

Video: 8 takeaways for B2B advertisers in the time of COVID-19

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On Live with Search Engine Land Wednesday, veteran search marketers Brad Geddes, co-founder of AdAlysis, Michelle Morgan, director of client services at Clix Marketing, and Matt Van Wagner, president of Find Me Faster shared what B2B advertisers are seeing, how they're managing campaigns and what the "new normal" will look like when the pandemic ends.

"This is our first pandemic, we have no idea." If you're feeling unsure right now, know that you're not alone.

"This is our first pandemic, we have no idea what's going to happen, but we have tried to be as conservative as possible so that we have budget and cash available when things pick back up," said Van Wagner.

"Depending on the industry, we've seen direct traffic go down by half, organic traffic go down by two-thirds – demand is off. We are at the bottom of the funnel. We aren't interested in top of funnel at this point."

Spending cuts on lower demand. For his industrial B2B clients, Van Wagner said they are looking at things on a week-by-week basis, particularly from a supply chain standpoint. "We want to be sure we are not selling past their capacity," he said. The first week of March 15, they saw declining traffic. Once people settled in at home, they began to see a lift in traffic.

"We've cut spend in most places but are keeping the middle of the road campaigns going. Not seeing a need to message around coronavirus for the most part. Some cases where it makes sense

to message “antimicrobial” or “disinfectant” but subtle changes.

Geddes said he has seen 20% to 30% of B2B clients cut spend or pause campaigns.

On the positive. “Good trends we’re seeing,” said Geddes, are shorter sales cycles. “Deals that would take six months now take two weeks.” Whether it’s because they have more time, fewer meetings or less bureaucracy to navigate, Geddes says, “we’ve seen conversion rates skyrocket for some companies.”

Morgan has seen the same for some clients. Many customers that expected to see a slowdown have instead seen business close faster. “For March in-month numbers, we’re almost at the efficiency goals already. I know we assume everything is going to slow down, but some deals are speeding up.”

Stepping back from the hard sell. Companies are offering longer free trials or lower entry-level price points for SaaS offerings while others are shifting away from direct sales.

Calls to action are getting softer. Morgan says one customer is still running bottom of funnel campaigns but has also added top of funnel informational campaigns. “You can provide meaningful content and value to people, particularly during this time of extreme need,” said Morgan “We don’t have a CPL goal on [those campaigns]. We’ll track and retargeting to those people, but we aren’t only doing hard sells.”

While analytics may be misleading, digging into our keyword data and search trends to see if search behavior has changed in your vertical can be very valuable in understanding messaging shifts, pointed out Van Wagner. They’ve been dissecting search queries to look for trends in how people are now looking for products in new ways. They’ve also gone through client shopping feeds and looked for opportunities, including asking vendors which products that are now in high-demand and going back to refine messaging around those

products on the clients' sites.

The smart advertisers have really looked at ads carefully to be more sensitive, softening their CTAs and ensuring they strike the right tone, said Geddes. For example, a B2B company focused on training events should update messaging that says something like, "Come join the party." "That isn't going to work well right now," said Geddes.

He said has seen some use callouts and sitelinks to message around new processes, but is still not seeing a lot of advertisers who have a new way of thinking about their ads now. "I don't know if that's because they're scattered and not thinking about their messaging, but I've sort of been amazed about the lack of positioning on existing [campaigns].

The data differentiator. "A true trend is companies that had good data organization before are doing better than those that didn't," said Geddes.

Those that had CRMs that talk to other systems are managing much better than those are trying to cobble together systems now that everyone is distributed. "They're struggling because they never had great data and it's only being exaggerated," he said.

Screwy analytics data. Don't be surprised if you see some "funkiness in your analytics," as Van Wagner put it. In looking demographics data for the two weeks starting March 15 compared to the previous two weeks, Van Wagner says they've seen client demographics shift from an even spread between 24 to 64 years old to segments of younger and older audiences.

Geddes said he's also seeing terrible analytics data right now, particularly for B2B. "All of a sudden you've got companies with 10, 20, 30,000 employees logging in at home. All of your IP filters are gone," said Geddes, referring to the filters companies have set in Analytics to ignore their internal traffic. "We've seen sales go up, but conversion

rates plummet because internal usage is now showing up in your analytics profiles.”

ABM and audiences challenges. Account based marketing strategies are particularly challenged now. “Cookie pools are not built up on home computers. ABM strategies, targeting are almost impossible,” says Morgan. “People are sent home with brand new, clean computers and there’s no way to target them. This affects LinkedIn audiences and targeting, in particular, too.”

Geddes has done something interesting with some accounts. For existing audiences, they’ve stopped accumulating new people and extended the lifecycle by six months so the audiences don’t die off. Then they recreated those audiences that will only have new people who are presumably now working from home. “So we can segment because we don’t really know how businesses are going to do remote work in the future. So we have completely reshaped audiences for some poeple.” It may turn out to have been a bunch of wasted time, he acknowledged, but this way they’ll have a barometer either way.

Audience measurement is going to be tough, said Morgan. “We are trying to create cookied and ideally some kind of lead audience through downloads or something because some of that is going to be hard to back into. Some of it is just going to be hoping the branding holds through. Because we don’t know how much cookie pools are going to hold up if people go back to work.”

New normal? All agreed the old normal is never coming back and business will be changed in various ways for good.

Some companies are instead preparing for “if business shifts this way” scenarios. “Instead of changing products today,” said Geddes, “they are looking ahead six months to prepare for various futures that may better position them.”

“It’s not going to be normal anymore when things level out.

Remote work will be a lot different,” said Morgan. “There are going to be more remote options and multiple offices in different locations rather than having everyone go to one main office. “If you’re doing geo-fenced ABM, that will get tougher when there are 10 or 20 different offices.”

Expect fits and starts, said Van Wagner. “I think there’s going to be a lot of variation because supply chains are going to be busted and there are going to be fits and starts. When it comes to working with your clients for budgeting and reassessing goals, you just have to keep it all on a very short-term basis. Spikes could be false spikes, sort of like the stock market, our supply chain is going to look like that.”

This is good opportunity for campaign managers to do deep dives into accounts. “Look at areas we’ve been wanting to clean up so we have better, fresher campaigns when things come back on,” advised Van Wagner.

About The Author

Ginny Marvin is Third Door Media’s Editor-in-Chief, running the day to day editorial operations across all publications and overseeing paid media coverage. Ginny Marvin writes about paid digital advertising and analytics news and trends for Search Engine Land, Marketing Land and MarTech Today. With more than 15 years of marketing experience, Ginny has held both in-house and agency management positions. She can be found on Twitter as @ginnymarvin.

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