Maximize Return During Tough Times Through Testing

We are living in a fast-moving time with new technology, ever-evolving social and political landscapes, and a pandemic on top of that. Any predictions about what to expect in 2020 for marketers was no doubt lightyears off what we're experiencing now.

So what can we learn from this year as we move forward? You can bet things will continue to change and evolve in unpredictable ways. What worked last year might not work now. Heck, what worked last week might not work next week! How, then, can you be sure you're getting the most out of your marketing efforts?

Evolving and finding opportunities

There are a few ways you can try to stay on top of things. No matter what, having a strategy for post-COVID is important.

Learn from others

For one, pay attention to those around you. Learn from your peers and competitors. Some may be sharing: read blogs, watch webinars, consume all you can in your space. But you can uncover even more by doing things like conducting a competitive analysis of other sites, advertising messaging, advertising spend, and content creation.

Learn from yourself and adapt

Pay attention to your own analytics and results closely. Take in what you are seeing and adapt. Have a willingness to branch out and pivot strategy based on what the data is telling you. Again, something that worked before may not be working now,

and vice versa.

Always. Be. Testing.

Knowing for sure what is going to work for your business, in your space, and at this particular time is a tough task. So the only way to find out for sure and stay on top of the changing trends is testing. We're all vulnerable right now – and any time tough circumstances fall on us. Figuring out a new course of action, whether it is macro marketing decisions or micro adjustments, is key.

What to test

It's easy to sit here and say "test to see what works and go with that", but that can mean a lot of things. As I tie this back into maximizing your return during tough times, let's talk about where to start first as you look to elevate your marketing and drive revenue and return.

Too often I see brands being timid in times of crisis. There is something to be said about caution, but testing and learning shouldn't be a risk – it's an opportunity.

The reality is, every industry is being affected in different ways in 2020. But challenging times come for us all, and when they do, focus on these few areas first.

Advertising

Advertising is always one of the first areas I look to when testing. It's a fantastic testing ground that is often more controlled, and in which it's easier to identify new, successful opportunities. You can look at ad copy, keywords, landing page content, calls to action, audiences, and different strategies altogether within the advertising platform.

We've measured positive results for clients in varying industries and in different platforms by changing aspects of the ads we ran.

For an SMB bike helmet retailer, we focused on creating social media ads during the peak of the pandemic that showcased a single rider as opposed to a group, typically in a more open environment instead of the city. Copy was also shifted to emphasize things like "embrace open space" and alluded to socially distanced riding without explicitly saying.

Due to the economic uncertainty of the time, our client scaled back the budget by nearly 44% in April, contributing to a 43% decrease in overall impression share. Despite this overall decrease, the click-through rate (CTR) increased by 61% in that month, the return on ad spend (ROAS) jumped from 0.25 to 1.34, and overall purchases more than doubled.

We saw similar results in a PPC campaign for a network security client. As many employees began working from home, we needed to position our client as a security solution provider for remote workers. Competition rose during the pandemic, which resulted in higher click costs and, despite increasing the overall ad spend, fewer clicks.

To improve our ads, we updated the copy to speak to users in need of remote security solutions and included free trial messaging. We also moved away from taking users to the homepage, instead directing them to a product-specific landing page that served as a remote worker solution hub. Doing this helped to focus the user's path of exploration to pages that are more relevant to them at the time versus a homepage where their scope of exploration is wider and less tailored.

Making these adjustments in our paid ad campaigns increased the CTR by 11% and conversions by 31%. And since we were sending users to a more focused landing page and not the homepage, the user's path to conversion was shortened and the

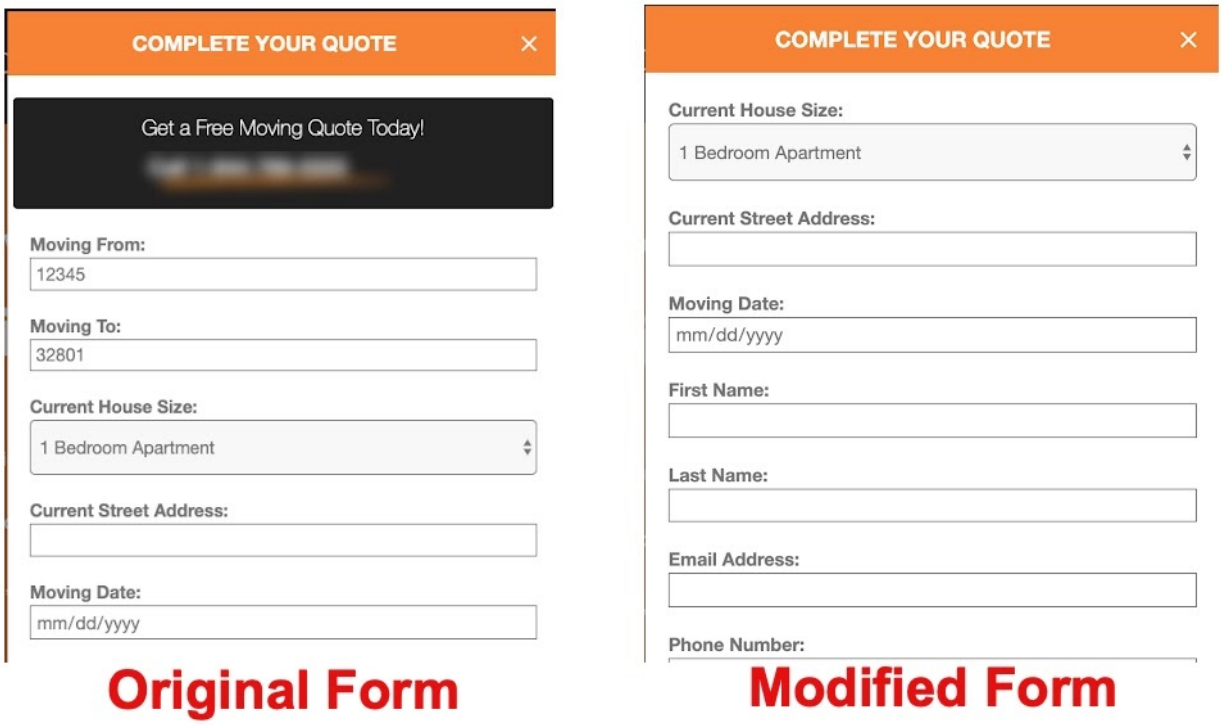
conversion rate increased by 44%.

Use your advertising as a way to learn and inform other marketing efforts. A great example of this is ad copy headlines. Consider A/B testing headlines to see which is more captivating and clickable, and then roll those findings out to title tags on the SEO side of things to see similar benefits there.

Content

Run A/B tests for different aspects of your on-site content. Conversion rate optimization is a powerful tactic. This might mean trying new copy, new design, new imagery, new calls to action, or simply title tags and on-page SEO updates. Really everything on your site, in your emails, or any pieces of content you have created falls into this category. I’m not suggesting overhauling things, but don’t just stick with the tried-and-true when the industry and users are changing around you.

To give you an idea of what testing can do, Portent ran an A/B test for a client to see which of two forms performed better, the original form they had been using or a modified version, which removed non-pertinent information from the top of the form.



Switching to the modified form increased form fills by 6% across all devices and a 14% increase on mobile devices. On top of that, phone calls increased by 22%—all from a simple A/B test.

Goals

Experiment with different ideas of what a conversion even is. If sales are down, consider something like driving more email sign-ups as an alternative. It may not be the primary end goal, but can still add value and contribute to your marketing funnel.

If lead form submissions are down, consider driving traffic to a white paper download, or some alternative value-add to the end user. As primary conversion points slow, look for other ways to drive value and build to the future productively.

Promotions

More specific to the e-commerce space traditionally, testing new and creative promotions and sales may help provide a much needed lift in conversion rates. In today's space

specifically, many customers are experiencing tough times, too. Something as simple as offering a discount, even if it's a small one, could be what is needed to get them to purchase. You may need to get creative with your promotions to drive people to your site, especially when competition is fierce.

A streaming service client ran a campaign in April when competition in the streaming industry was extremely high. To really stand out against competitors, most of which were offering free trials or adding new content, we needed to take a different approach. We offered to pay someone to do what they were already doing during quarantine—bingeing TV.

This campaign resulted in the site gaining over 1,200 new links and media coverage on various online outlets, driving nearly 154,000 referrals to the site (a 634% increase in referral traffic period over period). Overall, we saw an 86% increase in organic traffic period over period and there were over 343,000 new sessions on the site, more than 83% of which were new users. We also offered an extended free trial during the campaign, resulting in over 650 conversions.

Outside the e-commerce space, find ways to lower the barrier to entry and boost conversion rates in the short term. That might mean pushing traffic to more simplified forms or just asking less of the individual converting. In circumstances like what we are currently experiencing, something is better than nothing.

How to test

The "how" of testing is very easily its own post with many layers to it, from user research to focus groups. For most that are trying to maximize return for their business, that can be overcomplicating things. That said, there are some simple things you can easily do to test smarter and learn quickly.

Research

To start, do your homework. As mentioned before, do competitive research and learn from others. Review the keyword landscape and understand search trends so you can make updates to copy and content intelligently. Know your audience and personas before making updates.

This is essentially taking the guesswork out of it. If you are going to the trouble of testing something new, have research and data to support your hypothesis.

Use tools

Marketing testing tools come in many different shapes and sizes. There really is something for all situations. Here are a few great tools that can help you accomplish the following:

Hopefully, you've been using some of these or your own preferred tools already. Lean into your tools—they will make things easier and help you drive results more quickly.

Don't rush

Set your tests up as scientifically as you can and require statistical significance before drawing conclusions. It's easy to get impatient and quickly make changes when you see results coming in. But, let the data do the talking and give your tests time to run their course.

Have a testing budget

Remember: this is a test! It's easy to see results that you don't want, panic and pull the plug. If you are investing in testing, have a budget that allows for that.

Set clear goals and expectations

Before you start your test, define success. What are you

trying to accomplish? Make sure all stakeholders have the same set of expectations for what you are trying to discover and what goals your test supports.

Wrapping it all up

Tough times happen. Many businesses are facing them right now and will likely continue to. Don’t give up hope. Do your research and be nimble. You can find where your biggest pain points are and thoughtfully test solutions.

And remember, testing never ends. It’s an ongoing process in the continuous quest to drive the best results you can.

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