Pivoting B2C Email Messaging Strategies During a Crisis
A Note to Our Readers

At the time of this report’s publication, consumer sentiment, market demand and overall economic conditions had become volatile due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report assesses the digital performance of brands in 2019 and hence the data does not capture the impact of the unfolding COVID-19 situation. These insights and takeaways are related to best practices for cost-efficiencies, content strategy and marketing channel optimization.

Please visit Gartner’s COVID-19 resource center to review our resources on how to protect your people, maintain operations and sustain your organization during the pandemic. We will continue to share more resources and updates over the coming days and weeks.

Our priority is the safety and well-being of our clients, employees and the communities we live in, and our thoughts are with those experiencing difficulty at this time.
INTELLIGENCE REPORT: PIVOTING B2C EMAIL MESSAGING STRATEGIES DURING A CRISIS

Introduction

Key Findings

- Within the Awareness phase, average open rates for COVID-19-related emails dropped 17% from the Transition Period to the Response Period while average open rates for non-COVID-19 related emails didn’t shift.
- Leading in average open rates were emails about the economy (33%) and business updates (28%), while community-oriented emails had the lowest average open rates (22%).
- Financial services brands, especially in wealth management, witnessed an uptick in the share of desktop traffic attributed to email, increasing 15% when comparing March 2019 to March 2020.1

Key Recommendations

- As the Crisis phase continues to unfold, digital marketing leaders should remain agile in sending relevant emails to avoid being one of many brands unnecessarily flooding consumers’ inboxes.
- Marketing leaders should avoid generic, community-oriented emails by limiting COVID-19-related communications to business updates and ensuring their email subject lines are specific and aligned to consumer needs.
- Marketers can learn best-in-class lessons from financial services brands by leveraging email as a platform to boost awareness of their relevant resources and providing customers with a wide variety of options to reach their brand.

Executive Summary

In the wake of COVID-19, marketers pulled back on sending emails and scrambled to adjust their messaging. To determine what strategies marketers should pursue moving forward, Gartner analyzed email data such as open rates, percent of list and overall volume from 435 brands across 10 sectors. The data spanned the Awareness phase, the first phase outlined in Gartner’s four-phase crisis framework for COVID-19 (see “Use Gartner’s Crisis Framework to Plan for COVID-19 Marketing Scenarios”). This data was then split into two time periods: the Transition Period (24 February to 8 March 2020) and the Response Period (9 March to 23 March 2020). Between these two periods, COVID-19-related emails lost resonance with consumers: Average open rates decreased 17%. Within these emails, the best-performing topics were focused on issues directly impacting consumers, like business updates and the economy.

As brands shift from the Awareness phase to the Crisis phase in the second quarter of 2020 and beyond, marketers should limit COVID-19-related communications to crucial updates that affect customers or pertinent information that aligns with customer interests. In order to build consumer trust, marketing leaders should use their email platforms to position their brands as helpful resources with sensitively crafted messaging.

Percent Change in Email Volume per Day

Transition Period (24 February-8 March 2020) vs. Response Period (9 March-23 March 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>-63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocery</td>
<td>-51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>-38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Box</td>
<td>-38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxury</td>
<td>-38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Care</td>
<td>-21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty Retail</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Care</td>
<td>-19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Banking</td>
<td>-16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth Management</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 53,271 emails across 435 brands
Source: Gartner analysis of eDataSource data

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