

Online Marketing during the Covid-19 Period & Transition to the Post Crisis Period

When the first steps were taken against the spread of Coronavirus, entrepreneurs did not know exactly what was coming, what business were going to be left standing and how the situation would evolve. Over time, things began to become clearer and a gap was created between the business verticals: some that fell sharply and others that rosed during this period.

Some entrepreneurs anticipated the trend and saw the crisis as an opportunity. User behavior has changed and new needs have arisen, especially to buy and order basic commodities online, which they normally bought before from local supermarkets and other places such as farmers markets.

Fears, basic needs and pleasures are some of the most important factors that influence the buying and selling process. During this period, fear was a leitmotif that caused sales of basic necessities products to explode. Uncertainty has amplified the phenomenon.

Thus, this large gap was created between the businesses that could no longer operate and the boom in the verticals that flourished during this period, who sold temporarily “golden” products such as hygiene products, food, toys, books, DIY, etc.

What are some of the trends we've noticed?

1. Some brands have stopped all their activities, some even stopped communicating to their clients

Many businesses that could no longer carry out their activity pulled the shutters and stopped the activity and any form of communication. They minimized their costs and hoped for a return to the normal day to day as soon as possible. After things settled down, they noticed how other brands adapted to the crisis by transposing services online, using adapted communication strategy and the awareness they continued to raise.

Some entrepreneurs understood that silence is not the solution and that the actions they take in times of crisis will influence the process of transition to normality. It is important to stay in the customer's mind and, even if he does not buy now, the chances to buy in the future increase. And so, they began to communicate again, to adapt their services and to invest in marketing.

2. Business on hold, waiting for things to go “back to normal”

There were also cases in which stocks were the biggest problem, when business depended on orders of hundreds / thousands of products that began to be 1-2-3 months late and solutions were limited. Some put the activity on hold and others continued to sell, but with the notification to customers regarding the long delivery time.

In the transition stage, the communication strategy will have to be based on a plan that will help to inform the clients, to increase the visibility and to reconnect with the old followers. He will have to convey confidence regarding the terms and conditions of the deliveries, but also of the protection and hygiene measures they take.

This communication can be done through informative posts from Social Media, sending newsletters to the database, blog articles, videos and paid per click campaigns on social networks and Google.

3. New business have been born in the midst of the crisis

If we were to think about the positive aspects of the crisis, creating opportunities for new businesses is at the top. There were many entrepreneurs who anticipated a change in user behavior, new needs and they acted. They adapted and opened their own business. Here we can take as an example the new online groceries where people can order the necessary food. These new businesses are the ones that have attracted attention through immediate solutions, adapted to growing demands. They are also the ones who gained record sales for businesses at the beginning of the road. If we have to learn something from this example, that is how important it is to anticipate the trend and act quickly.

After the crisis, it is possible that the situation will change with the return to normality and change in user behavior. It is possible that demand will decrease, but these businesses remain examples of promptness, efficiency and success in a very short time.

4. Some businesses noticed the trend beforehand and began learning and adapting on the fly

The crisis has certainly been a challenge for businesses. No one has ever been through such a situation and no one could make recommendations from experience. Businesses learned together how to adapt either through internal brainstorming with the marketing team, with agencies or using other brands as a source of inspiration. Some have adapted their services, expanded their area of activity or completed their product offer with new ones of interest.

One thing is certain: in the early days of the emergency lockdown stage, everyone was talking about empathy and the human side of brands that need to be close to their customers, understand them and respond to their needs with solutions. Thus, among the first things observed were the new messages, strongly adapted to the crisis. Messages of encouragement, optimism, information and assurance that the whole operation of processing and delivery of packages is done in conditions of maximum safety, highlighting the products needed during this period, both in organic posts, paid campaigns and on the website, encouraging online transactions, credit card checkout and secure transport, directly to the address.

People have started spending more time on social media for information and news. This helped to make the most of communication opportunities: informative and educational blog articles, “how to” live sessions or “tips & tricks” video tutorials.

The process of returning to normalcy: how will it unfold?

Just as no one could make recommendations from experience at the beginning of the crisis, the state of transition to normalcy is, in itself, a process of learning and adaptation. Maybe a little easier, without panic and with fewer errors. We anticipate that this will be the longest stage in which changes will be made gradually, will be carefully analyzed and there will not be the same pressure.

Depending on the decisions of the approved institutions, both our way of life and the communication of brands will gradually change. Empathy will remain, but it will come with caution and, perhaps, enthusiasm. Messages will start to change from #stayhome to normal (semi-normal in the first part). However, this stage has helped to develop the trend of online purchases, and for e-commerce it can be a real plus. People have realized that it's safe, easy and doesn't take too long to order online and that's a good thing.

Businesses that have suffered during this period will begin to recover, but the process will not be a quick one. The results after the restart of the online marketing will not be the same as before the crisis. It will take time and patience and a **well-thought-out re-building strategy**.

Opportunities from online marketing efforts

While some marketing budgets were eliminated from the advertising scheme at the beginning of the crisis, there were businesses that not only maintained their budgets, but also increased them. Reasons: they had the products / services for which there was a higher interest and they started to see even better results than in the pre-crisis period.

The costs of displaying paid ads decreased by 30-40% in the first period. Thus, the brands that continued the online marketing campaigns had a higher exposure, at much lower costs. The benefit of exposure to lower costs continues even now, almost 2 months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though the metrics have slightly changed. Meanwhile, many brands have increased their budgets and others have restructured their online campaigns.

Conversion rates on certain niches of interest: cleaning, food deliveries, DIY, food supplements, home & deco, toys have increased significantly.

However, cheaper display space did not necessarily mean cheaper cost/ purchases. People faced uncertainty, insecurity, thus leading to an increase in information searches. For many, much of the action and budget has translated into branding. This current investment will show its results in the future.

What are some of the changes we expect?

The businesses that have continued to communicate and invest in marketing campaigns are the ones that will have the fastest recovery. The beginning was difficult, but rethinking the process with a good strategy helped them stay alive in the minds of the consumers. Even if many users may now think twice before buying a product, in a few months from now they will consider those brands that have remained in their mind as a first purchase option.

Advertising costs will increase because many marketing budgets will be reactivated and most likely many verticals on an upward slope will now be downgraded by others, which were more disadvantaged during the crisis period. Examples of industries that will be revitalized along the way will be: health and wellness, IT, automotive. Others, such as online stores focused on cleaning products or home food deliveries, may suffer a decline.

How did some brands managed to be succesful online during the COVID crisis and how to adjust Pay per Click Campaigns in the transition period?

Effective online marketing strategis involved evaluation of the products and services promoted. In many cases, there has been a change among best seller products / categories. Some were downgraded by products that were not normally of great interest (eg masks, disinfectants, manicure kits, home spa, etc). A change in user behavior also meant defining new needs.

Thus, the budgets were also adjusted to the new advertising landscape. In the early days, there was a need for constant monitoring of paid ads results (both from Social Media campaigns and from Google) and redistribution of budgets. Product feeds for Facebook, Instagram and Shopping Ads campaigns have been updated, and Google needed a little time and bidding strategies adjustments to perform. Being an atypical period, in certain situations there is a risk that the Google algorithms for automatic bidding could and would be turned upside down.

New campaigns were developed, especially using DSA (dynamic search ads) throughout client's sites to discover trending products and remarketing campaigns were used to maintain brand awarness in the customer's minds.

YouTube, also provided an oppportunity through tutorials on how to learn new crafts or skills, using certain products on the website, or through videos on how businesses are adapting to the crisis.

During the transition period, we will gradually see an increase in product interests/ services that we normally used before the crisis broke out (eg. beauty salons). The advertising strategy will have to be readjusted, depending on the users' interests and the obtained results. Messages and Call-to-Actions will need to be modified, as will bidding campaigns and strategies. There will be changes in conversion rates as well. There will be businesses that will start to recover gradually and others that we'll experience a slow decrease, especially if they are recently opened businesses build to respond to crisis needs.

SEO represents a solid marketing opportunity, crisis or no crisis

More users have turned to searching on Google for products that meet their needs and that, in the past, were bought offline. Some of the niches that were previously not as profitable in online, have seen an increase in potential of rapid SEO traffic gain. You can see an increased click rate on some words, even on the second page of the Google SERPS. Given that many of the advertisers have reduced much of the paid per click campaigns budget or even decided to put it on hold, there has been an immediate increase in organic traffic. SEO strategies have helped, especially, the newer products which have been introduced in the websites, attracting traffic very quickly. Another good practice on the site was to modify the Meta-Tags (Meta Title and Meta Description) to improve the CTR. Thus, when users searched Google for products of interest, the first information displayed on the sites had to be relevant, so as to encourage them to click.

Also, the development of additional content on the product page helped in the acquisition process and the articles adapted to this period, with tips and solutions, generating qualified transactional traffic on the website.

Local SEO has proven to be very useful, especially for new businesses that make deliveries with their own fleet nearby (vegetables, fruits, restaurants, etc.) to create or optimize their presence on Google Maps. For restaurants, Google offered the possibility to add words such as: delivery, takeaway, etc. in business name.

What we must remember is that SEO is a service whose real results can be seen in the medium and long term. It is the method by which sites attract organic traffic and help strengthen the identity and brand in search engines. It is a solution with long-term benefits, which any site owner must include in the marketing strategy. SEO is and will be a real valuable solution during normal periods or crisis periods, whether we're talking economic, health or social.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 crisis has certainly been a challenge for any business. Everything escalated very quickly, and brands had to learn on the go, adapt and find solutions, stay afloat and identify new opportunities. Some businesses have suffered or grown and others have sprung up in response to the needs of the crisis.

The transition to a normal day to day routine will not be easy or fast and many changes will take place along the way. However, we can look at the transitions as an inverted process, a bit more relaxed, with more patience, caution and which gives us time to analyze.