



Digital Marketing

*Adapting to More Digital and Social Ways of
Being in a Time of Crisis*

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A few weeks ago I was happily working away on a talk for Adobe Summit in Las Vegas. The topic? How to use social media to sell shoes. Well, there was going to be more to it but that was the major point: social can drive sales.



Fast forward to now. I'm locked in my office with my restless canine colleagues, just up the hill from King County Washington, which is ground zero in America for COVID-19 outbreaks.

These days, I've been thinking a lot about social media's value. It's so much bigger than selling a few sneakers.

Social platforms offer critical infrastructure, helping government agencies, hospitals, and health care organizations coordinate fast responses and speedy citizen engagement. We're also seeing personal benefits, as social media becomes an irreplaceable tool for easing our isolation and connecting in new ways.

On top of the devastating health crisis, businesses face a looming recession. It's easy to become overwhelmed and trapped in near-term thinking. Business survival. Making payroll. Getting things out the door.

[A survey by Econsultancy of 500 marketers](#) at major brands found that marketers are already deciding between short-term tactics and long-term planning. In fact, 47% (41% in the UK, and 53% in North America) of marketers say they have delayed or are reviewing strategic initiatives, such as digital transformation or restructuring.

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These days have been—and will continue to be—tough. But this is also an opportunity to become better corporate citizens, build new ways of working together, and demonstrate leadership in uncertain times. Employees will remember leaders who led. Customers will remember who showed up, what we said, and how we helped them.

Here are three ways organizations can adjust their business and communications strategies to stay connected and demonstrate leadership in the chaotic months ahead.

- Use social to protect human connection, including an increased use of Facebook Groups, social video (especially on TikTok) livestreaming, and 1:1 messaging.
- Use social to mitigate business disruption by experimenting with increased digital and social customer engagement.
- Use the disruptive lessons of the present to build for the future, especially the rapid experimentation in remote work, online service delivery, and increased use of real-time analytics.

1. Use social to protect human connection

Humans are social animals. And crises like these threaten to break those critical bonds.

Of course, social platforms have had a few bumpy roads in terms of public trust over the last few years. But we're seeing a new chapter.

"In a moment when so much seems to be coming apart," [writes the Verge's tech columnist Casey Newton](#), "the big tech platforms—for better and for worse—have become vital infrastructure for our new disaster-age lives. We expect regular briefings from elected officials and public-health agencies—and we ought to expect regular briefings from tech infrastructure as well."

The need for 1:1 connection has surged. [In a press call about Facebook's response to the virus](#), Mark Zuckerberg reported that WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger usage has more than doubled since the start of the crisis. In particular, global consumers are turning to each other with voice calling and 1:1 messaging.

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Community-focused uses of social media have increased on Facebook, [with 300 local coronavirus support groups](#) forming in the last few months with a combined membership of more than a million people.

“I never thought I would say this, but we’re using Facebook to express love to our neighbors in really meaningful ways,” [says Morgan Schmidt](#), an admin for one of those Facebook Groups in Bend, Oregon. Her group helps people housebound by the coronavirus crowdsource help with daily tasks.

Likewise, Reddit reports traffic increases of 20–50% in subreddits related to business, finance, news, education, travel, and sports over the past week. The community [r/coronavirus](#) now ranks second among the website’s top growing communities with 1.2 million members, while subreddits around finance, stocks, and business have surged, [according to AdWeek](#). [And research by the influencer agency Obviously](#) found a 22% increase in Instagram campaign impressions from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 and a 27% jump in engagement on average on TikTok from February to March.

We saw this ourselves with Hootsuite Inbox, which our clients use to manage inbound social media comments, replies, and private messages from their customers. We had the highest usage in our history last week, showing just how hard every organization is getting slammed with 1:1 customer interactions.

Two ways to build connections in a time of crisis

Specifically, there are two types of action organizations can take to build lasting impressions on customers: **either do good, or make people feel good.**

Doing good

For years, we’ve heard about the need for brands to have deeper purposes. Well, now it’s time to put those lofty purpose statements to the test.

A CEO rising to these challenges and building employee and customer trust in the most turbulent of times is Delta’s CEO Ed Bastian. On Twitter, he’s announced that he is giving up 100% of his salary to support Delta.

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If your business is doing something to help the cause, and something that will help your customers, it's a good time to use the full force of employee advocacy programs to distribute the message. In addition to trusted organizations like the WHO sharing critical information on social platforms, peer-to-peer sharing is critical for making those updates spread far and wide.

As Dr. Alan Fyall, associate dean of academic affairs at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida [told Forbes](#), "Accuracy of information is critical in such instances with the credibility of the source of the message paramount. This is why official government, be it at the city, county, state or federal level, is so important as their credibility is the most sound."

[Twitter found](#) that 75% of COVID-19 related tweets are retweets, demonstrating the need to complement official brand publishing and advertising with peer-to-peer sharing. [And as Edelman found](#), when the first exposure to a message comes from a peer, it increases the level of trust, especially when then combined with paid and owned content.



Source: [Edelman](#)

Making people feel good

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Lizzo—the artist who makes it impossible not to feel good when she’s around—led a mass meditation for her 8.4 million Instagram followers to “promote healing during this global crisis.” The sports fitness brand [Lululemon](#) also launched meditations on Instagram.

In China, DJs are performing live sets on apps like TikTok and Douyin while audience members react in real time on their phones, [as reported by the New York Times](#).

And Hallmark—the poster brand for feeling good—announced that they’re bringing back their famous Christmas movie marathons a little earlier this year [to help your self-quarantine](#).



A post shared by [Hallmark Channel](#) (@hallmarkchannel) on Mar 20, 2020 at 9:34am PDT

Not every organization exists to save the world. So how can you add a little lightness and connection to your regular cadence of content and tactics?

2. Use social to mitigate business disruption

[According to Econsultacy](#), 87% of marketers in North

America predict an increase in the use of online services by consumers during the outbreak. Seventy-five percent also predict an increase in ecommerce usage, as do 70% of UK marketers.

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Compelling approaches have emerged from China, which was earliest hit by the coronavirus. The cosmetics company Lin Qingxuan had to close 40% of its stores during the height of the crisis there. But rather than lay off employees, the company redeployed more than 100 beauty advisors as online influencers. By leveraging social tools like WeChat to connect with customers and drive purchases, [Lin Qingxuan was able to triple sales versus last year.](#)

Organizations are also rapidly deploying virtual technology. “With social distancing limiting physical world interactions, we are seeing increased interest in AI consultations and AR virtual try-on,” Perfect Corp CEO Alice Chang [told Glossy](#). “Consumers are looking for digital solutions, and we expect more and more brands will be turning to digital-first strategies in the days and weeks to come.”

While virtual experiences are helping to keep retail and service businesses afloat, people still want human interaction. Perfect Corp launched an AR training service to provide brands with livestream training for their beauty advisers, who work using a live chat tool. This helps brands like Estée Lauder and Nars to create a blend of virtual experiences with human help from in-store associates. According to Perfect Corp, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the addition of virtual try-on technology [generated 2.5 times higher ecommerce conversions for brands.](#)

Many tiny businesses—especially in service industries such as fitness centers and beauty salons—have pivoted completely to social-only service with some interesting results.

Sophie Pavitt, for example, is a New York-based facialist. , when the epidemic hit, she saw an instant spike in in-office cancellations. She turned to Instagram and started offering live guided facial tutorials on her Instagram channel. The first experiment, on Instagram Live on March 15, saw more than 10% of her 7,285 followers tune in. She booked 36 virtual consultations as a result. Now she’s doing tutorials on Instagram Live every Sunday so customers can give themselves facials while staying indoors and indulge in some self-care during this stressful time.

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In all these examples, we can expect that these new digital capabilities and increased demand for online and social interaction by customers will outlast the epidemic and become the new normal in the years to come.

3. Use the lessons of the present to build for the future

While short-term tactics are needed to adjust to our new realities, organizations need to think longer term, using the rapid lessons learned during the pandemic to build lasting relationships with customers.

What lessons offer bigger strategic solutions that we can develop in the months ahead?

First, it's clear that many organizations were caught off guard with the speed of digital business, particularly in the realm of real-time analytics and brand protection.

During the moment we need them most, hospitals, health care companies, and government agencies have been hit by a storm of cyberattacks in recent weeks. "You can expect the attacks to escalate as fast as the virus panic escalates," said Avivah Litan, vice president and distinguished analyst at research and advisory firm Gartner, [in the Wall Street Journal](#).

While the storm rages, these organizations don't have the resources or capacity to rewire security practices. This underscores the urgency of finding ways to minimize the damage of cyberattacks, clean up inactive social accounts, better secure employee access, and start building new capabilities such as brand protection monitoring, social listening, and tighter internal controls for digital publishing.

It's also critical to ensure that social data—that fast, instant pulse and glimpse into what global consumers are thinking—is properly connected to other sources of digital intelligence such as your website traffic, security and compliance warning beacons, and CRM systems.

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You can't wait three weeks for a status report from your traditional analyst team before making a decision in a crisis. [As an expert from the World Health Organization put it](#): "If you need to be right before you move, you'll never win. Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection." That said, if you move too quickly and make a mistake, it's important to be open and transparent about it to your audience, correcting it just as quickly.

We've also seen how organizations with digital transformation efforts well underway are coping much better than organizations too firmly rooted in the physical world.

Take health care, for example. According to Business Insider, the health care company PlushCare saw a 40% bump in virtual appointment volume since December. The US government is encouraging consumers to turn to virtual consultations with doctors, instead of making trips to the hospital for minor issues.

[As Business Insider predicts](#), the epidemic will introduce millions of people to telemedicine, a new digital behavior that will outlast the panic and present telemedicine providers with long-term growth opportunities.

Finally, many companies have also been abruptly thrust into remote work. At Hootsuite, we've dramatically increased our use of tools like Facebook's Workplace, as well as our employee advocacy program to quickly share information, update employees with videos from our CEO, and track how customers are responding to our crisis communications messaging.

We're going to break a lot of old processes, develop new collaborative skills, and learn important lessons about keeping our employees engaged in a remote setting. These will be key insights to bring back to our physical offices when the crisis passes.

A little help in the months ahead

For those planning to use social media, we're giving away Hootsuite Professional to small businesses and nonprofits. Organizations impacted by the crisis can [get free access](#) to our professional plan until July 1, 2020, helping them stay connected to their customers and communities.



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