Navigating your retail business through COVID-19

A guide to help retailers and brands adapt in a dynamic environment

Google for Retail

As communities around the world respond to concerns over the coronavirus pandemic, we know that this time presents unique challenges for retailers of all sizes and the people they assist. With many physical stores shuttered, retailers are faced with tough decisions — closing their stores, fluctuating supply chains, protecting employees — all while ensuring public health is the cornerstone of these decisions. At the same time, digital commerce has become a lifeline for retailers and **we see** millions of people doing product related searches on Google every day. We know that many retailers have the items people need in stock, but are less discoverable online.

Connecting people with information is what Google does best, and in my time here I've been focused on how we can create an ecosystem where consumers can find the products they need from anywhere, regardless of whether they're sold at their neighborhood hardware store, or on their favorite brand's website or app. That mission has never been more important than it is today.

No one has all the answers, but through the tools, new product solutions, and strategic insights we've brought together in this guide, we're here to help, no matter what's next.

Bill Ready

President, Commerce, Google

What's inside

Using consumer insights to guide your approach

COVID-19 has changed life as we know it — and as we do everything we can to keep each other safe, our routines have fundamentally shifted. The necessary measures taken to manage the pandemic have disrupted the global economy and altered consumers' expectations, habits, and purchasing behavior. Here are three high-level consumer behaviors we've seen, based on how people are interacting with technology.

1. Consumers are using multiple devices to go online at unprecedented levels

Connecting with the world online is more important than ever right now, with at-home media consumption increasing dramatically and permeating all aspects of life.

79%   **95%**   **35%**   **58%**
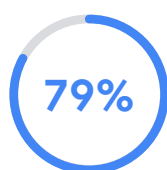
In the UAE and KSA, around **79%** and **95%** of consumers, respectively, are now spending more time online amidst the COVID-19 outbreak[1]
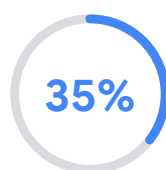
MENA consumers are also spending more time on mobile as search interest for **"mobile app"** grew by **35%** since the beginning of March and by **58%** when compared to last year[2]
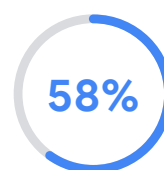
2. People are searching for information and content to meet essential needs

With retailers adapting to delivery or online models, people are looking for clear, specific information about where, how, and when they can get what they need.

↑ **120%**

In MENA, shoppers are interested in knowing if businesses are open. In fact, search interest for **"open now"** increased by **over 120%**, since the beginning of March[3]

↑ **290%**

Search interest related to **"delivery"** increased by **290%** since the beginning of March, as people faced mobility restrictions in MENA[4]

3. Consumers are adjusting their routines to be internet-first

As routines and schedules change to meet the demands of isolation and new realities, so have online habits.

In MENA, **"online shopping"** related searches grew by **65%** between February and April[5]

Search interest for **"online grocery"** increased by **over 700%** between March and April. Also **grocery apps downloads** are growing by **140%** from the beginning of April[6]

As we work with retailers around the globe, we know that you are making changes to adapt to these new realities. While no one can predict exactly how things will go, we're here to support you. This guide should help you prioritize recommendations to help manage your storefront as needs evolve, evaluate and adjust your marketing, and help your customers in new ways.
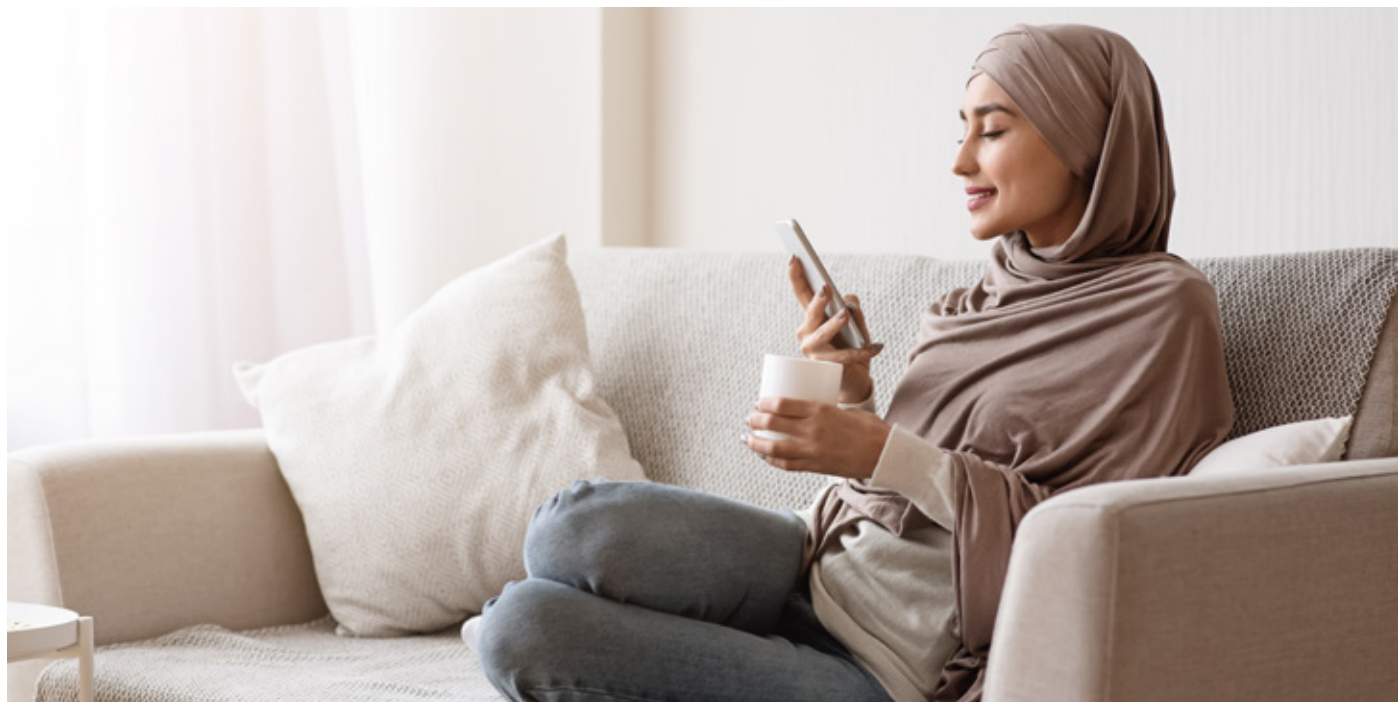
Managing your storefront as needs evolve

Be current and transparent

In a rapidly changing environment, your customers are looking for real-time updates on how your business is doing — especially when it comes to your stores and product availability. In MENA, people are searching online for what's open near them, with search interest growing by 61% since the beginning of March.[7]

Update your business information

- ✅ Use a **COVID-19 post** in Google My Business to share timely information, such as safety precautions you're taking to prepare packages, inventory updates, and how you're keeping employees safe

- ✅ Edit your **Business Profile** to provide the latest information or manage your store's **temporary closure status**

- ✅ If you have 10+ locations, you can make store edits **in bulk**

- ✅ Manage your **delivery options** to show whether your store offers pickup, delivery, or curbside pickup

- ✅ Indicate if your store offers "store pickup," "curbside pickup," or "in-store shopping" through your **Google My Business attributes**

People are trying to get the things they need — searches for "in stock" have grown globally by over 70% from the week of March 28 to April 4.[8]

Keep your inventory up to date

Use **feed uploads** and **automatic item updates** to keep your online product data fresh. For in-store items, use **incremental feeds** in your local inventory ads

Use **feed rules** to make quick updates, such as product availability in your **primary feed** or store closures in your **local inventory feeds**

If items are running low, set a **purchase_quantity_limit** or mark them as **"out of stock"** for online items. For in-store items, mark them as **"limited availability" or "out of stock"**

Make sure your **shipping** and **delivery information** is accurate

THRIVE — MARKET —

Thrive Market **proactively let** their customers know they increased stock in high-demand categories such as immunity, cleaning, and pantry staples. They also led with their values by letting customers know that they will never engage in surge pricing.
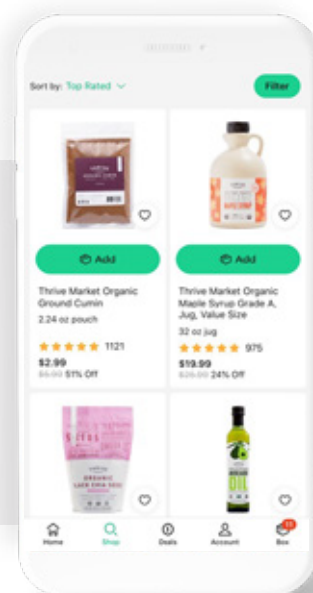
Find additional **resources for small businesses** to help get your retail business through this challenging time

Consider flexible delivery options

As consumers show more interest in safer shopping methods like home delivery, curbside pickup, and in-store pickup, consider trying contactless shopping options and letting your customers know.

800%

Searches for **"home delivery"** have grown by **over 800%** from the week of March 1st to the week of April 5th in MENA. In fact, **"home delivery"** related searches have reached their peak in March when compared to the past 12 months[9]

100x

In UAE specifically, searches related to **"contactless delivery"** witnessed an uplift of **100x** since the beginning of March[10]

BEST BUY

After Best Buy saw demand surge for products that people need to work or learn from home, the consumer electronics giant **adapted and implemented** curbside sales and pickup, allowing customers to stay safely in their cars while a Best Buy employee picks up and delivers their purchase to the curb.
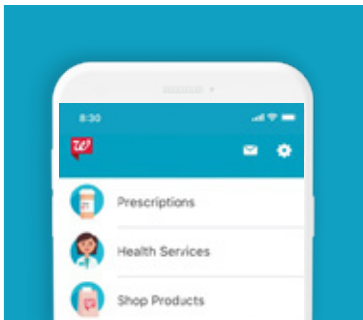
Walgreens

Walgreens **waived delivery fees** on prescriptions to ensure their customers receive their medications without having to go in-store.

LOWE'S

Lowe's ramped up their **curbside pickup services** and changed delivery procedures with contactless delivery options.

Optimize your e-commerce experience

And with hundreds of millions of shopping searches on Google each day, it's crucial that retailers are connected to the customers searching for their products. To make your products discoverable, you can show them in **free product listings** on the Google Shopping (currently available in the U.S.). Once customers are on your site, offering simple, easy-to-navigate web experiences will help them find the information they're looking for and improve their shopping experiences.

Optimize your site for mobile
and **test** your mobile site speed

Promote your app across
Google with **App campaigns**

Evaluating and adjusting your marketing

Find the insights that are relevant to your business

Today's rapid market changes and abundance of data can make it hard to know which insights you should use to inform your marketing strategies. These tools can help you cut through the noise and identify how your customers' shopping behaviors and needs are changing.

55%   **39%**

In MENA, people are now shopping for their home. In fact, searches related to **"home appliance"** & **"desk"** have grown by **55%** and **39%** respectively, since the beginning of March[11]

Understand demand in real time

Google Trends provides access to real-time search requests across Search, YouTube, Shopping, and Images to understand changing consumer behavior

Retail category reporting lets you know what your customers are searching for across your Search and Shopping campaigns

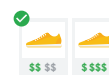**Google Alerts** lets you set up custom alerts for topics you're interested in to help stay informed
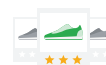
The **best sellers report** helps you identify the most popular brands and products used in Shopping ads

Auction insights for Search and Shopping indicates whether dynamics within your auctions have changed

Price benchmarks for Shopping ads show you how other merchants are pricing the products you sell

Evaluating and adjusting your marketing

As you identify how demand is changing in real-time, focus your inventory and marketing strategies on the products your customers need today. You can **add products** directly in Merchant Center.

🔍

With people spending more time at home, searches for **"nail kits"** and **"hair dye"** have grown by over **100%** and **60%**, respectively from the week of March 21 to the week of March 28[12]

HUDABEAUTY

Huda Beauty, a global beauty brand, saw demand shift from makeup to skincare. To adapt, they reallocated search budgets to bolster skincare ad groups. Ad copy was also tailored to focus on self-care, directing audiences to a new, sitewide "Self-Love Sale." Through this tailored ad messaging and responding to the increase in skincare demand, Huda Beauty saw a **75% increase in search traffic** and **262% increase in search ads revenue** when compared to the prior period.
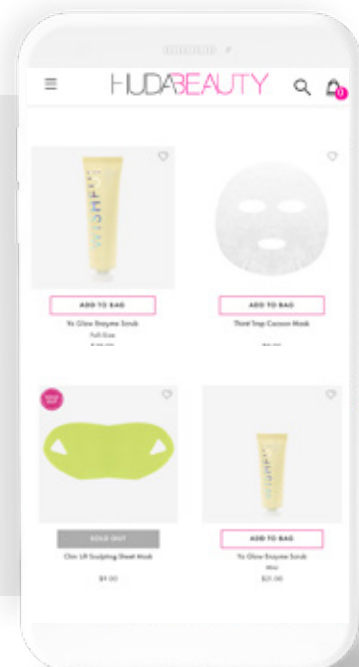
Depending on your marketing strategy, audience insights can help you focus on critical audiences to achieve your marketing goals or expand to new audiences for greater reach or increased conversions.
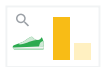
Understand your existing customers and find new customers

Audience reports in Google Analytics can give you a deep-dive into who has visited your website, including their interests and behaviors
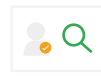
Find My Audience helps you understand who your most valuable customers are on YouTube so you can reach similar audiences with relevant messages

Audience insights can help you find new customers by revealing valuable insights about the people in your remarketing lists

Reach planner can help you find audiences and understand the reach of your Video campaigns

Adjust your marketing campaigns

As your business responds to quickly changing markets, flexibility in your marketing approach is key. Update your marketing campaigns so your approach is aligned with the new climate.

- ✔ Use **location exclusions** to exclude your ads in regions where you can't operate, such as areas where your supply chain is disrupted or conversion rates are impacted

- ✔ Enable **ad scheduling** to control when your ads appear and adjust bids accordingly

- ✔ For products that are affected by supply and demand issues, consider **pausing ad groups or ads**

- ✔ Set **content exclusions** and **placement exclusions** to limit where your ads appear to remain sensitive to customer concerns

Optimize your marketing campaigns using real-time signals

Under changing conditions like these, using **automated bidding** can help you quickly adjust your marketing to the current situation, even if you were previously bidding for store visits. Implement automated bidding like **Maximum conversion value**, **Target CPA**, **Target ROAS**, and **Smart Shopping Campaigns** to make real-time bid adjustments to meet consumer behavior. Monitor your **optimization score and recommendations**, which reflect new ways to improve campaign performance based on shifting demands and market changes.

eSalon

eSalon, a direct-to-consumer custom hair color company, responded to increased demand by creating a comprehensive Search and Display strategy that uses automated bidding. With this approach in place, eSalon was able to automatically meet the surge in demand during COVID-19 while beating their CPA goals using Target CPA. This led to **600% sales growth** compared to the prior two-week period.

The New Way to Color Your Hair

Made-to-order hair color. Never pre-mixed or pre-made, each shade is crafted just for you.
eSalon
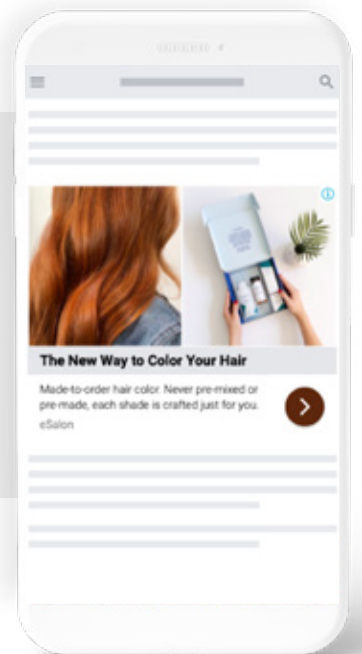
Review performance metrics and be willing to pivot

Use **Performance Planner** to reallocate budget to the most efficient campaigns and optimize your bids and budgets to capture new opportunities

Implement **shared budgets** to automatically allocate budgets to campaigns that are performing better

Apply **RLSA, Customer Match, and similar audiences** with **Smart Bidding** to identify and optimize bidding for your most profitable audiences

Helping your customers in new ways

Let customer needs guide your response as you adapt

Brands that are **helpful to their customers** will have an opportunity to stand out above the rest. In these changing times, being flexible with cancellations, refunds, and customer service can go a long way toward building customer trust. **Turn on messaging** in the Google My Business app and extend your customer service phone hours to be there for your customers when they need your support.

77%
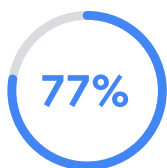
of consumers say brands should talk about how they are helpful now[13]

33%
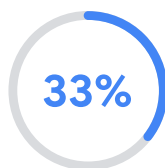
Over 1 in 3 have started using a new brand because of the innovative or compassionate way they responded to the pandemic[14]

Reformation

Sustainable fashion brand **Reformation** partnered with Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti to launch **LA Protects**, an initiative to organize local manufacturers – who are not already in the protective gear supply chain – to ramp up production of non-medical masks.
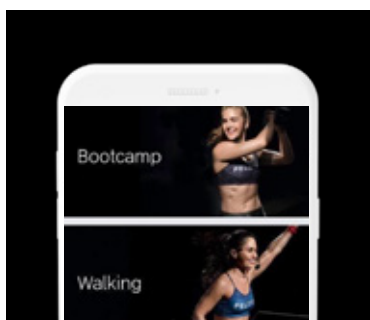
PELOTON

Peloton has extended the free trial of its workout app to 90 days for individuals stuck at home during the pandemic. They also **pledged $1 million** to cover two months of membership fees for customers in financial hardship.

Adjust your creative and media campaigns for context and tone

As the situation evolves, continue to reassess the context and tone of your marketing messages. Conduct a creative review of your ads and landing pages to gauge whether the language and imagery are appropriate. Make sure you're sensitive to how certain words could make your audience feel, especially those with double meanings like "protection," "checkup," "prevention," and "virus." For international campaigns, be aware of local terms that have been used to reference COVID-19 and regional disruptions.

> 🔧 Consider incorporating the **5 principles we've been using to guide our media** into your marketing plan

With an increasing number of consumers staying at home, YouTube is filling a vital role in entertaining and educating people. If it makes sense for your marketing strategy right now, consider creating video content to reconnect with your customers.

Create video content from home

For help with re-editing existing footage, developing fresh animation from scratch, or product shots from afar, check out our creative partners on **YouTube's creative directory**. You may be surprised by what you can create from your laptop in a few short minutes with a few **creative best practices**.
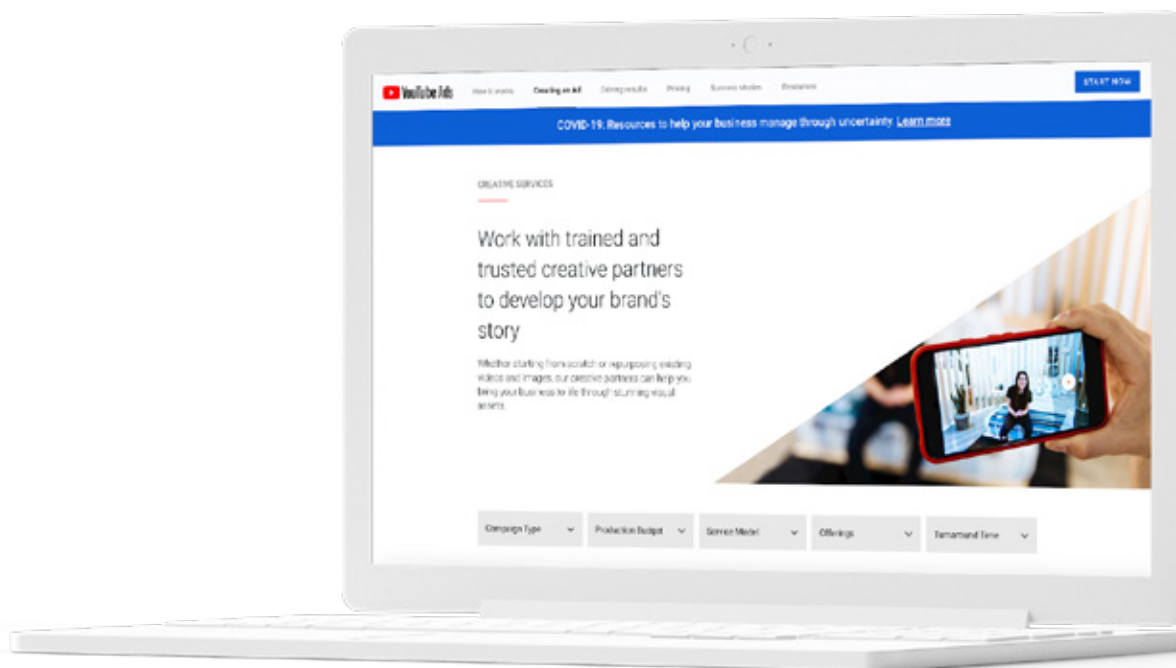
See examples of **brands responding to coronavirus** on YouTube

Preparing for what's next

Communicate business updates and store reopening

As you prepare for stores to reopen, continue to be transparent and communicate with your employees and customers. Create a **COVID-19 post** in Google My Business to let your customers know that you're responding to local conditions and government guidelines.

If you have multiple store locations, you may be considering a phased approach to reopening. In Google My Business, you can **reopen a location** or multiple locations with the **Google My Business API**. You may want to consider reactivating your paused **Local Campaigns** and **updating your ads** with updated business hours.

Adapt to lasting consumer behaviors

When we look at past crises, the businesses that weathered uncertain times stayed in contact with their customers, acted fast, and invested in preparing for recovery. According to a Deloitte study on the 2001 and 2008 recessions, e-commerce grew during both periods and continued to grow in their aftermath.[15] In China, the 2003 SARS outbreak led to the birth of some of China's largest online retailers. Even as stores begin to reopen, online shopping will likely keep growing.

Planning for recovery will require adapting to long-term changes in consumer behavior. For example, **social distancing** could accelerate the trend of home as headquarters — which makes it important to stay up to date on the latest consumer trends. While we don't know when the disruptive shifts of this crisis will be resolved, we do know that remaining flexible is the key to staying connected with customers and giving them the support they need. Only time will tell if certain consumer behavior shifts are here to stay, but the result will be a lasting increase in the move to digital.

Visit our COVID-19 hubs on **Google for Retail** and **Google for Small Business** for the latest tools and resources

Sources

1. **Kearney** Middle East, UAE,KSA, n=1000, April 5, 2020 - April 9, 2020

2. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; January 1, 2019 - May 29, 2020.

3. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; March 1, 2020 - May 29, 2020.

4. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; March 1, 2020-April 10, 2020.

5. Google Trends, UAE,KSA,EG; February 1, 2020 - April 30, 2020.

6. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; March 1, 2020 - April 11, 2020 | App Annie, Top 15 grocery delivery apps in MENA, UAE,KSA; April 1, 2020 - May 5, 2020.

7. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; March 1, 2020 - May 29, 2020.

8. Google Data, Global English, March 29, 2020–April 4, 2020 vs. March 22, 2020–March 28, 2020.

9. Google Trends, UAE,KSA,EG; March 1, 2020 - April 11, 2020.

10. Google Trends, UAE, March 1, 2020 - May 2, 2020.

11. Google Trends, UAE, KSA, EG; March 1, 2020 - May 29, 2020.

12. Google Data, Global English, March 22, 2020–March 28, 2020 vs. March 15, 2020–March 21, 2020.

13. Kantar, 30 Markets, COVID-19 Barometer: **Consumer attitudes, media habits and expectations**, n=500 per market except Italy where n=1,000, March 2020.

14. Edelman, BR, CA, CN, FR, DE, IN, IT, JP, ZA, KR, UK, US, **Brand Trust and the Coronavirus Pandemic**, n=1,000 nationally rep. respondents/ market, March 23, 2020–March 26, 2020.

15. Deloitte, **The next consumer recession, preparing now**, March 2019.