Navigating your retail business through COVID-19

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

Google for Retail
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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.
Using consumer insights to guide your approach

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.

In the U.S., staying home has led people to watch 60% more content, or roughly 12 hours a day, according to Nielsen data. Consumers across the globe are downloading and spending 20% more time using apps than they did a year ago, according to App Annie.
Using consumer insights to guide your approach

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.

↑ 100%

Searches for “curbside pickup” and “home delivery” have grown by 70% and over 100%, respectively over the week ending March 28.

↑ 60%

U.S. consumers searched online for “what’s open near me”.

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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 the U.S., 24% of surveyed shoppers went online to purchase something they would normally buy in-store and 87% of them said they’d try it again⁵

Searches for “groceries delivery slots” have grown globally by over 300% from the week of April 4 to the week of April 11⁶

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. 60% of U.S. consumers said they searched online for what’s open near them.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
Managing your storefront as needs evolve

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 4.¹

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.

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”.

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

Make sure your shipping and delivery information is accurate.

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.
Managing your storefront as needs evolve

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.

Searches for “home delivery” have grown globally by over 100% from the week of March 21 to the week of March 28.

Searches for “curbside pickup” have grown globally by 70% from the week of March 21 to the week of March 28.

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

Lowe’s ramped up their curbside pickup services and changed delivery procedures with contactless delivery options.
Managing your storefront as needs evolve

Optimize your e-commerce experience

With over 80% of the U.S. staying home, consumers are turning to the web for what they need. 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 tab 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**

**Evaluate and improve your digital shopping experience with Grow My Store**

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

38% of U.S. shoppers say that they are shopping for their home, now that they’re spending more time there.  

42% of U.S. shoppers say that they are shopping for items they want or need for after COVID-19.
Understanding demand in real time

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

- **Google Alerts** lets you set up custom alerts for topics you're interested in to help stay informed.

- **Shopping insights** helps you understand what shoppers are looking for across Google, compare competing products in your category, and discover local demand for your brands and products.

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

- **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.

- **The rising retail categories tool on Think with Google** surfaces the fastest rising retail categories in Google Search.
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 salons closed, 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.

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.
Evaluating and adjusting your marketing

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.

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.

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*In Europe, Smart Shopping campaigns can be used with any Comparison Shopping Service (CSS) you work with. The ads will show on general search results pages and on any other surfaces the CSS has opted in to.
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 fact, 84% of surveyed U.S. consumers say that how companies or brands act now will affect their future loyalty. 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.

Above all, remember that your customers’ lives are changing rapidly, too. Over a quarter of U.S. consumers are struggling to find the products they want or need, and nearly 3 in 10 bought brands they don’t normally buy. Many retailers have changed how they operate in order to sustain business and help customers in new ways.

77% of consumers say brands should talk about how they are helpful now.

Over 1 in 3 have started using a new brand because of the innovative or compassionate way they responded to the pandemic.
Helping your customers in new ways

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 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.

76% of consumers say they want to hear from helpful brands during this time.

Consider incorporating the 5 principles we’ve been using to guide our media into your marketing plan.
Helping your customers in new ways

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.
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. 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

5. Google/Ipsos, U.S., Shopping Tracker, online survey, n=3,005, Americans 18+ who conducted shopping activities in past two days, March 2020.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
17. Kantar, 30 Markets, COVID-19 Barometer: Consumer attitudes, media habits and expectations, n=500 per market except Italy where n=1,000, March 2020.