



# Staying Connected in the Midst of COVID-19

An advertiser's guide to navigating a  
rapidly changing world.



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# We're Here for You

The global effects of COVID-19 continue to develop and impact all aspects of our businesses and personal lives. Your family and health are of the utmost importance, and we hope you are taking care of yourselves. We at Adobe are focused on how to best protect and support our families and employees in the face of this unfolding crisis. At the same time, we recognize that in the coming weeks and months, our customers and communities will be faced with many new challenges and problems to solve. We want to assure you that our team is committed to supporting you every step of the way as we all navigate this new reality.

The mission of Adobe Advertising Cloud is to make advertising a connected experience, and we feel this mission applies now more than ever. You will need to keep your teams and partners connected while you work out new ways of operating, and make sure you're connecting with your customers in effective ways during these challenging times. This evolving guide will be a way for us to share our learnings and strategies for how you can keep your business moving forward. Most companies are undergoing rapid change and are being confronted with questions of strategy that will have long-lasting effects on business. The goal of this guide is to help you evaluate the short-term versus long-term impacts of advertising in this landscape and to provide actionable steps on how you might choose to adapt your messaging and strategy in light of COVID-19.

We consider you partners in this new journey, and all of your Adobe Advertising Cloud team members are available at this time for tailored strategy sessions, if only just to brainstorm.

Stay safe, and please reach out to us with any questions or concerns.

*Wishing you all the best,*

*Your Adobe Advertising Cloud team*



## Be There for Your Customers

### Consider long-term brand equity when making decisions today

There are some major decisions for your brand or agency to make in the days and weeks ahead. If you choose to keep your brand online during this time, we have pulled together market research to support your decision as well as strategies to help make your spend more efficient.

According to John Quelch in his recession-era Harvard Business Review article, [How to Market in a Downturn](#), "Although it's wise to contain costs, failing to support brands or examine core customers' changing needs can jeopardize performance over the long term."

[AdAge](#) recently published a new study from Kantar that looked at consumer sentiment on the pandemic globally. They found that 77% of respondents "expect their brands to be helpful in what has become 'the new everyday life.'" Additionally, only a small percentage (8%) feel brands should stop advertising. The Kantar report also showed the implications of stopping TV advertising completely, indicating that a 6-month pause will result in a 39% reduction in total brand communication awareness, which would make it difficult for long-term recovery.

This sentiment was further echoed by Jason Kanefsky, Chief Investment Officer at Havas Media, according to an email received by [Campaign](#). "There is a risk of losing brand equity when advertising goes dark, and an

opportunity to use this time to build and reinforce a brand's relationship with their customers and prospects."

While brands across the globe are shifting strategies during the COVID-19 crisis, we see many Chinese companies that have already made major changes to their businesses. According to [The Drum](#), Dentsu Aegis Network (DAN) recently surveyed 155 clients in China to understand how brands there are responding to the crisis. 61% are making short term changes to their marketing, whereas only 9% are making changes to their longer-term strategies. And while 47% of businesses said their sales had been "significantly or severely impacted" by the pandemic, only 7% had pulled their advertising spend, and 34% of respondents said they were planning to either maintain or increase spending in 2020.

The takeaway here is that while cutting short-term costs might seem like an appealing option, long-term success may be contingent upon staying in front of your customers during this time. If done correctly, this is a time when you can drive brand awareness and perception with long-term benefits that may very well outweigh the temporary impact to metrics like cost per acquisition and return on ad spend.

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### Shifts in media and efficiency trends

Deciding what paid media to keep and what to shift right now is on the mind of most advertisers. More time at home can lead to a significant increase in time spent on media, up to 60%, according to a [Nielsen](#) assessment of "stay-at-home" crisis moments such as Hurricane Harvey and the 2016 "Snowpocalypse."

We're also anticipating a shift from offline to online spend as more people are required to stay home. Out-of-home and radio media investments, which are normally great to reach commuters, will need to be redistributed to other channels in order to reach the same users. China is in the midst of this already, and with more time at home, brands have responded by moving spend from offline media to online. 14% of respondents said they were moving budget from offline media, according to the DAN survey of 155 clients mentioned earlier in [The Drum](#).

The increased time spent on media gives advertisers more economies of scale with regards to the inventory available, meaning more efficient buys. According to Adobe Advertising Cloud auction volume data, comparing February to April, impressions are up considerably for both Connected TV (CTV) and display. We're also seeing CPM decreases for video and display by as much as 5-10% and 20-25%, respectively.

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Specifically, here's how we've seen these advertising channels increase in auction volume:

- With CTV we are noticing an overall increase of 19%. We are seeing new peaks, with volume up 32% between 12-3pm, and 41% 6-9pm.
- Display auction volume is up 19% and we're seeing a spike of 20% between 5-8am.

**Increases in auction volume according to global Adobe Advertising Cloud data†:**

Channels	Auction Volume Increases
CTV	19%*
Desktop Display	19.4%

\* Auction volume is up 32% between 12-3pm, and 41% 6-9pm.

† Data was compiled from two weekday snapshots, comparing auction volume on February 10-12 to April 13-17, 2020.

To help you stay connected with your customers, we've developed some strategies for you around the **What**, **Who**, and **Where** of marketing during the COVID-19 crisis.



## **WHAT: Connect With Customers Through Authentic and Relevant Messaging**

**Authenticity and staying true to your brand are paramount**

COVID-19 is causing minute-by-minute change, making it hard to predict what tomorrow will look like, let alone next week. The advertisers who will excel during this time are the ones who will remain true to their brand and values while also being nimble in making necessary changes to their creative and messaging.

It's tempting to make a dramatic change when sales start declining, either to your go-to-market plans or business models. But as John Quelch states, "When sales start to decline, companies shouldn't panic and alter a brand's fundamental proposition or positioning." (Source: [Harvard Business Review "How to Market in a Downturn"](#))

Authenticity is also incredibly important at this time, especially if you are going to insert your brand into the crisis conversation. According to Chris Stephenson, regional head of strategy and planning, PHD APAC, for a recent article in [The Drum](#), "Above all, brands should respond authentically based on their brand positioning, values and tone of voice."

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The IDC's recent commentary<sup>1</sup> recommends three specific actions to bring authenticity, and empathy, into your communications:

- **Keep it simple** – Now is not the time for complicated messages. Be very clear about what you're trying to say.
- **Be proactive** – Don't wait for the customer to ask you what you're doing about the crisis.
- **Communicate what you are doing** – The worst thing is for a customer to be surprised, so keep them in the loop with how things are evolving.

<sup>1</sup> IDC Link: *Responding to COVID-19: An Evolving Playbook for Customer Experience*, March 2020

The importance of tone and messaging was backed up by the Kantar COVID-19 barometer report, recently published in [AdAge](#), which found that over 70% believed that brands should not exploit the situation to promote their brand, while 64% wanted brands to communicate their values.

There are some great examples of how brands are responding. [AdAge](#) recently highlighted a great campaign from Ford, which replaced their planned advertisements with creatives that highlights a payment relief program and reminds customers how they have responded to past disasters. Anheuser-Busch InBev (ABI) announced recently, in [AdAge](#) as well, that it is donating \$5 million to the Red Cross to support pandemic efforts. And finally, [AdWeek](#) reports that several top tier brands are giving significant media space to drive awareness of the most urgently needed messages surrounding coronavirus. Now is the time to understand and connect with customers and evolve your products and marketing to meet their needs, rather than focusing solely on short-term ROI. This will undoubtedly be appreciated by customers, and also drive long-term brand value.

### **Be agile with your creative and messaging, focus on the positive**

Your messaging strategy and how you approach creative should ideally change during this time (see below if new creatives are not possible). Cheuk Chiang, Chief Executive for greater north Asia at DAN, put it eloquently in [The Drum](#), "Firstly we cannot forget that this situation is first a humanitarian issue. In this context, brands must be sensitive and responsive to avoid reputational damage. Content should reflect the changing times and consumer sentiment."

Watch, learn, and listen to continually update your creative and messaging to meet the demands of the changing market. We recommend having a small standup weekly to discuss if your creatives are still relevant. According to the aforementioned survey by DAN in China, 22% of clients say they had changed creative and regional focus because of the coronavirus.

Not closely monitoring your messaging in a time of crisis can be detrimental. There have been multiple brands at the center of controversy in recent weeks with ill-timed messages and calls-to-action that seemed tone-deaf considering the current situation. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there have been brands that have put their customers' needs first and foremost to create a positive and lasting impression.

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Here's a checklist to ensure you are asking yourself the right questions about your creative:

#### If you are creating COVID-19-specific messaging:

- Does the copy answer what you are doing to look out for your customers during this time? Or how are you helping or thinking about the larger communities that are affected?
- Does the ad provide useful information for safety, prevention, health, or services?

#### General creative questions to ask:

- Is the ad well designed and professionally created?
- Is it insensitive? (E.g., is it an ad for cleaning products that are hard to come by?)
- Does this ad induce panic or fear in users? (If it potentially could, revisit your creative or messaging.)

#### **No new creatives possible? No problem.**

Some advertisers may not be able to swiftly create new creatives right at this moment. If you went through the checklist above and feel comfortable with the creatives

you are currently running, you are probably fine. But in a pinch, we recommend revisiting past creatives to see if any will be a good fit. Those that have a proven track record of emotionally connecting with your customer segments and sharing your brand promise are ones to think about and prioritize.

And remember, not every brand message needs to be an explicit response to COVID-19; this is about reminding your customers that you're there for them in the ways they need today.



### **WHO: Adapt and Connect to Your Customers at the Speed of Change**

All good marketing should start with the customer – who they are, what their needs are, and how you can best help them. In times of crisis, this customer attunement is not just a best practice, it's a must-have.

Specificity in who you're targeting and how you're communicating with them is crucial in order to have a positive and lasting brand impact. Now is the time to ensure you're reaching customers with the best message for them, rather than focusing on volume of exposures and blind reach.

If your audiences are broad today, think through how you can segment further based on inputs like psychographics, income level, or behavior. For example, if you're an electronics retailer, you don't have to stop selling TVs, but you may not want to push the flashiest model to every income segment, as it could come across as insensitive and disconnected.

As we observe changes to customer behavior, one question you may be asking is, “Are consumers still spending?” The short answer is yes, although it depends on the consumer and the product. According to 451 Research, in their March 2020 [Trends in Customer Experience & Commerce](#) report, respondents are anticipating a dip in overall spending, with 33% of consumers expecting to spend less over the next 90 days than the previous 90 days. The most significantly hit areas will be travel, restaurants, and consumer electronics. It’s not all negative though, as they also reported 62% of respondents anticipate consumer spending to stay the same or even increase. During this time, 451 Research recommends that “business leaders need to focus on remaining relevant in the eyes of customers.”

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*451 Research*

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### **First-party data analysis and segmentation**

If you’ve looked at your site analytics lately, your reports might be looking quite different than they did a few months ago. For many brands, site paths are changing with consumer behaviors, and real-world activities are moving online. As brands like [Sephora and Ulta close their physical doors](#), they are launching digital experiences to replace face-to-face consultations. Other retailers like Credo experienced a 34% increase in virtual consultation chats during the weekend of March 14-15 as customers moved their conversations, and purchases, online, according to [Glossy Beauty](#).

Ensure you are closely monitoring your site analytics and taking note of what customer behavior is telling you. For some companies, your customers might be looking for

answers and support rather than typical conversion pages. Take note of these shifts, segment your users accordingly, and adapt your advertising strategy, messaging, and landing pages to provide a better customer experience.

To learn more visit our [Customer Intelligence](#) page on Adobe.com.

### **Third-party data segmentation**

If you don’t yet have a strong first-party data repository, don’t fret. Third-party segments work as well and many data partners that you can access through our platform are building out new segments in response to the crisis. Segments may be based on psychographics, shifts in streaming behaviors, and lifestyle changes as many customers begin to spend more time at home.

Your Adobe Advertising Cloud account team can work with you on a variety of tailored data strategies, but here is one example use-case on the intersection of psychographics and household income levels: By understanding buyer behaviors by financial impact, we could use third-party data such as household income to better inform your advertising strategy and messaging.

Data types are not an either-or decision; third-party data can also be a great way to add further precision and scale on top of your first- and second-party data segments. Using different data sources in tandem can help you understand more about your customers and how to best create a meaningful, helpful experience during a time when it matters most.



## **WHERE: Understand Where Your Customers Are Spending Time, and Meet Them There**

Consumers are very emotionally connected to media right now – from reading articles for the latest updates, to connecting with friends and family, to watching shows and movies to pass the time. With this level of increased focus on media, brands should be thinking about how they meet their customers where they are. To successfully do this requires the right channel and inventory approach, the right frequency management, and the right context. While “at-home” channels such as TV are seeing increased activity, it is important to ensure that different channel messages are coordinated and managed appropriately so as not to fatigue or annoy customers.

Given this overabundance of time spent consuming media coupled with more budgets shifting to digital, we’ll break down some channels and strategies to help you reach your customers most effectively during this time.

### **More volume, reach, and trust across TV formats**

Advertising strategies have been impacted by live sports cancellations, box office closures, and extensive work-from-home policies, which have driven huge shifts in media consumption behavior. Because of these changes, experts such as [Nielsen](#) forecast a 60% increase in overall TV viewing compared to typical levels during this

time. In South Korea, there’s already been a 17% increase YoY in TV viewership for the month of February. Lombardy, Italy, has seen a 12% increase in TV consumption.

Advanced targeting tactics can support re-investment across both linear and Connected TV (CTV) to take advantage of increased at home viewing opportunities. For example, marketers can utilize ACR-driven data partners, such as Inscope and SambaTV, to capture historical viewership audiences on sports and target them across non-sports related content where they are now diverting their attention.

Our TV partners are responding to the shifts as well. We’re already seeing streaming services like [Sling TV](#) stepping up and offering consumers free content, and Roku just announced a dedicated COVID-19 channel for viewers to keep up to date with developing news. Additionally we are also seeing pricing advantages in the TV marketplace with TV rate card reductions ranging from 2-10%.

Your Adobe team can help you navigate the landscape of TV formats, including where to best reach your customers on channels such as Roku and similar channels with deterministic audience targeting.

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We're seeing TV rate card reductions ranging from 2-10%.

*Adobe Advertising Cloud*

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### **Consumers trust ads on premium content**

Especially in times like this, consumers want content they can trust, and this trust is often placed in credible, premium publishers. In a [recent study](#) from Adobe and YouGov, broadcast OTT (“Over-the-top”) premium channels overwhelmingly shone through as the most trustworthy option on which to see an ad. In the survey of over 3,500 American consumers, we found that

consumers are more likely to purchase goods and services via ads on premium content channels rather than non-premium content like social feeds and user-generated content (UGC). The study looked at an assessment of seven credibility beliefs (appealing, believable, credible, trustworthy, relevant to me, makes me want to learn more, and makes me want to purchase). Within this construct, video ads ranked 20%-50% higher in credibility in the context of premium channel properties compared to non-premium channels.

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Video ads on premium channels are seen as 20-50% more credible vs. non-premium inventory.

*Adobe and YouGov [study](#), January 2020*

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The data also revealed that the ceiling for engagement performance is significantly higher for premium:

- 1.58x viewable completion rates for desktop video and a 1.05x for mobile video
- 1.5x higher CTRs on desktop video and 3.8x for desktop display
- 1.18x viewability for desktop display and 1.31x for desktop video

### **Display traffic is increasing, premium content has the highest trust**

Sites are seeing enormous traffic increases, [in some cases as high as 60%](#) according to MediaPost, on news and entertainment sites. However, you need to be strategic about where you're placing your ad buys and, as with TV, premium content conveys a sense of trustworthiness.

Adobe compared the overlap of advertisers who placed ads on both UGC and premium sites and concluded that ads on premium sites offer better engagement. Ads placed on premium content channels were found to

deliver CTRs of 4.5x and 2.3x higher than non-premium on desktop and mobile, respectively.

### **Contextual and geo targeting**

According to 451 Research, "Heightened demands for context, convenience and control in all customer interactions require companies to re-evaluate how they provide contextually relevant – and in situations such as the current crisis, sensitive – experiences for their customers. In effect, this is forcing the evolution of the entire technology stack and organizational culture to enable real-time, contextually relevant experiences." (Source: 451 Research, [2020 Trends in Customer Experience & Commerce](#))

When it comes to ad placement, some brands are more comfortable than others when it comes to running on COVID-19 related content. We understand that certain companies want to completely exclude any advertising from the crisis, and for those clients, we advise them to employ a more aggressive tactic to remove news/health content sites from their targeting.

For brands who do want to consider running alongside COVID-19 related content, Integral Ad Science<sup>2</sup> ran a rapid-response consumer study in March 2020 on the perception of this. Here are the key takeaways:

1. 88% of people say the COVID-19 situation is currently shifting online content consumption patterns.
2. 58% of people are actively looking for COVID-19 news online.
3. Most people (78%) report that their sentiment would likely remain unchanged for general ads that appear near COVID-19 content.
4. However, more than half of consumers have some level of concern surrounding how suitable it is for ads to be near COVID-19 content (22% unsuitable, 32% depends on the brand).
5. Food/beverage and travel are the categories that consumers report greatest resistance to being adjacent to COVID-19 content.

6. Health, government, and educational organizations are the ad categories that consumers most want to see near COVID-19 content.

<sup>2</sup> From "Consumers on Coronavirus: Ad Adjacency Considerations" by Tony Marlow, CMO Integral Ad Science. 3/17/2020.

In addition to context, location matters too. You may want to refine or even scale back your messaging in the hardest hit areas.

The choice is ultimately up to your brand, based on the understanding of how your customers may respond. Adobe offers a wide range of contextual and geo targeting offerings to meeting your needs, and we recommend working with your Adobe Advertising Cloud team to identify the strategy that's right for you.

### Searching for answers

Consumers are now faced with new situations, new challenges, and new information. We are all, quite literally, searching for solutions and answers. According to [Search Engine Journal](#), paid search accounts for 39% of digital advertising budgets on average, and it often delivers one of the strongest investment returns of any digital channel. At a time when consumers are rapidly searching for solutions, you have an opportunity to provide the answers.

First, you'll want to assess how traffic is already changing for you. We recommend the following tips:

- Monitor your stable brand and generic keywords vs. historic baseline
- Check volumes, CPCs, and conversion rates as user behavior shifts week-by-week
- Detect new or unintentional search terms

Second, make sure you're accounting for brick and mortar closures, inventory, and policy changes in your ad copy:

- Makes changes to location extensions and hourly strategies
- Monitor and address out of stock products
- Abide to all search engine policies such as Google disallowing certain advertising for face masks, hand sanitizer, and COVID-19 related terms

Finally, design and execute a COVID-19-specific response plan. Proactively consider adding negative keywords related to COVID-19 and think through resources/pages you might want to direct your traffic towards.

# Let's Stay Connected

As mentioned at the beginning of this guide, our mission is to make advertising a connected experience. Now more than ever, this is critical to help our customers navigate these uncertain times.

We hope this guide provided some actionable thought starters, but we want to keep the conversation going. Whether it's a consultation with our team, letting us help with campaign management, or recommending an approach tailored to your business, we're committed to helping make your life easier and your business uninterrupted.

This is an unprecedented time for us all. Above all, we hope you and your families stay safe and healthy.

For additional resource, please see Adobe's COVID-19 [response page](#).

