COVID-19 has altered paid search: How marketers can adjust strategies

30-second summary:

- Since shelter-in-place rules were enacted, the way people use the internet has changed. They're consuming more media and increasing web research and browsing.
- Paid search strategy is not one-size-fits-all. Each vertical must be treated differently, as some industries like ecommerce have seen improved performance while others have seen a declined performance.
- A pandemic is not the time to cut ad budget. Instead, investing in advertising now should pay dividends when the market normalizes.
- Ensure your ad copy is appropriate for the landscape. That means even going back to a campaign that started before the pandemic to update any language that isn't applicable to the current landscape.
- Marketers must stay flexible and agile during this time and monitor what's working or not working and creating a quick plan to adjust.

When COVID-19 began spreading across the U.S., marketers scrambled to figure out how to respond. Sudden work-from-home mandates, cancelled business trips, postponed conferences and frozen budgets threw a wrench into usual expectations and plans. Users' needs and online behaviours have changed in tandem, forcing marketers to meet them on their new terms.

Search is more important than ever now because people are

spending almost all of their time at home and online, consuming media, researching, browsing and shopping. According to Forbes, total internet hits have surged by 50% to 70% with people under lockdown, while 32% of people say they are spending longer on social media. Hours spent in non-gaming apps are up as people turn to TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter to keep entertained, connected and informed. To stay relevant in these turbulent times, it’s imperative that marketers maintain their paid search presence while adjusting to the needs of the moment.

Vary strategy by vertical

While no industry is immune from the impact of coronavirus, businesses are affected differently and should adapt their paid search strategies accordingly. Industries like B2B and ecommerce have seen improved performance, while industries like travel and healthcare have struggled with poor results.

The fact that healthcare is struggling may seem paradoxical, given the overwhelming need for healthcare services right now. While hospitals are busy with COVID-19 patients, people who don’t have the virus are avoiding medical centres, hospitals, and non-essential medical services like bariatric surgery and physical therapy.

Users are shifting their searches for their healthcare needs. Notably, people under shelter-in-place orders are seeking to receive care while staying in their homes. eMarketer published data from CivicScience which found that between February and March 2020, the number of U.S. adults who reported intent to use telemedicine rose from 18% to 30%. As a result, healthcare providers have to switch their offerings – along with their messaging – to emphasize virtual and telehealth services. The same is true for many restaurants as they pivot to pick up or delivery only.

The situation is different for B2B companies

The situation is different for B2B companies, which have longer sales cycles. While businesses like restaurants are worried about running out of money now, B2B companies are concerned about how they'll fare months and, in some cases, years from now. The instinct may be to cut down on marketing budgets to save money, but extreme changes in paid search strategies can have long-lasting effects on performance. During this time, it's important B2B companies continue filling the funnel and building brand awareness to alleviate large sales gaps that can occur later in the year.

Financial service-related searches are surging

Financial service-related searches are surging right now as people explore their options for economic relief like loans. Many companies in this space are smartly increasing their ad spending and shifting the bulk of it toward campaigns that push their best performing service lines. The same is true for ecommerce companies, especially those that sell household products and cleaning supplies, loungewear, cooking equipment, workout gear and entertainment items like board games and puzzles. Shares of Hasbro, for instance, have soared. For these companies, the adjustment is less about the offerings and more about the messaging.

Don't stop advertising when times are tough

There are universal principles for how to optimize paid search strategies that apply to marketers in every industry. The first is not to neglect paid search, even during difficult times. The World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) recently ran

a survey which found 81% of large advertisers deferred planned ad campaigns and cutting budgets due to the coronavirus pandemic. Of those surveyed, 57% said they had decreased budgets greatly or somewhat due to the virus outbreak; however, cutting out advertising or marketing completely can make the road to recovery more challenging.

Experts advise not to stop advertising during a downturn. Evidence from recent economic downturns like the 2008 housing crash show that companies come out stronger in the end if they continue investing in brand awareness. According to Google, "Even in categories where consumers have pulled back spending right now, creating a branding impact now will have a halo and pay dividends when the market normalizes. Research and historical examples of economic downturn have shown this to work." It's important to keep investing in your brand and branded keywords, regardless of industry. The last thing an organization wants is competitors monetizing on branded search results.

Every cent counts these days. Not only is paid search cost-effective with a low barrier to entry, but it also enables companies to be extremely agile. A company can get a campaign up and running pretty quickly, run tests, collect data and easily alter the messaging as things change day-to-day. Marketers can also see the results of engagement, click-through rates and conversions in real time, so they know whether their investment is paying off. COVID-19 is an unprecedented situation, so testing and learning are critical during this volatile time in the market.

Best practices for paid search

For any marketer thinking about how to adjust during COVID-19, here are a few best practices for how to optimize paid search.

1. Pivot messaging

Messaging needs to be both accurate and appropriate for the current landscape. Confirm that messaging is updated with current business hours and offerings, and revise CTAs away from messages like “Visit in-store.”

2. Keep an eye on the tone of messaging

Is your copy appropriate or empathetic? An ad for booking a vacation package could feel out-of-touch. Customers will be turned off by companies that seem like they are trying to profit or gain from the pandemic, so craft communication to focus more on brand identity and values. Businesses can also use marketing to let customers know how they are responding to the pandemic. A construction firm or ecommerce company could talk about safety practices for workers, for example.

3. Adapt offerings to what your customers need

As mentioned above, healthcare companies are moving to telehealth, restaurants are moving to pick up, delivery and B2B companies are repurposing content planned for conferences into virtual webinars. Marketers should be connecting with customers virtually to let them know how you are supporting them.

4. Adapt your strategy to your customers’ changing digital behaviour

During the quarantine, desktop usage has increased. Conversely, the rise of remote work conditions and people being less on-the-go has caused mobile search traffic to decline by nearly 25%. We’ve all become accustomed to a mobile-first world, but given the predominance of desktop, it’s especially important to ensure all search ads and landing

pages are optimized for both mobile and desktop.

Move fast

This pandemic has caused so much of what used to be normal out of the window. Whereas before, marketers might have used a multiphase process for developing campaigns that involved planning and back-and-forth and feedback, now they have to act fast to keep up with the rapidly changing world. Marketers need to craft campaigns that are affordable, cost-effective and agile – and that means paid search.

As marketing and advertising professionals, we're all trying to figure this out together as we go. There is no roadmap or rules, but there's no doubt that staying flexible and using this time to connect with customers is a smart strategy.

Brianna Desmet is Media specialist at digital and demand gen agency, R2i.

More about:

> *COVID-19 has altered paid search: How marketers can adjust strategies*