Ecommerce and SEO: Past, present, and post COVID-19

30-second summary:

- Ecommerce is suddenly a reality for millions of businesses who may not have had online selling on their radar prior to COVID-19.
- Consumers in most countries are cutting back on discretionary spending as optimism for economic recovery has fallen. Groceries, household supplies, personal care, and entertainment are among the categories in which consumers plan to maintain spending.
- In this post, we'll take a look at the current state and how businesses will need to adapt their ecommerce and SEO strategy to succeed post-COVID-19 (whatever that may end up looking like).

As countries including the USA head into phased reopening, countless questions remain about the business landscape ahead. Will changes in consumer behaviour persist and if so, to what degree? Is there a second wave coming that will derail recovery efforts and send consumers back into lockdown? How can you plan for recovery when no one really knows quite what "recovery" means?

In the face of such uncertainty, one thing is for sure, companies need to get in position to gather and analyze data quickly—to be agile and respond to whatever twists and turns Coronavirus throws our way next. Regardless of industry or location, that responsive, adaptable strategy is going to rely heavily on ecommerce and SEO.

Ecommerce is suddenly a reality for millions of businesses who may not have had online selling on their radar prior to COVID-19. And while search optimization is a discipline as old

as search engines themselves, dramatic differences in consumer behaviour may require an entirely new approach to SEO going forward. In this post, we'll take a look at the current state and how businesses will need to adapt their ecommerce and SEO strategy to succeed post-COVID-19 (whatever that may end up looking like).

Consumer behaviour and ecommerce: Present state

Fresh off of an unprecedented leap of $8.5 billion in U.S. CPG (in-store and online) sales during the first two weeks of March, conditions have quickly shifted once again. Panic buying gave way to record-high ecommerce sales in mid-March, after which we saw a week-over-week decline (-22%) in online sales between March 21-28. Overall, according to Nielsen, U.S. ecommerce sales right now are above the rates of one year ago. CPG, in particular, is soaring and up nearly 42% over the week ending April 4, 2019.

Consumers in most countries are cutting back on discretionary spending as optimism for economic recovery has fallen. Groceries, household supplies, personal care, and entertainment are among the categories in which consumers plan to maintain spending. As of April 19, 32% of US respondents to a McKinsey survey were anticipating a drop in their household income and over half expect the impact on their household finances to persist for four months or more.

Kantar/Google research shows even greater pessimism and pegs 71% of consumers in G7 countries as expecting their income will be impacted by Coronavirus.

Source: Think With Google

Online and phone ordering with contactless delivery or curbside pickup has become the modus operandi for millions of businesses.

Businesses need to be able to listen closely to consumer fears, needs, and preferences as they evolve. Customers may not be comfortable heading straight back into crowded retail environments. Vacations closer to home may be preferred by many. Businesses will be challenged to understand the customer experience as it’s happening and to respond with optimizations in real-time to meet the individual’s needs.

In addition to this increased listening and awareness,

consumers want to hear from the companies with whom they choose to do business. Even prior to COVID-19, 64% of consumers and 84% of business buyers expected companies to respond to them in real-time, according to Salesforce research. Right now, consumers are looking to brands for guidance and expertise in solving the challenges they are experiencing navigating the path to a new normal. The vast majority of consumers across sectors want to hear from brands just as often or even more than before the Coronavirus pandemic.

How SEO will drive ecommerce success as the coronavirus pandemic evolves

The relationship between ecommerce and SEO has become far more complex than how you optimize product listings for search.

But whether you're ecommerce first, selling online as a sideline, or now enabling ordering and payment online with curbside or in-store pickup options, the insights gleaned from SEO will power more effective operations across the board. Here's why:

SEO provides real-time insight

BrightEdge (disclosure: a client company), back in 2019 surveyed a sample of over 200 digital marketers and found that over 86% of marketers stated the real-time research is critical to success. Furthermore, SEO insights are being used in all manner of digital marketing campaigns across paid search, video, email, and display.

Real-time search insights – especially now – enable us to tap into localized pockets of demand and appear in front of customers with rapidly evolving needs and intent. SEO insights, more than any other type of data, give us a clear line of sight into the voice of the customer through search queries, interactions with local search results, site analytics, and more.

SEO paves the way for both desktop and mobile experience

Consumers may not be searching for restaurants during the commute home from the office right now, but that doesn't diminish the importance of mobile-friendliness, especially when it comes to ecommerce. As Google itself says, when it comes to mobile marketing, "speed is table stakes."

Staying at home doesn't necessarily mean switching to desktop, particularly where multiple family members may each be home and browsing on their own mobile device.

Consider switching to next-gen image formats like JPEG 2000 or WebP for mobile, with PNGs or JPEGs for desktop browsers. Look out for render-blocking resources, inefficient code, unused CSS and other page speed or site speed issues that may be hindering your performance. Use Google's Test My Site as a

starting point.

Search trends are key in staying on top of customer expectations

Who was even thinking about curbside pickup this time last year? Today, it’s pretty much expected that if you are open for business, you’ll provide this fulfilment option for customers who are not comfortable entering your store (in some places, entering the store may still be prohibited by public health regulatory agencies).

Those businesses that caught onto the trend in early to mid-March were ahead of the groundswell in early April. Being among the first in your space to catch onto a massive change in consumer demand such as this can help you win over new business and better serve your existing customer base. Google Trends has a Coronavirus Trends resource business should be keeping an eye on. These are helpful insights for marketing but could influence operations, sales, and customer service, as well.

Search spans Google, Amazon, YouTube, and more

Organic search commands the largest proportion of channel share, accounting for 53.5% of site traffic, on average. A comprehensive ecommerce SEO strategy accounts for Google, but other product search opportunities, as well. Amazon, for one, cut back its service to third-party sellers but as this comes back online, there may be opportunities to expand your ecommerce presence in the world's largest marketplace. Check out this guide to improving rankings on Amazon to get you started.

Video search is another massive opportunity for companies now selling online, as Nielsen reports video streaming is up 100% in some markets due to Coronavirus. Even before lockdown, YouTube was both the world's second-largest search engine and second-most visited website.

YouTube SEO takes into consideration factors ranging from watch time and keyword targeting to sentiment, engagement, channel authority and more. Learn more about optimizing this channel in SEW's YouTube Optimization: Complete Guide.

Post-COVID-19 SEO tips for ecommerce

Whether you're an experienced online seller or just transitioning to ecommerce as a result of physical distancing, your customers may be entirely different from who they were even three months ago. A few tips to help you get in front of the right people with the right content:

- **Revisit your adherence to ecommerce SEO best practices.** You may need to renew your keyword research, update on-page optimizations to reflect changes in consumer behaviour, reorganize your site structure and optimize

for the new customer journey, refresh and add new content (particularly around how you are responding to COVID-19-related issues such as food safety or package handling).

Ensure that you are monitoring trends in real-time whilst planning for ease of lockdown restrictions, seasonal and product demand. For example, above we can see large demand for products related to how people now are investing in their dwellings, particularly, with spring here and summer coming, and in outdoor spaces, it is important to seize opportunities where demand is high and also plan for future trends and new normal(s).

- **Optimize your ecommerce site for voice search.** Make sure you're positioned to trigger a response when consumers ask their voice assistant for a product like yours. If you are not yet familiar with speakable schema, there's a good primer here to help you get ready for it.
- **Automate SEO intelligently.** Taking the legwork out of routine SEO tasks can make marketers more efficient, freeing up valuable time for more creative optimizations and strategy. Of course, intelligent automation can dramatically improve search performance, too, by recognizing and optimizing for opportunities in real-time.
- **Consider your headless commerce and content options.** Make your products and content even more accessible, removing barriers to conversion in the process, by incorporating headless commerce into your strategy. This is the process of separating the front and back ends of your ecommerce application so you can sell directly through social media, for example.

Most important of all is that you are set up to measure, analyze, and activate the mass of user signals consumers are sharing with you across search interactions and your ecommerce

website. Whatever economic conditions and user preferences COVID-19 generates next, those businesses that are able to quickly understand and move on new opportunities will win the day.

More about:

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