

1-800 Contacts Doubles Down on TV Advertising During the Pandemic

1-800 Contacts has been selling contact lenses over the telephone since 1995, but it's never received as many calls as it has since the Covid-19 outbreak began.

At the outset of the coronavirus crisis, government orders to shelter in place meant fewer people were willing to venture far from home. Plus, with eye doctors largely closed for business, renewing a prescription became difficult. Given that 1-800 Contacts both ships products directly to customers and offers an online prescription-renewal tool called Express Exam, demand for the company's services has surged during the pandemic.

"Intentional or not, we were kind of built for this moment," said chief marketing officer Phil Bienert.

In late March, amid an increase in new customers, the company doubled its year-over-year TV ad spend. Using preexisting spots created by Rain the Growth Agency, which specializes in DTC brands, 1-800 Contacts focused on two things it knew people wanted: contactless delivery and prescription renewal.

"We already had creative that was applicable," said Bienert, "so we didn't have to go with some default 'we're there with you together.'"

The recent shift in more people going online to buy items from groceries to eyeglasses while living under quarantine also appears to be giving 1-800 Contacts a boost. From March through July, traffic to the company's website was up 23% compared to the same time last year, according to data analytics firm SEMrush. Some of the top paid search terms the

ecommerce site is using to direct people to its platform include “contact lenses” and “contacts online.”

Another part of 1-800 Contacts’ business that’s proven beneficial recently has been its ability to talk to people over the phone. With hundreds of customer service associates available to answer calls around the clock—and additional personnel hired to meet more demand during the pandemic—the company generally makes 20% of its sales through this channel. During peak shelter-in-place orders, 1-800 Contacts saw an 85% jump in total calls.

Not only that, but the average call time has increased by 20%, too. As Bienert explained, some of this additional time is due to an influx of new customers setting up their accounts and placing first-time orders. The rest, however, is coming from people who just want to talk to another person.

“If somebody is alone by themselves in an apartment, and they haven’t been able to talk to anybody for a week or two ... that’s a service we can provide,” said Bienert, who added that the company doesn’t hold its agents to time limits.

Founded 25 years ago, the online contact lens retailer has been around a lot longer than companies behind the past decade’s DTC craze, such as Casper, Warby Parker and Dollar Shave Club. One reason for 1-800 Contacts’ longevity, according to Bienert, has been its emphasis on having real people take care of customers.

“From the beginning, we’ve always been a brand that was built to last, versus built to cash in on something,” he said.

Still, the company has its challenges. One particular problem Bienert mentioned arises every now and then: Some customers can’t seem to locate the phone number for 1-800 Contacts.

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