including Forest City Commercial Development, Forest City Residential, Henkel Corporation, ShurTech Brands, The Dial Corporation and Preformed Line Products.