



## Digital engagement: Listen and show up

As businesses strive for deeper engagement with consumers in a world shaken by a pandemic, listening has taken on added urgency across every step in the sales cycle, from initial online research through to post-purchase servicing. Organizations need the skills and operating structures to create differentiated experiences and meaningful consumer connections, and they need to have the technology in place to listen, disseminate information, and act fast.

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### Your customers are telling you the answer

Some businesses are well tapped into their customers, able to listen to them online and ready to respond quickly and effectively through their digital channels. And some are not. Where there may have been doubt about which category a particular organization falls into, the extensive disruptions caused by COVID-19 have made the distinctions clearer. The digital relationship with a customer suddenly became all-important as the proliferation of the virus made physical interactions unsafe. Some were more ready than others.

With a pandemic shifting consumer behaviors and loyalties in ways no one could have anticipated, the ability of a business to listen to its customers has become vital. It needs to be functioning well across three different levels, a schema we envision as a funnel.

The uppermost level, the top of the funnel, is where consumers are exploring or browsing, and it's how they build awareness of products, services and brands. Think about people planning a party, traveling, getting ready to move, or buying a home.

Every important life moment usually starts with research on a computer or phone. Businesses need to be able to listen to the signals that can be teased out of this digital traffic. Then they need to create moments that are going to matter for their customers, to ultimately drive consideration of the brand. A grocery chain, for example, might want to offer recipes that allow consumers to click and create a menu for a family dinner and a shopping list to go with it.

At the middle level of our funnel, customers are actively seeking a specific product or service. They may be focused on a brand, perhaps yours or perhaps a competitor's. Or they may be searching generically. You need to be listening to know what they want and what they might respond to. You also need to have an offering informed by that listening. If an individual is researching automobile prices, for instance, a business needs to understand where that person is in the car purchase journey so messaging and content relevant to their specific interests can be served with precision. Your customers will tell you what they want you to sell them. If you're listening, your brand can capitalize more effectively on all the cues.

## Listening—and showing up

The implementation of a strong commitment to listen and show up falls into two main areas. First, it's important to have the right technologies and tools. Then, your business needs an organizational design that allows it to pivot and respond nimbly and effectively to shifts in consumer interests and needs.

To that end, businesses should be taking advantage of social listening tools that can help them anticipate trends in customer needs and sentiment. The uncertainty and volatility in consumer behaviors spawned by the pandemic has underscored the importance and utility of having a direct line to consumer sentiment. They also need to be taking full advantage of keyword analysis, which may not be well understood outside of an organization's marketing function. Tracking volume across keywords and watching for increases is arguably the best way to anticipate consumer demand.

### Highlight reel: Home entertainment

**Listen**—To launch a new home theatre speaker system, Sonos<sup>1</sup> targeted consumers based on search history that showed they loved music, loved to dance and were interested in being better party hosts.

**Show up**—Sonos served them video content that could help them visualize how the speaker system might help with their lifestyle 'need' of entertaining. Based on who engaged with the video, Sonos retargeted with harder-hitting product ads. The campaign's one-two punch greatly boosted the company's return on ad spending.

The bottom level of the funnel is where customers have made a purchase. The listening task here is about deepening relationships with existing customers, avoiding the risk of attrition, and boosting the likelihood of repeat purchases. Businesses need to know how happy the customer is with the product or service and, more generally, how consumers feel about the brand. And if the customer is not happy, responsiveness will be key to having any chance of driving future loyalty.

### Highlight reel: Personal grooming

**Listen**—As COVID-19 spread, salons shut down and activities that many consumers preferred to outsource—haircuts, manicure, pedicures—suddenly had to be done at home. Search volume exploded on terms related to these activities such as foot scrub and cut your own hair.

**Show up**—Retail organizations that were keeping tabs on keywords relevant to their products were able to respond quickly to rising demand and gain competitive advantage.

What's more, the funding model for a company's marketing needs to be flexible. Listening will sometimes reveal an opportunity that requires a quick reaction or a problem that demands a quick response. Management needs to empower the marketing team, establishing guardrails but then trusting them to work effectively within a budget that allows the marketing strategy to generate return on investment.

<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.google.ca/amp/s/blog.hootsuite.com/facebook-lookalike-audiences/amp/>

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## Highlight reel: Wealth management

**Listen**—In a typical year, wealth management firms in Canada will invest heavily in keywords such as RRSP as the deadline for retirement fund contributions approach. But the pandemic changed behaviors this year, and search volume showed people trying to better understand investments and get into the market.

**Show up**—Firms that were actively listening maintained spending after the deadline and were able to improve impression share for their ads and boost traffic to their sites.

The right tools make it possible to assemble a snapshot of volume, share of voice, and sentiment on a variety of issues—and then relate those back to specific business offerings. In the face of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, for example, social sensing has helped demonstrate the importance of empathy in companies' communications and reinforce the premise that every brand needs to project a clear sense of purpose. There's an imperative to know how people see your industry, and how they view your specific brand or product or service relative to the industry as a whole. If you don't gather such intelligence, your competitors probably will.

Technology is only part of the solution, though. Too often companies make significant investments in tools without ensuring that there is sufficient understanding and capability within the organization to extract the true value of the new technologies. Marketing talent is being stretched thin, asked to develop both the left- and right-brain skill sets required to deliver strategic, compelling, and analytically tested solutions. As a result, recruitment, talent management, and skill development are becoming increasingly important.

Listening and showing up is not something that just happens. The best marketing organizations know that this mindset requires the right combination of technology, talent, organizational design, and management commitment. Done well, the returns on an investment in the effort to listen and show up can be substantial, increasing customer loyalty and driving increased sales.

**While we cannot anticipate all of the lasting consumer behavior changes spurred by this pandemic, we can anticipate that empathy and action will continue to be key to a brand's success.**

## Contact us

**Lauren Bradeen** Digital Marketing Leader  
Senior Manager, Deloitte Consulting LLP [lbradeen@deloitte.ca](mailto:lbradeen@deloitte.ca)

**Shaunna Conway** Canada Advertising, Marketing & Commerce Leader  
Partner, Deloitte Consulting LLP [shconway@deloitte.ca](mailto:shconway@deloitte.ca)

**Livia Zufferli** CMO Program Leader  
Partner, Deloitte Consulting LLP [lzufferli@deloitte.ca](mailto:lzufferli@deloitte.ca)