

# Coronavirus Disruption: Could Search be the Answer?

How marketers can turn the world's largest dataset of consumer intent into actionable strategies to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and capture more customer demand.

An abstract graphic consisting of multiple parallel orange lines that start from the left side of the page, curve upwards and to the right, and then end in five vertical arrows pointing upwards. The lines are closely spaced and create a sense of flow and direction.

**REPRISE**



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# Introduction



“What is coronavirus?” In the short two decades or so since Google has been the near-universal destination for people’s insatiable curiosity, few three-word queries have triggered such a profound shock to the way we collectively live our lives. Whether in Singapore, New York, London or Sydney, the COVID-19 pandemic has captured the world’s attention: from seeking the latest news, scientific advice and financial support, to researching homebound life hacks, stockpile plans and eccentric conspiracy theories.

When people are confined at home and in need of anything at all, that little search box on our devices and in our smart speakers is a portal to the outside world. Practically overnight our ability to be compensated for lost income, diagnose mysterious symptoms, keep our businesses afloat, entertain or educate our kids, feed our families, assist our community and find inspiration to pass the time, all begin with search.

For marketers, whose business models have been uprooted, never has there been a more pertinent time to take a hard look at your holistic search strategy—how you are directing this huge uptick in customer flow towards your brands and products—from the content you need to be a relevant authority on new queries, to the way you actively intercept or organically rank for those queries.



Meanwhile and unsurprisingly, with the cancellation of the entire sporting calendar; conferences, award shows; political campaigns gone virtual; the closing of movie theatres, restaurants, bars; the suspension of new entertainment production; the decrease in commuter and business travel as roughly half the global population is in some form of lockdown; we are seeing sweeping reductions in reach and behavior changes in linear TV, OOH, cinema, radio and transit media. (MAGNA Report, 4/3/20)

Yet consumer life goes on. And not only are we witnessing a sustained change in how people use search, but the platform itself is an invaluable resource to fuel intrepid marketers' plans for the future. With 90% of the world's searches taking place on Google, over 3.5 billion per day, it is a vast study of real human behavior. Marketers rarely look at global trends for unique insights into their business, but in this unusual time, observing this scale can uncover untapped opportunities for brands to enrich the connection they have with consumers and drive more customer flow to their products through a focus on media, content and customer experience. While self-isolation and stay-

at-home orders will likely remain in place in the Western hemisphere through the second quarter, there's a whole second half of the year to catch up, reset, or reimagine.

This article provides a detailed breakdown of all the corners of the search ecosystem that deserve to be addressed during the crisis—a practical guide highlighting reactive recommendations and proactive opportunities. While a trend or data point may well have passed or been surpassed by another feed-breaking finding by the time you read this, the recommended strategies should not be discounted. What follows is the culmination of a global think tank of SEM, SEO and Content experts from across Reprise, a global leader in customer-driven performance marketing, embedded within IPG Mediabrands.



**The following POV is intended for business leaders and marketers to prepare their organizations to effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19. This is not intended to offer scientific or medical advice. Please consult your preferred search engine for the latest information on the global pandemic.**

# Part 1:

## How are consumer behaviors changing?



Search experts have long observed the correlation between the demand generated in search and the share of mind a given topic has captured in the culture at large. In the case of COVID-19, it is literally all we are thinking about.



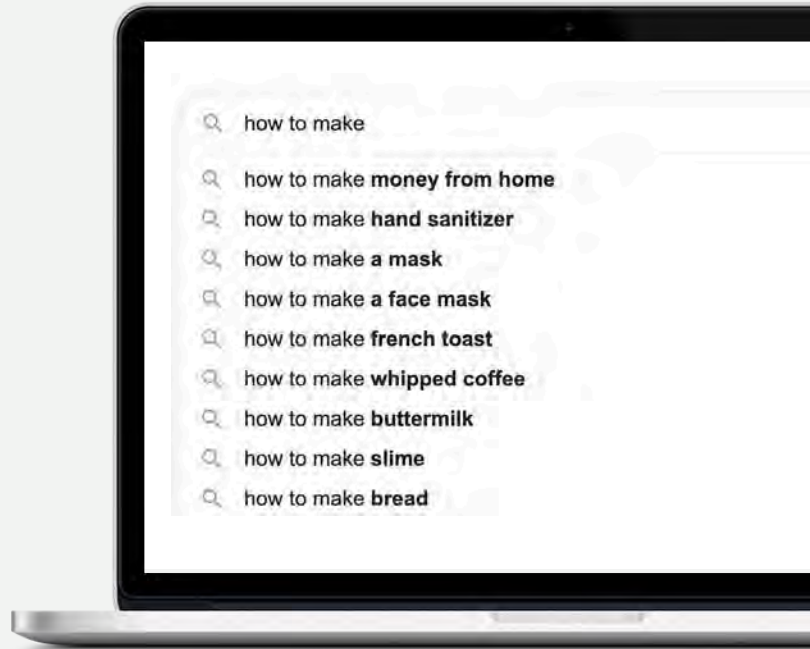
Aside from the monumental interest in the pandemic itself, far surpassing any natural or man-made event ever witnessed by Google, we see a wealth of new and intensified behaviors taking off. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we had our routines and habits, our weekend sports rituals, favorite dinner spots, gym routines, commuting radio shows or podcasts, our post school-drop caffeine pick-ups and FOMO-inducing spring break plans. Aside from a major life event there was little

reason to disrupt this routine. Search was in large part a means to an end—you had some idea of something you wanted or needed and used search to get more information and evaluate where and when you would make a purchase.

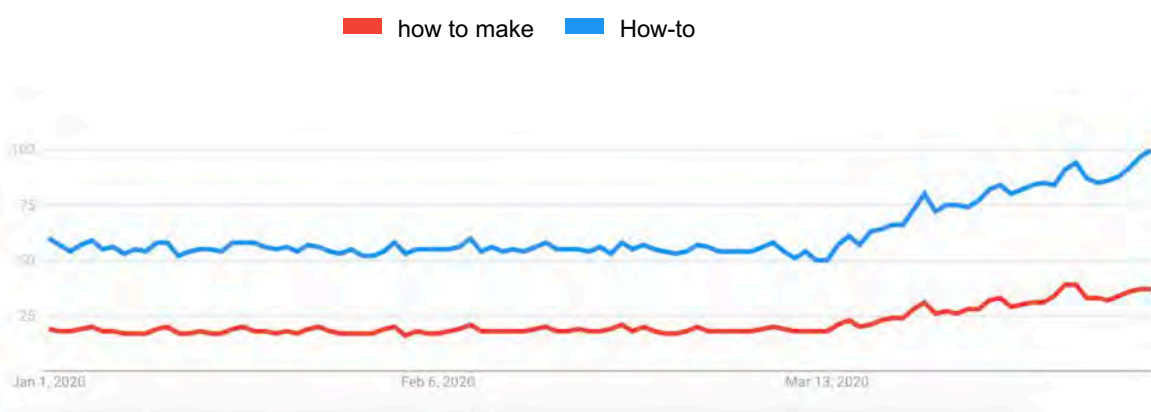


Today, amid COVID-19 lockdown, consumers are faced with the reality that they have no idea what they want or need. And they are questioning whether to spend money at all. Consumers are already anticipating changes in their spending habits with 29% expecting to save more and 27% spending less on non-essential items such as fashion and luxuries. (BCG Analysis, March 17, 2020)

They are less occupied with searching for products alone, but more in search of solutions to the new totally unpredictable challenges life has thrown at those carefully manicured routines. They must learn new skills, new routines, new ways of living at home, new ways to interact with their families, virtually motivating coworkers and socializing with friends. We are seeing an extraordinary surge in “how-to” related search queries as a result.



### Google Trends, Worldwide, 1/1/20 - 4/14/20



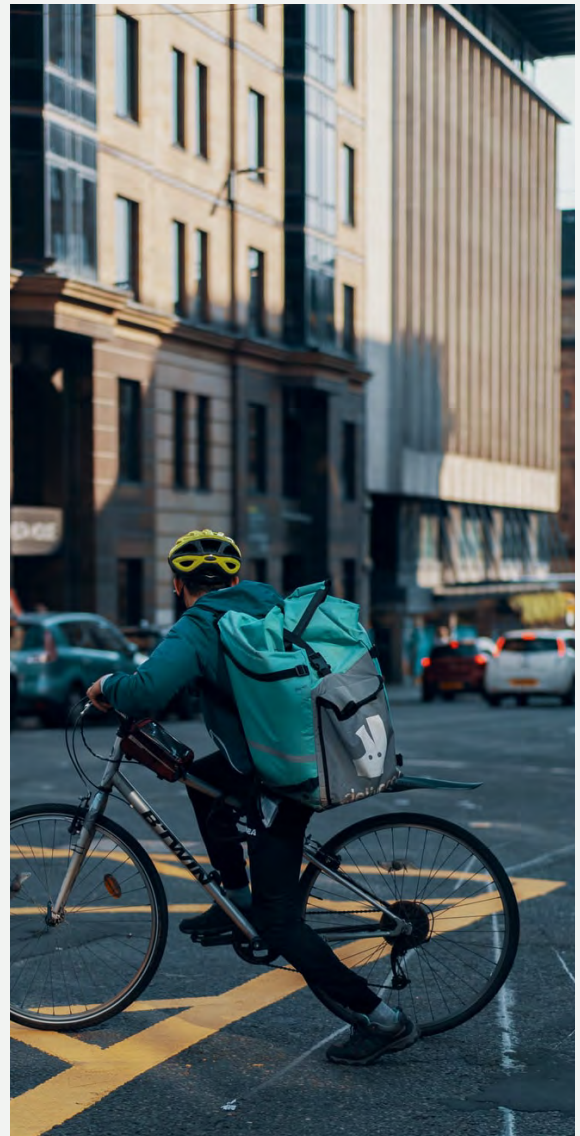
Search data gives us a remarkable glimpse into how these new routines are playing out in real time and the experimentation that comes with finding new ways of doing things.

*A couple of counter-intuitive global observations illustrative of this experimentation:*

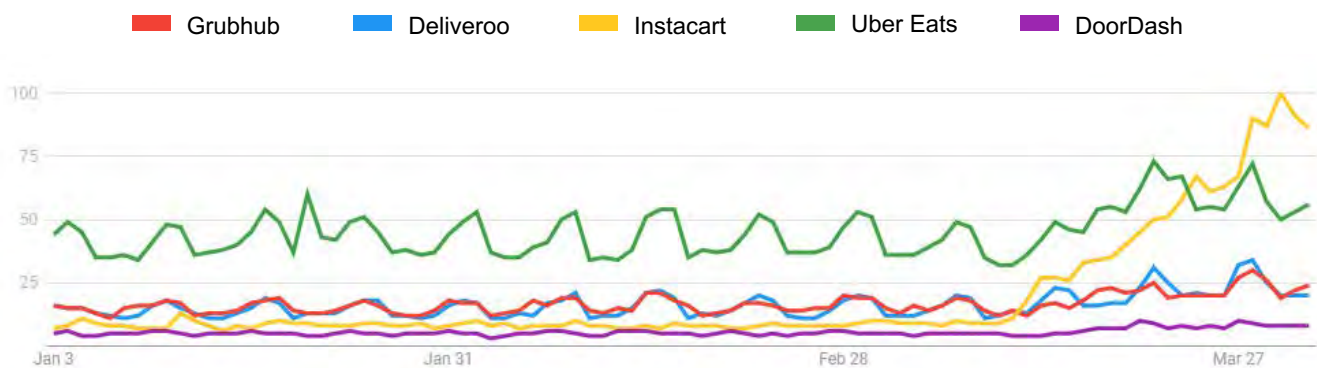
## 1. The comfort of home cooking or home delivery?

Amid social distancing restrictions, a huge proportion of restaurants moving to take-out or delivery only models, the disarray of home life and pressures on routines one might expect to see a surge in take-out and home delivery app demand. But the likes of Grubhub, DoorDash and Deliveroo are seeing only moderate search increase with spikes remaining at the weekend as people try to maintain routines from normal times in which food delivery is a costly weekend indulgence.

People would rather prepare food themselves than receive it from unknown kitchens with potentially risky sanitation standards. As a result, grocery delivery businesses, like Instacart, are surging in demand as more people take to virtual grocery shopping at scale, bulk ordering a fridge and pantry full of supplies to last weeks not days.



### Google Trends, Worldwide, January 2020 – March 2020 (Search Team)



Google Trends (1/1/20-4/17/20)

## 2. Healthy intentions meet feel-better indulgences

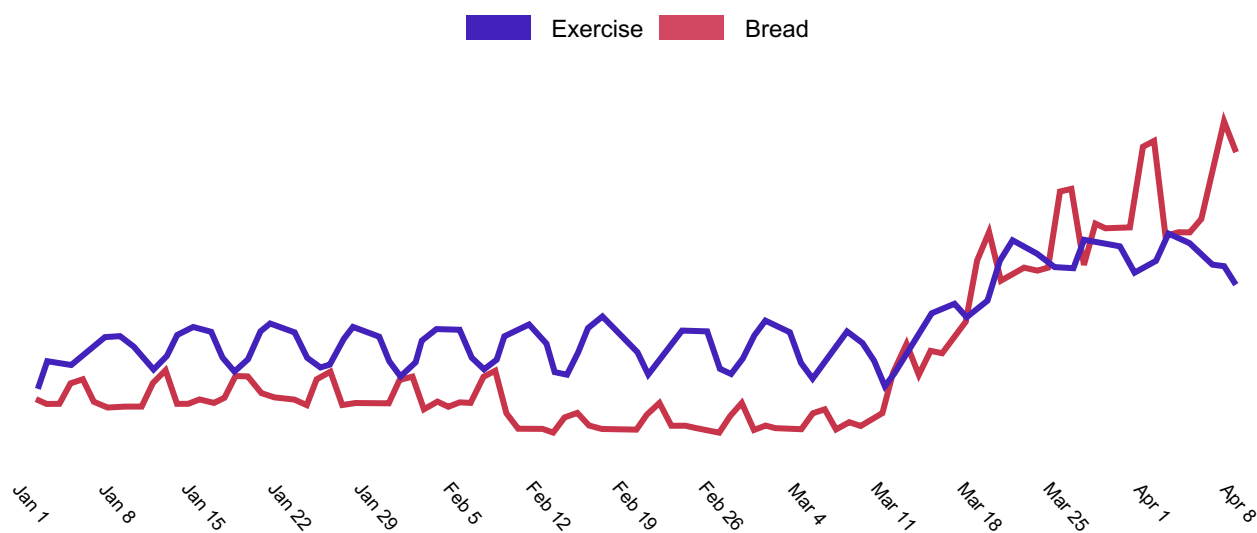
The rise in amateur bakers has been well documented by the mainstream media, with the likes of CNN trying to explain “Why everyone’s suddenly baking bread” (4/13) and bread machines seeing a +652% year on year growth rate in eCommerce (second only to disposable gloves)! It seems in the time of COVID-19 the target of the anti-gluten, anti-carb health movement has made a huge comeback.

Meanwhile on the complete opposite end of the healthy living spectrum, we’ve also seen people seize the work-from-home life as an opportunity to apply their excess energy to exercise—with home workouts and virtual fitness classes seeing a surge in demand. Equipment from simple dumbbells to high-end stationary bikes are as scarce as hand sanitizer in some places.

But it’s the intersection and relationship of these seemingly disparate search behaviors that proves insightful. As bread rises, exercise subsides. This inverse relationship persists somewhat as we enter the pandemic surge demand right around March 13th. One month later it seems bread has won the battle, with exercise beginning a downward trend. Sometimes correlations in data observed from outside your own category can shed a valuable light on consumer behaviors relating to your category and spark new ideas for content, social engagement and even entirely new products. Simple workouts to do while baking, anyone?



### Search Volume: Exercise vs. Bread



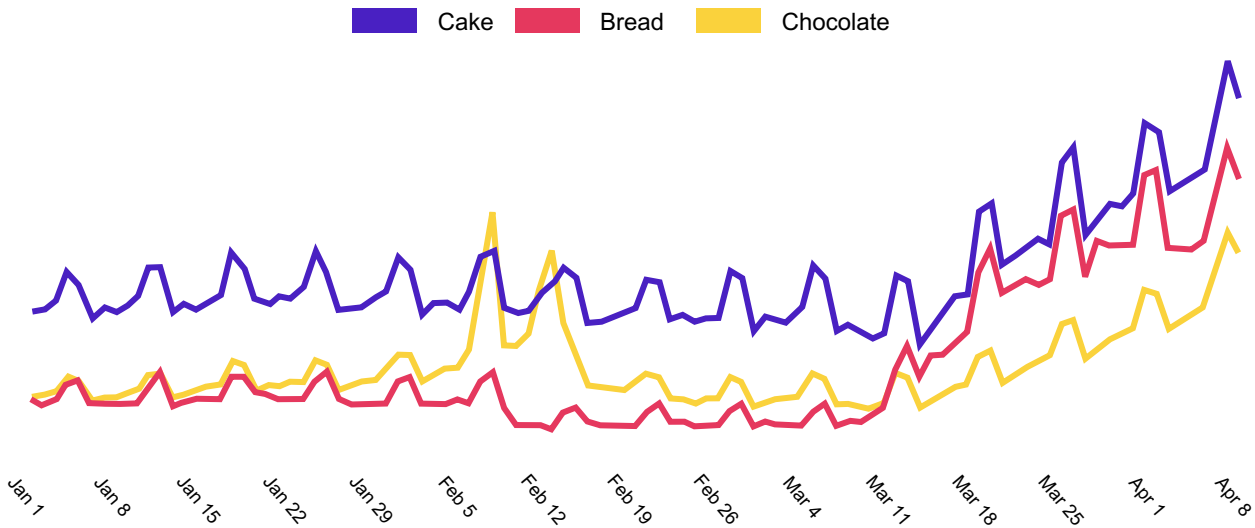
Source: Google Trends Worldwide YTD 2020

Google Trends (1/1/20-4/17/20)



In fairness, bread is a staple ingredient in the grocery basket of most households, so it's rather harsh to label it as the antithesis to exercise, though truly indulgent foods like cake and chocolate are also seeing an extraordinary surge in interest in response to stockpiling and home baking. Not to belabor the point, but edible cookie dough is seeing a +70% increase in search demand in the US. (Google trends).

## Search Volume: Baked Goods and Chocolate



Source: Google Trends Worldwide YTD 2020

Google Trends (1/1/20-4/17/20)

*Note: Easter, traditionally filled with chocolate in the Christian world at least, had little contribution to this surge when compared to last year.*

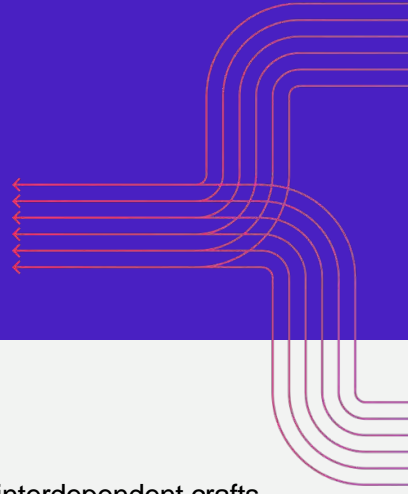
These two search demand match ups are an excellent illustration of the importance of understanding your consumers' intentions and motivations in search. They may hail from the food and fitness industries, but similar nuanced insights abound across every industry, for every brand and every type of consumer. This is a great opportunity

to get creative with the keyword mining in your industry and inspire your organization with hitherto ignored or undiscovered insights about your most valuable consumers.

As mentioned in the introduction, there have never been more people more actively engaged in searching, discovering, evaluating and buying brands and products online—these are huge customer flows waiting for the right brand to intercept, engage and convert them. It is our responsibility as marketers to ensure we can provide the content they seek, and ultimately lead them to the products that will make their lives better or easier.

# Part 2:

## What should marketers do?



What follows is a detailed exploration of what can be done right now in relation to three interdependent crafts within the search realm. At Reprise, we look at the world of performance marketing through the lens of customer flow, the movement of people along a journey to purchase. Each craft plays a critical role in directing and channeling customer flow to conversion.

1

### Content Marketing

Your content can attract and engage new customer flow

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2

### SEM

Your paid search can intercept new behaviors and capture new customer flow

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3

### SEO

Recalibrate the experience to convert more customer flow

# 1

## Content Marketing:

Your content can attract and engage new customer flow

If you thought this was a POV purely on SEM, we apologize, but to ensure your brand can “be there” and be relevant for your customers in search during this unique time, we have to start with what content you have or need to create to meet their new and evolving needs.

At Reprise we distinguish content into four categories, as part of our Complete Content Model solution for clients.

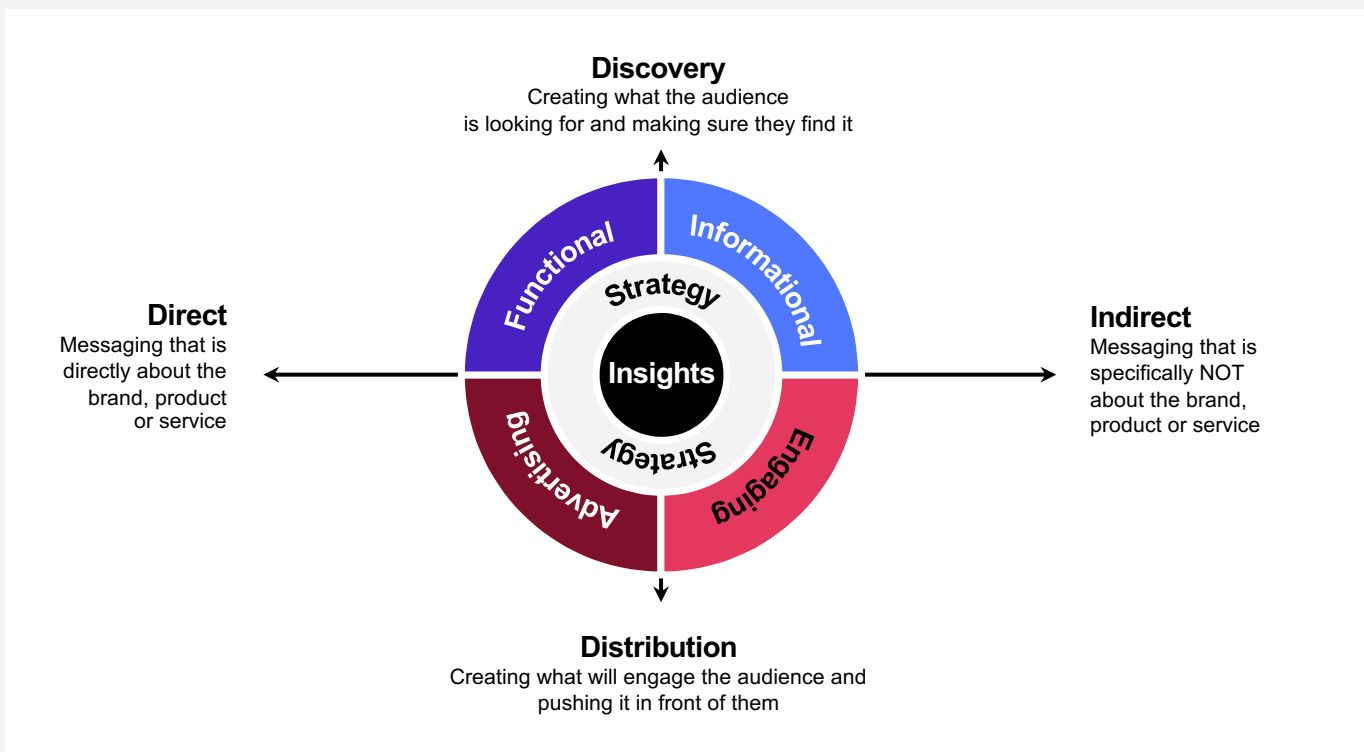
**Functional Content:** Content that people discover primarily via search about your brand, products, or services. This might be commercial pages, About Us content, or FAQs.

**Informational Content:** Content that people discover primarily via search, but is NOT directly about your brand, products, or services.

This might be evergreen or blog content that touches your audience’s immediate needs, passion or pain points.

**Engaging Content:** Content that is primarily distributed to your audience via paid, organic or partner channels, but which (unlike advertising) isn’t explicitly about your brand, product or service. This is content designed to resonate with the audience and their specific needs, passion points and pain points, but unlike informational content, it needs to reach them and grab them in passive moments, when they’re not actively looking for help.

**Advertising Content:** Content that is designed for distribution and which is explicitly about your brand, product or service. This is a huge subject in its own right as it covers everything from DR price and product ads for ecommerce firms, through to multi-million-dollar brand campaigns. Critically, a Complete Content strategy must consider this content category in much the same way as it considers the other three—is advertising content part of the right solution for your brand, your audience and your performance objectives?





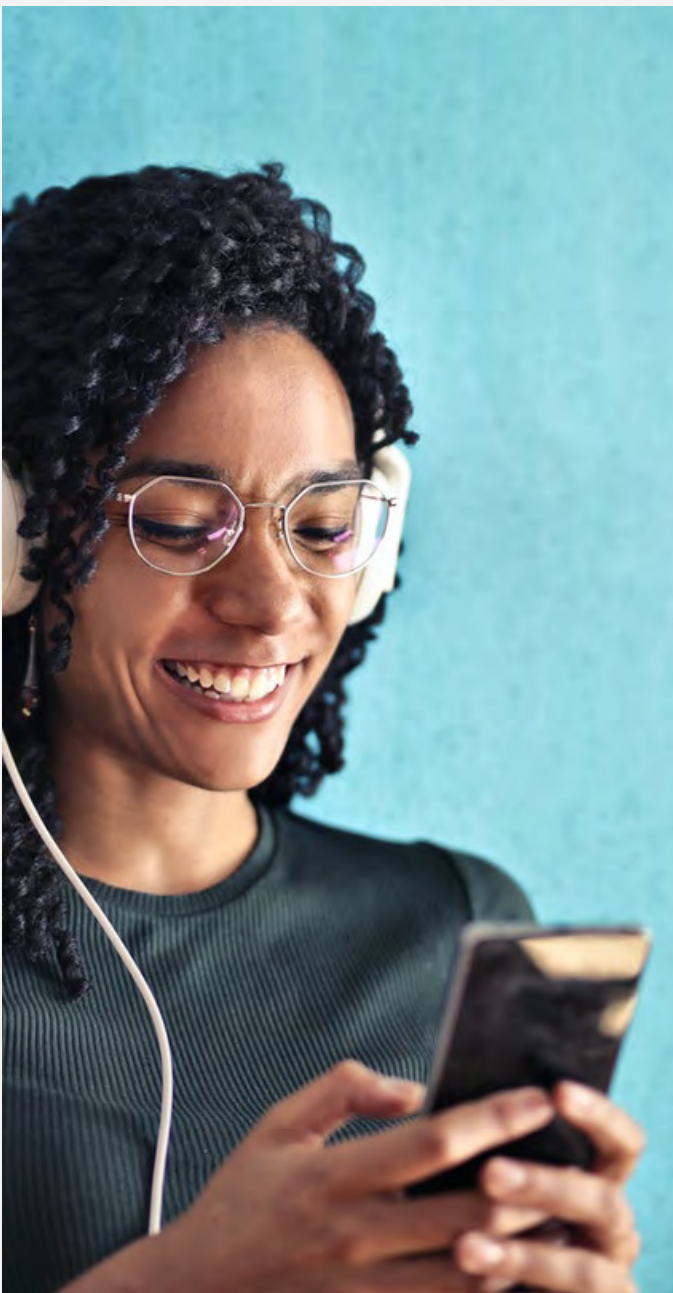
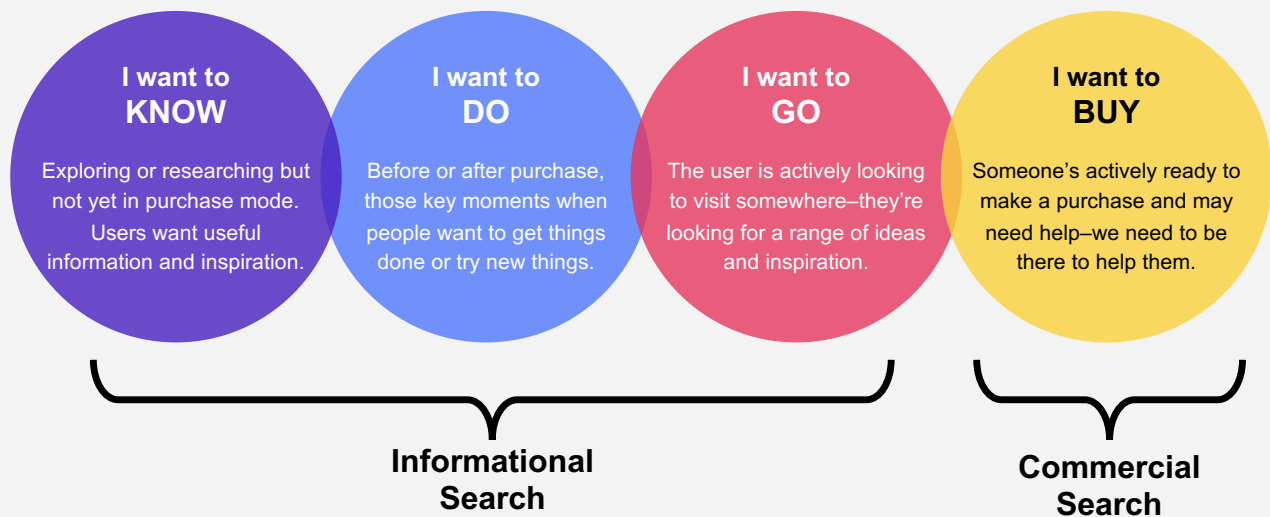
Unlike many traditional content marketing models, Complete Content is not about trying to argue that content (in the traditional sense) is somehow better than advertising—it's about helping brands develop a strategy which will truly deliver what the audience wants and needs

The first opportunity in the **Functional Content** space is to identify the key questions that your audience want answered about your brand. Tools such as Google Search Console can help marketers identify these rising topics. For example, in addition to the aforementioned rise in “how to” we have seen a recent increase in queries starting with “does” and “can.” Others such as “where” or “how” depend heavily on the industry. You may be surprised to find entirely new terms not seen before, such as searches containing the word “without.” Similar insights can come from customer service data, social listening, and first-party research that may not have filtered through to search yet. Exploring search trends in other markets further ahead in the coronavirus experience journey can also inform this research and identify new FAQ topics.

Brands can typically rank organically for their own brand-related terms if they have the corresponding functional content and ensure search engines can index pages. Therefore, the focus of anything new should be simply about identifying what people want and need, and then creating best-in-class practical and actionable content that meets those needs. We would typically achieve that by bringing SEO, UX, design and content experts together to work through clusters of search terms and agreeing to a content solution that balances the needs of these different crafts.

The second opportunity is in **Informational Content**, identifying what relevant non-brand search micro-moments your brand has a right to rank for—across the whole user journey. It is often useful to categorize consumer search behaviors into four distinct groups: I want to know, I want to do, I want to go, and I want to buy (as explained on the next page). Naturally, we are seeing a sharp decline in “I want to go” based search terms, but you should plan with the foresight that those terms will be back the moment social distancing restrictions are lifted across the globe.





We always recommend staying true to one's brand and against wild goose chases during new Google algorithm updates. One of their newer updates, nicknamed E.A.T., further prioritized what has always been valuable for good content: Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. Any terms you want to rank organically for must be on topics where your brand is a legitimate resource.

The challenge, at this time in particular, is identifying which search terms fit that bill, using the following process:

- **Brainstorm topic areas** with very high levels of brand relevance—what the audience is searching for, and which your brand has an indisputable right to be regarded as an expert, an authority, and a trustworthy source.
- **Carry out detailed keyword research** in these areas.
- **Group all relevant search terms** into semantic clusters—groups of terms with very similar meaning.
- **Develop content titles to cover these clusters**—some titles may cover multiple clusters, other clusters may require individual article titles.
- **Analyze both opportunity size and competitiveness** on an article title level to identify the biggest, quickest, and most winnable battles within organic search. We use a range of proprietary tools to do this quickly at scale.

Armed with a detailed list of article titles, prioritized by both opportunity and competitiveness, you can now start creating **Informational Content** that is explicitly not about your brand, product, or service. One example in the financial services sector might be, 'How will the coronavirus affect my pension?' To create best-in-class content, you will compete against the most-trusted sites on the Internet so content needs to be deep, rich, and incredibly high-quality as well as meet the needs of both users and search algorithms.

### 1. Pick the right battles

Ensure you choose topics that your target audience are actually searching for and only cover content topics that are genuinely within your field of expertise as a brand.

### 2. Understand user intent

Focus Informational Content on meeting users' wants and needs. The main content on informational pages should be 100% focused on answering the user's query, preferably with structured markup where applicable—but marketers can also include supplementary or advertising content on these pages to highlight relevant products and services.

### 3. Demonstrate your credentials

Your expertise, authority, and trustworthiness must be clear and obvious on Informational Content pages. Visual cues of branding may suffice for users, but not search engines. Use qualified authors or expert interviewees and name them. Source and reference all factual claims. Include proof points and evidence throughout.

### 4. Be the best

Ensure your Informational Content can stand up against other ranking pages for the topic. That means taking a leaf out the books for leading editorial and official sites, employing quality content professionals, and creating content that is at least as deep as the content published by the competition. Bake usability and accessibility factors into content as a standard.

### 5. Get talked about as experts

If worth sharing amidst recent news, communicate the new content or products to your audience through media, social influencers, email, or virtual events.

Given the wealth of new behaviors and routines being adopted by consumers all around the globe, corresponding to a huge appetite to surround oneself with the culture and community that new hobbies and challenges present, this is an opportunity for your **Engaging Content** to shine by association. Not brand, product or promotion led, but interest, expertise and passion-focused on a topic. You probably have this content neatly filed into numerous CRM programs or archived on blog pages. Now is a good time to surface some of that content and distribute it to new audiences hungry to learn about the category, in places like YouTube pre-roll, Twitter or Instagram. As many competitors go dark, finding low-hanging fruit to engage new category entrants with content that enriches their discovered passion can generate new customer flow to your brand (not to mention rich retargeting pools). And of course, distributing all that highly-relevant content off your site is a powerful way of driving authority and engagement back to your site, which will only enhance its SEO proficiency.

A quick side note about the fourth quadrant in our complete content model: **Advertising Content**. As an industry we have already seen the spectrum of COVID-19 response ads: from beautiful odes to homebound life powered by a brand's products and technology (Apple, Nike) to demonstrating the contribution brands are making to support essential workers, whether within their employee base or the broader public (Uber, Facebook, UPS, Walmart). And there's strong evidence to suggest that brands which increase their brand advertising spend versus the competition gain serious advantages in non-brand search performance too. But what about the brands whose core products and services cannot be MacGyvered into supporting the pandemic response? Consumers anxiously scrolling through LinkedIn amid fears about their job security don't need to be told their sneaker brand is now proudly making face masks. Make no mistake, it's "good" content for a lifesaving cause and it should exist as evidence for current and future potential customers to know that you did your part. But it's not good advertising content because it doesn't appreciate the needs of the audience it aims to engage in that moment on that platform.

## 2

### SEM:

Your paid search can intercept new behaviors and capture new customer flow

A good transition from the role content plays in your holistic search strategy to focus on pure SEM is to take the recommendations from the previous section and determine where your organic presence will come up short in your audience's queries. If you have strong content, but you haven't built up the authority, trust and resulting visibility, you can buy your way into the ranking with paid search. Using paid search dollars to instantly propel your Functional and Informational Content to the top of the SERPs can be an efficient and effective way to reach and engage prospective customers in search micro-moments throughout their journey. Conversely, gathering your quality Engaging Content and pushing it to your audience via OESP channels can be a powerful way of boosting the authority of your website—and therefore its SEO performance—at a crucial time, as well as delivering timely reach and engagement.

Automation and machine learning help search marketers make smarter, data-driven optimizations and strategy shifts. This is especially important at a time like the COVID-19 pandemic, where day-to-day lives have been disrupted and clients' SEM performance impacted. Automation can help us adjust bids and budgets in near real time and fuel us with a pipeline of business intelligence and trends. However, machines can't do it alone.

A team of AI-empowered marketers mobilized to better understand the shift in behavior and identify emerging categories and queries, is critical. Assigning the role of Trend Spotter on each account helps unlock intent signals along the way, giving us actionable insights.

### What

Mine campaign Search Query Reports and use Google Trends for keyword insights weekly (if not more frequently). This is where keyword intelligence is as close to real time as we can get and will help us understand what users are searching for, fueling keyword expansion projects. Staying up-to-date here will give brands more opportunities to connect with consumers.

### Where

Analyze geographic performance at the various levels available in your market and optimize accordingly (Region, DMA, City). Campaign performance can vary greatly depending on the penetration of COVID-19 cases in different areas. For example, areas with stricter stay-at-home orders and higher case count may have a greater impact on performance depending on the product or service you're selling.

### When

Assess hourly and day of week performance and assume that otherwise reliable optimization tactics may not have the same effect at this time. Our schedules are constantly changing. We are commuting less and are at home more, causing changes in normal search patterns. With mere 30-second commutes, working out at lunch time, grocery shopping after midnight, teaching kids mid-morning. We yoyo from work to life and back again multiple times every day and search behavior may follow that erratic behavior.

Relentless optimization and adapting to the changing landscape is vital to get and stay ahead of the pack. However, the impact of COVID-19 is unique to each account and we must align SEM approaches accordingly. We have segmented accounts into three distinct groups based on current state: Protect, Pivot and Pioneer.

## Protect

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Situation has caused significant impact to SEM campaigns: decrease in revenue, drop in conversion, rising CPAs or a decline in ROI. In this case, it makes sense to protect the bottom line, potentially reducing investment and focusing on content and SEO.

## Pivot

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Recalibrate SEM efforts to increase campaign effectiveness by focusing on testing creative and ad formats and aligning messaging to the changes observed in search behavior.

## Pioneer

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Invest and grow in new ways for accounts where category interest is on the rise. Invest in content, expand campaigns, increase budgets, and drive innovation.

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While not all search marketers can throw caution to the wind and grow or even maintain investment at this critical time, we've identified five ways you can adjust efforts to increase SEM effectiveness in the time of COVID-19.

### 1. Prioritize investment where organic visibility is lacking.

With pressure to drive performance likely to be at an all-time high this is the perfect time to eliminate inefficiencies. Is your paid search activity cannibalizing organic search activity, causing you to pay for customer flow you would have gained "for free" from organic search? Without an unlimited funding source, maximizing investment where you lack organic visibility will allow you to prioritize which auctions to compete in.

At Reprise we can dynamically recalibrate SEM spend in this context with our proprietary Equilibrium tool. If we see that a competitor enters the auction, or we track a drop in our organic ranking, then Equilibrium will automatically activate bidding on that keyword to increase the likelihood of connecting with consumers on that keyword. This holistic approach across paid and organic search can be a game changer with unpredictable auction dynamics in this period of disruption.



## 2. Maximize high-performing keywords and review keyword reports frequently.

For those experiencing a surge in search demand due to social distancing, ensure sufficient budgets to capture incremental traffic across your high-performing keywords. With more impressions and shifts in competition, your CPCs are likely to trend down. This may present an opportunity to capture more traffic to your site through SEM. Historic benchmarks and YoY forecasts are no longer indicative of developing trends. At Reprise, we use the Keyword Maximizer within our optimization suite Tempo to help us do this at scale day in and day out.

No one knows what will be trending tomorrow, so it's important to have your Trend Spotter looking at Search Query Reports often to understand what traffic your ads are getting and identify negative keywords to quickly incorporate into your campaigns to prevent your ads from reaching irrelevant searchers and wasting budgets. Leverage your own real-time data with Search Query Reports (SQRs) and utilizing tools such as Google Trends will help identify new opportunities to engage your audience or eliminate wasteful spend.



## 3. Modify messaging to align to observed shifts in behavior.

Even if your business is not an essential one with respect to COVID-19, there are still ways to stay relevant. Check your ad copy to meet safety measures and lifestyle changes impacted by the virus. Use features and update language that reinforce shelter-in-place mandates like “click to call,” “virtual,” “delivery,” “contactless,” “download,” “online,” etc. You may also want to update urgent calls to action (CTA) in your creative to be more respectful to the current consumer climate, applying less compelling pressure on users.

If your business is picking up, this is the time to test out new creative on a variety of audiences to gather data for better performing future campaigns. For new ad creative, you'll want to test against an already high-performing ad. This way you can compare the results directly to an ad you know performs well for your specific business, saving you time when analyzing results. You'll only want to test one element at a time for an accurate analysis. For example, if you want to test a new description, don't make any changes to headlines or extensions during the test period.

If message testing isn't a focus for your specific business and you still want to drive creative performance, it would be advantageous for advertisers to leverage Responsive Search Ads (RSA) in this fast-paced, and unpredictable environment. The optimization feature will allow for a combination of different headlines and descriptions to be automated delivering the most appropriate message to the consumer in the moment. Monitoring reporting and reviewing each ad variable segmented on an ongoing basis will help identify which components are top performers and locking those elements in place (e.g. CTAs, value propositions, etc.).

#### 4. Adapt day-parting strategies to account for new routines.

The disruption to routines resulting from life under quarantine has already been touched on, but let's take a minute to apply these behavior changes to SEM day-parts, schedules and timing. New search patterns could exhaust your daily budget even faster and may impact your overall performance.

To make the most of your investment and ad delivery, consider new day-parting strategies in the time of COVID-19. Adjust bids up or down based on more recent performance trends versus historical datasets. You may even choose to opt out of certain hours of the day or potentially adjust messaging through ad scheduling. During this radical shift we are finding new micro-moments in search when we can connect our brands to consumer needs.



#### 5. Focus on audiences with first-party data at the core.

With increased search traffic to your website, now is a good time to connect with previous customers and website visitors through Customer Match and Remarketing Lists for Search Ads (RLSAs). Incentivize them to convert with a promotion or offer where they can reengage with your brand. This is especially true for businesses like delivery, streaming services, at-home fitness and gaming. RLSA budgets should also be monitored and increased accordingly with an expected increase in member volume. As new audiences may be developed, create an audience matrix to align investment with audiences that carry the greatest propensity to convert.

This is also a good time to find new customers and build your CRM lists. Any category with an uptick in search demand provides marketers with an opportunity to collect first-party data, creating new audience lists to remarket to after the pandemic. Lead Extensions can complement any ad copy and landing page adjustments to help increase CRM and fuel future growth.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents us with an unpredictable marketplace. As behaviors shift back to the “new normal,” search marketers will need to continue to lean in on automation and agility and adopt a rapid response approach that maximizes channel performance.



# 3

## SEO:

Recalibrate the experience to convert more customer flow

SEO, the alchemy of making your branded digital presence, products and store more visible to more of the people you want to attract is the last of the three considerations in your holistic search strategy. Executives have traditionally seen SEO as a long-term investment since good content takes time to create and complex technical projects do not happen overnight. Nimble teams can complete some initiatives quickly, but large enterprises and highly-regulated categories often have longer lead times. Companies that have not yet prioritized SEO should accelerate to better position for future shifts in search behavior. Luckily, improving SEO never consists of moving a single lever. If your web publishing team has been repurposed to help elsewhere during this crisis, developers can relook at their codebase to determine where efficiency can be gained because better site speed increases performance across all digital channels.

### SEO needs to focus on CRO

Now is the time for Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO) to take center stage in your SEO strategy. Brands will emerge from this crisis craving sales, and ensuring your digital presence is built for seamless conversion will ensure less abandoned carts and diverted shoppers.

- **Compare your experience with competitors** – every brand is in the same position; fighting for customer flow in these uncharted waters. Put yourself in the consumer's shoes and complete the same task or journey on your competitors' websites. Does your process contain unnecessary steps and superfluous content? Could the consumer lose track of where they are while trying to make a purchase and perhaps find navigating through a competitor's website



more intuitive? Benchmark your site versus your competitors in areas such as features, benefits, usability and the amount of content to see where you may be lagging behind. Usability testing is a great way to get genuine customer feedback and understand user sentiment. While some methods of qualitative research are conducted in person, remote user testing can still be carried out effectively, with respect to social distancing in the current situation.

- **Help consumers to make the right decision** – people are looking for new ways to entertain themselves and improve their situation in this new normal. Whether that's subscribing to a streaming service or signing up for an online course, our efforts should focus on making their decisions easier by reducing cognitive load. If you offer a service with several different package options, direct users towards the most popular choice so they don't abandon their task while deciding which solution is best for them. Consider offering incentives for new customers who are reluctant to convert and encourage existing customers to increase their commitment with intriguing value propositions.



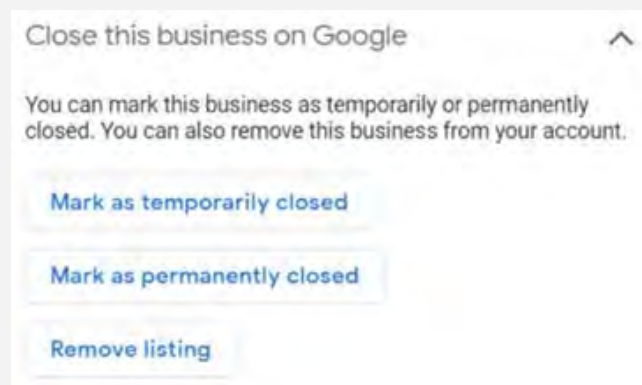
- **Only what's necessary** – with everyone in lockdown and reliant on the internet to purchase essential items, avoid making this process more difficult than it needs to be. If the consumer has made it 99% of the way through the journey, don't lose them at the last hurdle with a clunky conversion process. Form fields should only ask for what is absolutely necessary in order to complete the transaction. Any additional fields which primarily benefit the business should be made optional to make the consumers' lives easier. Other ways of improving form fields include providing instructional copy for how to navigate through the stages of the checkout, or information icons which users can hover over to understand why their personal details are required for the transaction. Further improvements can be made by leveraging a zip code finder and auto-fill functionality which populate address information, saving users valuable time and improving the user experience.
- **Online retailers can no longer rely on product feeds alone** to do all the heavy lifting for product discovery through Shopping and eRetail campaigns. Google just announced a return to allowing free product listings within Shopping results, which are about to get even more crowded with physical storefronts doing anything they can to stay top of mind. They must make foundational infrastructure investments into areas such as structured data for product attributes, technical specifications, and Enhanced Brand Content optimization—ensuring continued organic discoverability across customers and search engines.

## SEO takes the pressure off Customer Service

The last thing companies want to focus their efforts on in this crisis is dealing with refunds and cancellations. Unfortunately, inquiries are now even more frequent, challenging an already strained workforce. SEO has always been one of the most cost-efficient ways for brands to respond to consumers. Powering customer service with SEO forces companies to adopt a more content-oriented

approach. Being upfront and posting as much public information as possible can serve as an FAQ that can keep call center volume down, emails to a minimum, and social response time manageable.

Proprietors who have physical locations that are closing temporarily should take advantage of the new feature in Google My Business to label their status accordingly. Business owners have requested this option for years and it is now finally live, along with the ability to add special hours for a specific timeframe. Companies with larger footprints that leverage the Yext platform can do so at scale. Proprietors who have physical locations that are closing temporarily should take advantage of the new feature in Google My Business to label their status accordingly (see image below for reference).



Two related feature requests that Google have not implemented yet include the ability to create a Google My Business listing for a virtual, online-only business and a way to mark a physical location as temporarily closed but still doing business virtually. For organizations in this situation, publishing an update on the website, within social media, or using Google Posts are the best ways to make this information public.

Safety comes first. Companies should not worry about negative repercussions from reviews because Google is not accepting new ones while Yelp has instituted a zero-tolerance policy for customer complaints about closing during normal hours.



## SEO fast tracks businesses from bricks to clicks

If the crisis is forcing you to add a digital component to your existing physical business or if you need to shift from bricks to clicks entirely, SEO can help you tremendously with this transition. In doing so, first avoid potential pitfalls. Do not set a location to permanently closed or remove the listing unless the business is really closing its doors for good. This alert can set off all sorts of unintended consequences such as altering search results or removing the business entirely, losing all the online authority earned over past years. In addition, be careful while inserting a website banner, popup, interstitial, or notice using JavaScript code. Doing so incorrectly can reduce website traffic from organic search by as much as 90%, so always consult with an SEO professional first.

Also, now may be the perfect time to direct existing SEO resources towards initiatives that will gain strategic importance in the future but that never seem to make the roadmap during normal times. Voice and visual search for example will represent significant opportunities for most companies in the not so distant future. Companies that service interests already inclined to voice search, such as recipes, need as much content as possible to answer the long tail of queries. Informational intent does not always lend itself to paid search investment but businesses can earn brand loyalty by providing the best experience. The same holds true for visual search. If business is slow, ask employees to start tagging products and images in a spreadsheet or database. This will soon become invaluable as usage and technology start accelerating.



# Part 3:

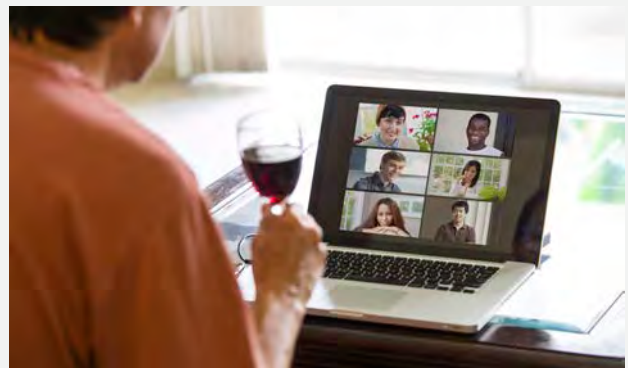
## What about the long-term impact?

If we could predict the future we probably wouldn't be writing this paper. All we can do is double down on the effective and proven strategies for capturing and converting customer flow. Ultimately, some behaviors will change as we all settle into a new normal lifestyle, others will revert to pre-COVID times once the structural restrictions are lifted. But consumer needs don't change—we will always have a need for products and services that help us live our lives.

Which products and services we choose will in no small part be informed by how well brands respond to the crisis. Those that can weather the storm may see new brand loyalty as well as a reduced field of competitors. Expect that eCommerce will see a boost in addition to its continued growth rate while a decline from in-store sales will remain after the worst of the pandemic subsides. Streaming services, eSports, and videoconferencing will continue to gain momentum.

Ironically, social distancing has given us an opportunity to connect with friends and family more deeply, if not physically. Virtual happy hours, game nights, dance parties and movies have taken off and could well remain part of our future social behavior. Search interest in “watching together” is up over 4x since early January (Google Trends, March 1-28, 2020). Similarly we are seeing families finding time to grow closer, a behavior that could well persist—as search interest in family movies have doubled in just three weeks. (Source: Google Trends, Mar 7-28, 2020)

Most industry shifts came about due to advances in technology such as the iPhone and smart speakers. Yet this year will be one of the first times



in the modern era to observe how a major disruption impacts global behavior. Expect more interest in VR/AR/visual and voice search as people begin to get cabin fever or generally become more hesitant to visit stores or pick up products from a physical shelf even after the worst of the pandemic subsides. Search interest in “virtual field trips” is up almost 1,250% and “virtual tour” is up +450% since January (Google Trends Jan-April 2020). As people “teach” themselves VR as a source of entertainment and distraction while at home, we can expect this to accelerate adoption for activities outside entertainment once we establish our routines post COVID-19, with greater adoption of virtual brand, customer service and retail experiences.

The massive rise in search demand is also providing unprecedented amounts of data. Expect similar innovations that once inspired Google Flu Trends to arise again. Until then, remember that Google Search Console only maintains keywords for 16 months and Bing Webmaster Tools stores them for half a year. Time will tell how long the pandemic lasts but download your data now from this unique point in history. It could prove to be a gold mine in ways that you will not realize until later.

Look at consumer patterns from countries affected first to see what form recovery could take elsewhere. Over three quarters of people in China surveyed by CEIC and MailToWin said that they saved money from not traveling during the biggest local holiday of Lunar New Year. That, along with government policies to boost the domestic economy and consumption, is likely to result in a surge of pent-up demand once shelter-in-place advisories end.

One final thought, be proactive with planning your content for the future. As the world remains in a state of shock, glued to screen and newsfeeds with the latest updates, the savvy marketer willing to look a few months into the future and take a few bets could pay dividends. In the US for example, Memorial Day, July 4th, Summer heat waves and backyard BBQs will take place, as will Back to School, Labor Day, Halloween and Thanksgiving regardless of the state of self-isolation the country finds itself in. Even retail and eCommerce holidays like Prime Day, Black Friday, Small Business Saturday will go ahead. Why not put a little energy to the side and make a plan for social distance trick or treating or virtual Thanksgiving dinners? Your future you may well thank you later.

Ironically, at a time of physical distancing, this shared experience will shape those who went through it and hopefully bring us all a little closer in spirit if not in person. For those less philosophically inclined there's always a little search bar within reach or audible range to satiate queries about making sourdough starter.



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