



The REAL state of marketing in 2020

Learnings from the experiences of
over 500 marketers

Created in Partnership with



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Introduction

COVID has turned the world upside down.

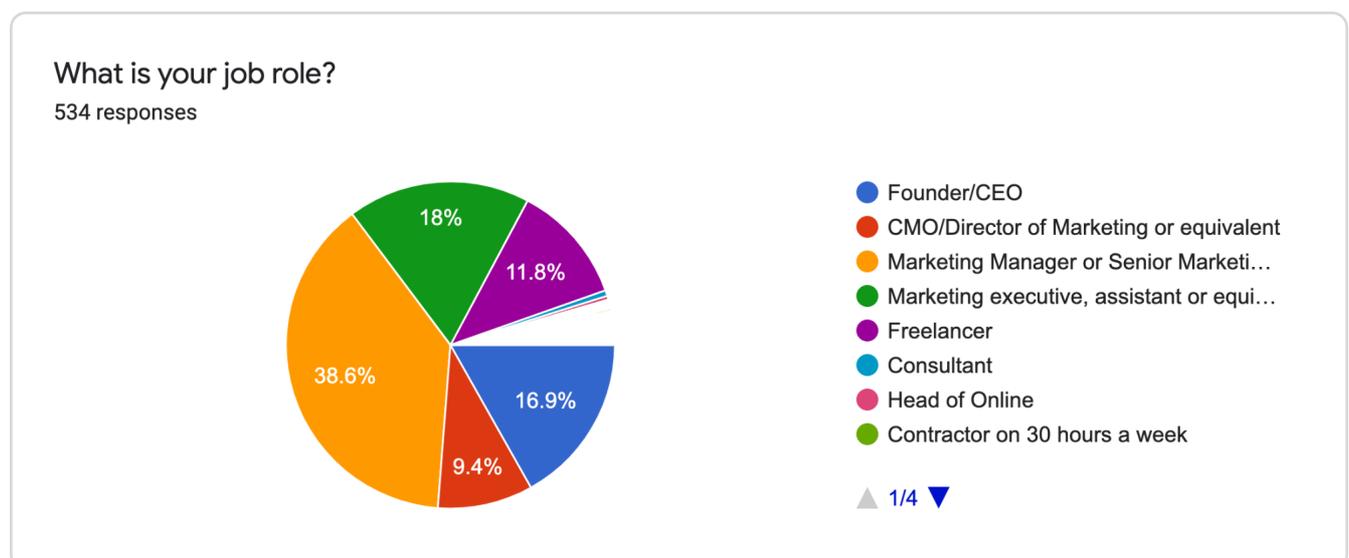
During this time there have been many who have prospered, and a huge amount who have suffered, too.

Not that long ago, Andy from ContentCal, Vanessa from ThirdLight, and Joe from The Marketing Meetup were chatting. All are marketers, but each has had a different experience of the COVID period.

Thinking this was interesting, we resolved to explore this on a far bigger scale, asking 536 of our marketing peers what their experience of COVID has been and how it has affected their marketing activities.

Specifically, we focused on the topics of business, marketing, personal reflections, technology & productivity, and learning. These were the results...

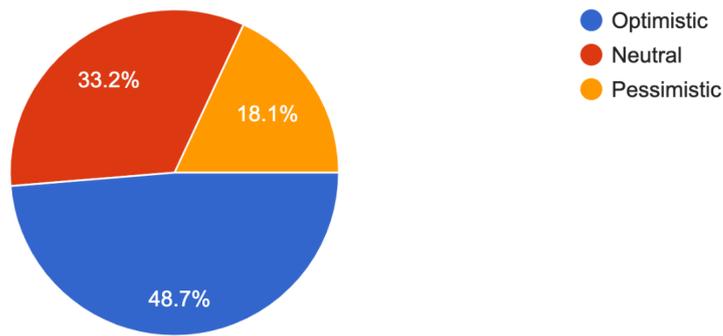
The respondents



The respondents came from a variety of backgrounds and seniorities. This rich data set gave us an overall understanding of the marketing industry, not just focused on one type of person.

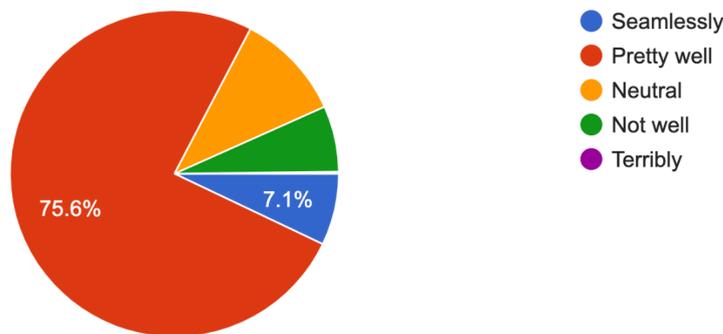
Generally, how are you feeling about your professional life right now?

536 responses



How do you feel you have adapted to the changes of the past 10 weeks personally?

536 responses



Among the respondents, there was a general sense of positivity. 48.7% reported feeling positive and 83.7% stated they had adapted to the situation presented by COVID either 'pretty well' or 'seamlessly'.

This left another 33.2% reporting a generally neutral feeling, and 18.1% stated they were feeling pessimistic. This 18.1% figure more or less matches the 17.1% who pointed to their performance in adapting to the circumstances either going 'not well', or 'neutrally'.

Interestingly, not a single respondent pointed to a terrible adaption to COVID - which feels encouraging!

From the data, we can gather that on a personal level, many marketers are doing just fine or getting by. Although with 1/5 of us feeling pessimistic or like the shift has been a struggle, there is a significant amount of us who should not be forgotten.

Section 2 - Personal reflections

What impact has COVID-19 had on how you approach your work?

The numbers show us as a whole that COVID has forced a positive change on work and our approach to it. A very slight majority of people reported a greater balance between work and life (51.7%), with 38.6% pointing to more time to learn, and 34.5% indicated they're more productive than they were in a pre-COVID environment.

Respondents pointed to fewer distractions than within the office environment, no commute, and the cancellation of personal activities for this increase in productivity.

Interestingly, this also nearly perfectly mimics the 53% of marketers who reported a general sense of positivity right now.

That being said, this is certainly not 'the rule' as 1 in 5 respondents stated they were less productive than before, and 15.9% found themselves less focused on work. It's no surprise that childcare was mentioned numerous times, with one parent almost shouting through the form 'get the schools open!!'

While these top-level figures give a view into a general trend, there is nuance here. One respondent pointed out that their experience has been one varying "between days of productivity and days of running through treacle."

Perhaps reassuringly, 40% of respondents stated they were missing their colleagues... although, we're not sure about the other 60%!

Key Stats

- More balance between work and life - 276/534 - 51.7%
- More time to learn - 206/534 - 38.6%
- More productivity - 185/534 - 34.5% [Less interruptions]
- Less productivity - 103/534 - 19.3%
- Less time focused on work - 85/534 - 15.9% - Childcare
- Missing colleagues - 213/534 - 39.9%, even moments of Frustration
- Spending too much time working - 6/534 - 1.1% (a blurring of the lines and little else to do)

How do you feel the culture of work will change?

Change is afoot, but it feels like more of a blended approach than a moment of revolution. 55% of respondents suggested that remote working will continue beyond COVID, and 57% expect more balance between work and home life.

While this is the general expectation, only 15.5% expect 'the office' to be a thing of the past. Many pointed to a more grown-up approach to work in being required to only come into the office when you need to or just attending for a specific number of days a week, with the remaining time being made up at home. Overwhelmingly, this feels like a stamp of trust to employees, but could also have large benefits to employers in not having to take up large office spaces.

Perhaps an underline to the biggest change here is a comment by one respondent who stated 'My boss is archaic and wants us back into the office ASAP'. This suggests companies who don't adopt working from home policies are also those which may begin to be seen as old-fashioned. Working from home is no longer a perk; it's expected!

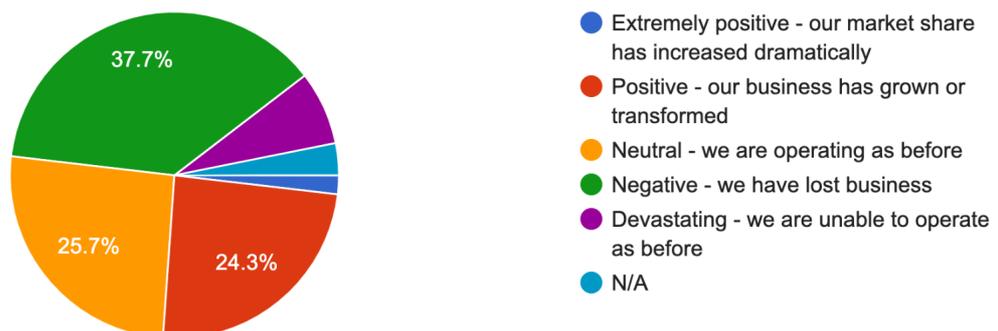
Interestingly, the increased capabilities of people to work from home also appear to signal the possibility of far fewer people traveling. 1/3 of respondents indicated that traveling for work would feel 'alien' to them. Whether this remains true once COVID is consigned to the history books remains to be seen.

Finally, freelancers could be in for more competition but also benefit from a normalization of using them for work. 1/4 respondents expect the freelancer market to boom post-COVID.

Your business

What impact has COVID-19 had on your business?

536 responses

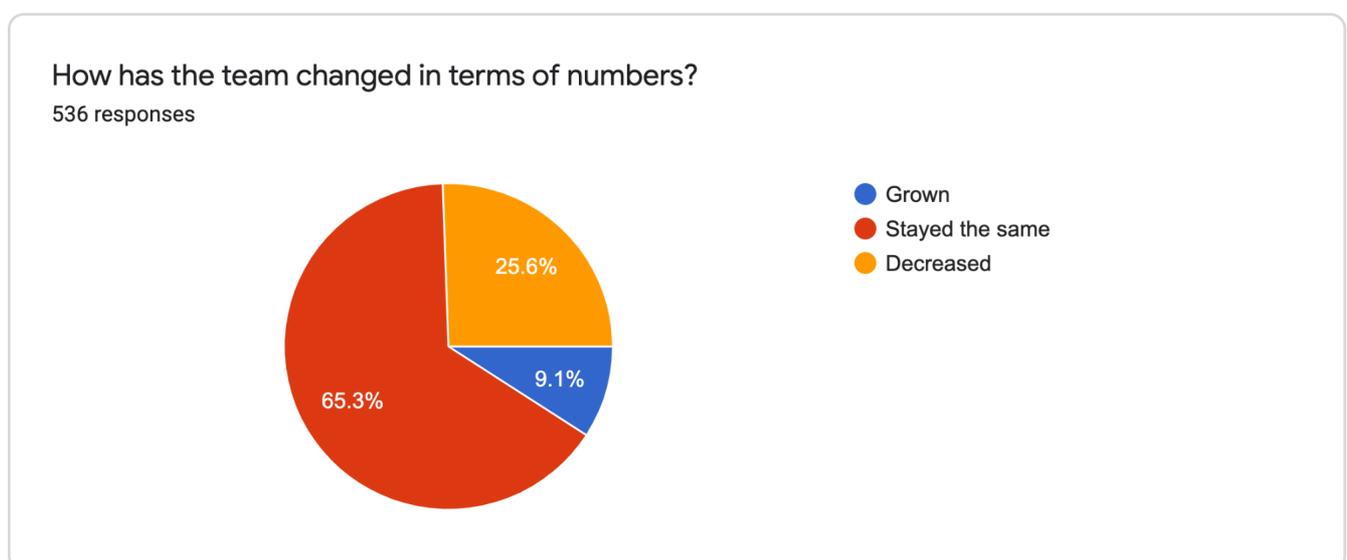


COVID undoubtedly had a terrible effect on the economy, with the UK seeing a 20.4% shrinkage in April 2020 alone. To speak to this, our survey shows that 45% of businesses had a negative or devastating experience of the COVID world.

Interestingly, compared against only 25% of marketing teams who have reduced in size, we're forced to draw one of a few conclusions; either the furlough scheme is still keeping people in employment, there is more pain to come with redundancies, or, that brands are recognizing that not investing in marketing also leaves the door shut to increasing share of voice in the market once happier times return.

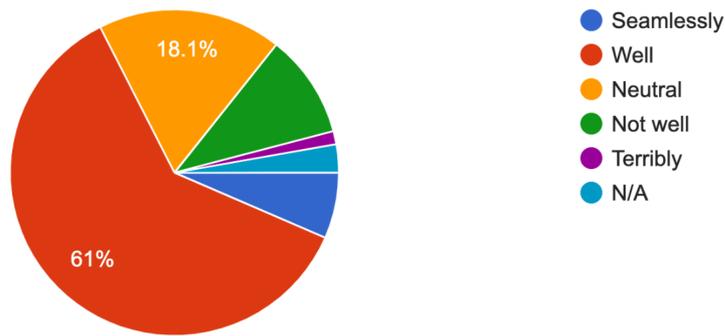
We also can't ignore the 24.3% who experienced a positive time where their business has grown or has been transformed. These percentages are a sound representation of Rand Fishkin's webinar with The Marketing Meetup, where he identified there will be some businesses that directly win, and others that lose, with the third category being those who are indirectly affected - likely a large portion of which is represented by our 25.7% of 'neutral' survey members.

Despite the general negativity of the period, it's good to see 67.5% of businesses reported adjusting 'well' or 'seamlessly', suggesting a period of innovation and adaptability. This is something the majority of respondents think will stay in place, post-COVID. Alongside the generally positive outlook of marketers right now, it feels like there is cause for cautious optimism within the marketing community.



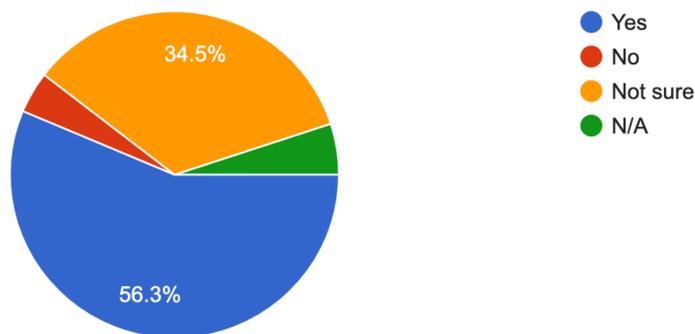
How has your business adjusted to this change?

536 responses



Do you feel that the changes you've put in place will remain after COVID-19?

536 responses



What changes have needed to be made?

It's clear content marketing has been seen as a critical tool for marketers in this crisis, with 93% (490 / 527) citing an increased focus on content. This increase in content breaks down into three core areas:

- 329 / 527 - 62% are focusing more on organic content channels, like blogs and social.
- 267/527 - 51% are investing more in educational content (webinars, courses, etc.)
- 171/ 527 - 32% are orienting their communication towards top-of-funnel awareness messaging

It's clear that this has increased workloads for marketers, with 51% saying they have increased their content production in the last three months, despite many working with teams of the same size or smaller.

What's less clear, however, is the position on direct response advertising. 11% said they would be reducing direct response advertising and 10% said they were increasing spending in this area.

Whilst views might be split, the opportunity is clear;

One respondent said: *'We're taking the opportunity to stand out in the market through investment in advertising - many companies will take a step back from ad spend and that's the opportunity to step in and win those customers'*. This was backed up by another commentator saying that they've seen *'A Sudden investment from the business in marketing to claw back market share'*.

Standing still is not an option, less than 5% said nothing has changed and it's clear that this crisis has represented an opportunity for some businesses to re-evaluate:

- Many have shifted focus on to new markets and verticals
- This shift relates to the marketing too, with marketing plans and campaign strategies being re-written
- 'Focus' and 'trust' were also frequently mentioned words, with this time presenting an opportunity for those to re-evaluate what's working and use messaging to build trust with that target audience.
- Budgets have been shifting from traditional media into digital, with many focusing on brand building content along with hygiene factors, like SEO.

To deal with the massive shift to digital-first content marketing, respondents have made *'Big investments in outsourcing copy and automation'* and *'Encouraging more participation in marketing activity from across the business'* to help manage the increased workload of content creation.

What channels are you likely to invest more in, in the coming months?

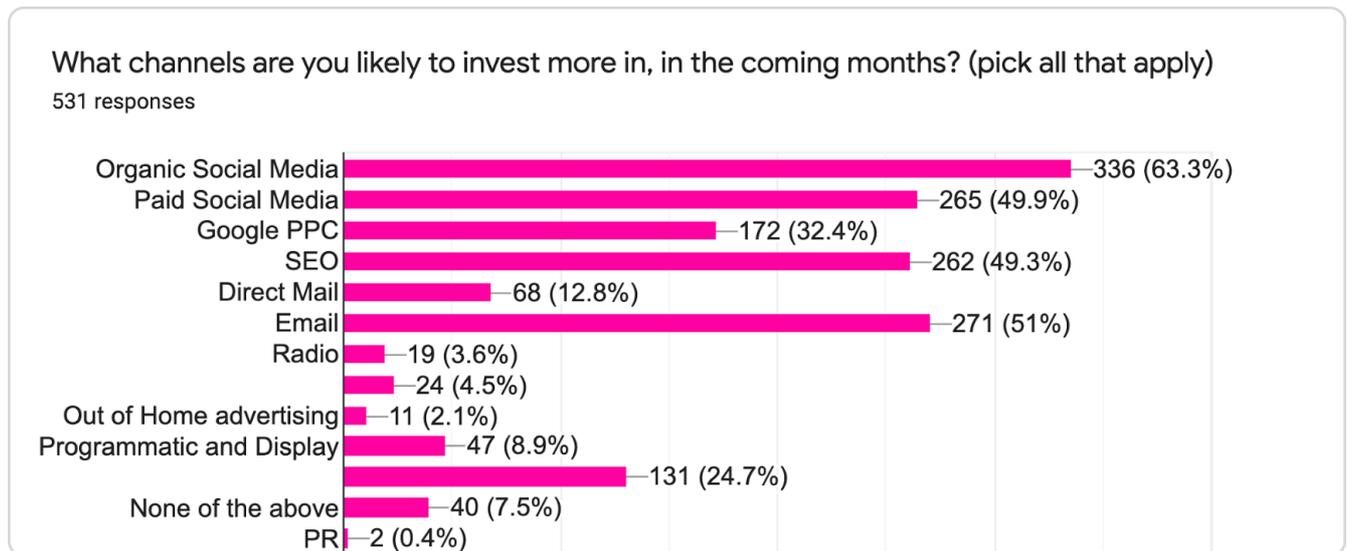
Based on the strategic changes, it's little surprise that social media features as a key channel for the majority [63%] of marketers.

Whilst paid social still features heavily, attitudes towards paid social have changed slightly, as signified by the preference towards organic.

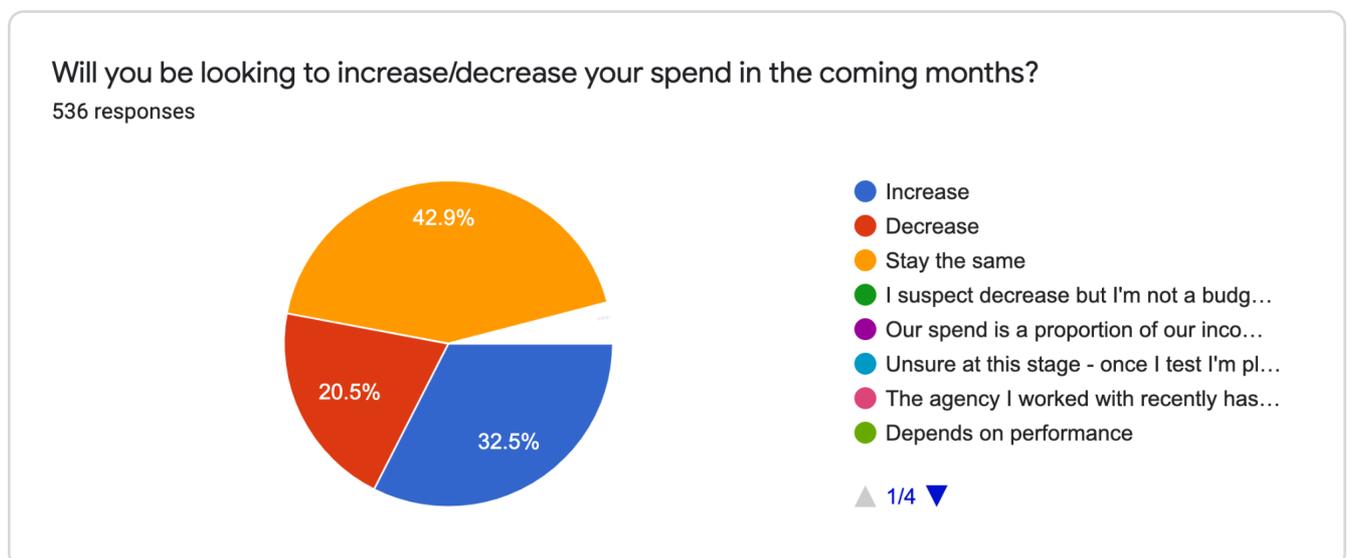
SEO emerges as the other clear focus area for marketers. As mentioned above, the strategic shift has forced marketers to re-evaluate a paid media first strategy, realizing

that organic-led strategies are the route to long-term growth. That said, other channels that don't often get attention are still being utilized effectively, like out of home, radio and above the line [print, TV, etc.]

One area that stood out is the large percentage [25%] that will be investing more in affiliate marketing, showing a shift towards relationship orientated marketing from more traditional media-driven marketing.



Your marketing

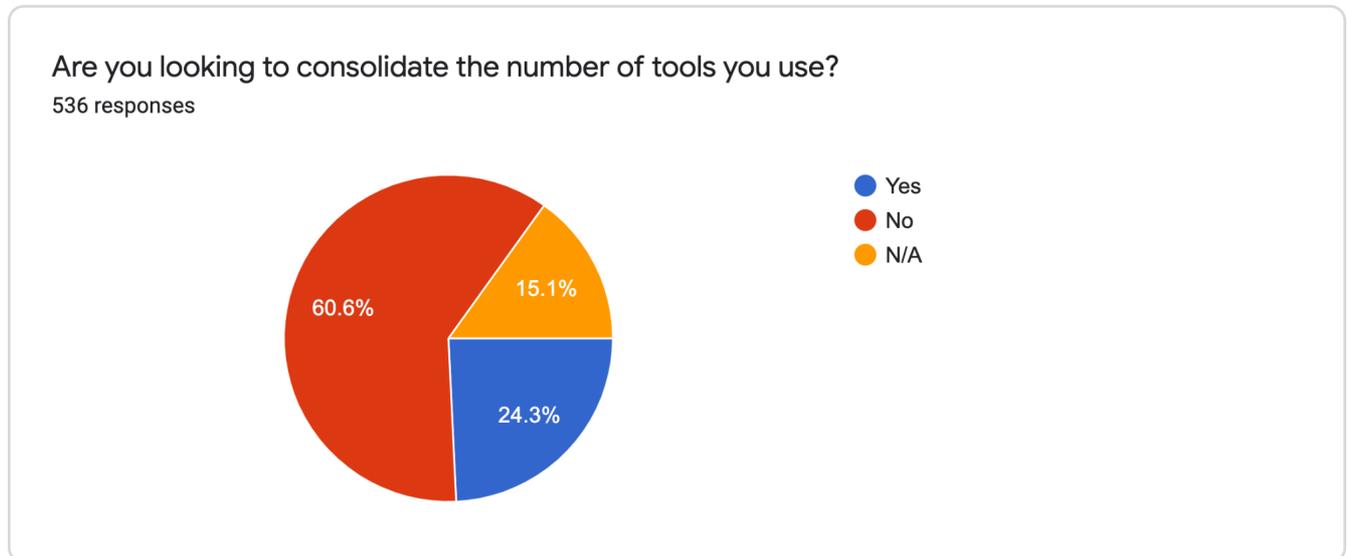


Just like the employment figures, the largest portion of respondents reported things staying the same for now. Fascinatingly, however, 1/3 of marketers indicated an increase in spending.

The 2010 article 'roaring out of a recession' indicated that the companies most likely to survive a recession are those which invested in R&D and advertising while reducing operational expenditure. Perhaps companies are heeding this advice? Perhaps more

realistically, many of the comments provided did indicate that the budget is very much in a state of flux, depending on results - *“our spend is a proportion of our income - when that increases, so will our spend”*.

What’s in your marketing technology stack at the moment?



Automation, collaboration, and reporting tools top list of technologies used by marketers

The number of tools available for marketers to manage their marketing activities has increased dramatically. As the ways of working rapidly shifted to home working during the lockdown, tools have helped marketers maintain efficiencies and continuity essential to perform their roles.

When grouping the tools that marketers have been using to manage their daily activities, these tools are centered around automation, collaboration, insight, and analysis.

Top list of tools ranked by marketers:

- 1) Marketing automation platforms (E.g. Hubspot)
- 2) Collaboration tools (E.g. Trello, Slack)
- 3) Insights and analytics platforms (E.g. Google Analytics)
- 4) Social media management tools (E.g. ContentCal)
- 5) Customer relationship management platforms (E.g. Salesforce)

What's the number one marketing lesson you/your business have learned during this time?

Building an authentic brand while being agile, a key lesson for marketer

There is a shared sentiment amongst the surveyed marketers for brands and businesses that to survive beyond the pandemic is to build a brand that is authentic and connects with people. This will be a key driver for them to succeed.

While brand activation will continue to be one of the main drivers of sales, the crisis has brought to the forefront of marketers the importance and value of building brand trust. Previously seen, mainly in the context of B2C, brand marketing that involves long-term brand thinking is increasingly being applied by B2B marketers too. As one respondent commented: *"People buy from people when they're being themselves."*

It is also evident from the survey that while building a brand is crucial for marketers, they also must stay agile and nimble with their strategies, with one respondent stating: *"Focus on building brand whilst others are quieter"*, and another respondent commenting *"adapt plans more frequently."*

Helping brands to stand out in a crowded market has always been a challenge faced by marketers. But when you add a major global crisis like the one we're experiencing, marketers understand that creating an emotional connection at each brand touchpoint in a consistent, positive, and meaningful way, is what will build the long-term trust that will eventually help customers choose their brand over others. *"People want brands they can trust"*, as one respondent commented.

Your learning

What type of content format have you found most useful for your learning during the last three months?

536 responses



Reassuringly for The Marketing Meetup, 47.6% of the audience indicated the best way they've learned throughout COVID has been through webinars. There is perhaps a hint of a bias here given the audience, but we'll take it! To the wider point, however, as there have been no events going on during this period - online events could have picked up much of the slack.

The remaining best place to learn was distributed across a whole manner of mediums, with videos, blog posts, and podcasts topping the list. Interestingly, only 2 respondents chose books as their top source of learning throughout the period - so much for all the reading lists we put out!

The lesson here for marketers: it's still worth doubling down on your webinar schedule if this data is anything to go by, while podcasting still remains a strong channel, even when people aren't commuting like they used to.

Summary

The survey returned a real mixed bag of results. On one hand, marketers are more likely to feel positive than negative right now, and there have been some clear benefits in terms of work/life balance too - even if childcare has been a hard slog.

That being said, when overlaid with economic data, there are challenges ahead for all of us, even if the nature of this challenge is felt in many different ways. A real positive takeaway is the ability of the marketing industry's ability to adapt and implement strategic changes with no prior warning as almost everyone's 2020 plan was consigned to the scrapheap.

These changes have largely been positive too, allowing many businesses to refocus on key strategies and channels that will drive long term growth. This time has focused the mind. That much is certain.

Technology has also been a real boon during this time, with the implications being that work for the majority of us has changed, likely forever, with more flexibility than ever before. Tie this into a suite of tools that help us all do our jobs better, and we could all be in a more efficient working environment very soon.

Finally, learning has taken a real step forward. Whether it's having more time or having access to additional resources not dependent on location such as webinars, the opportunity to learn has never been stronger.

About The Marketing Meetup:

We are the world's loveliest community for marketers [probably]. We help you become a better marketer through great events, mind-shifting resources, and the opportunity to meet your marketing peers. Most importantly, we do it with kindness at the heart of it all.

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About ContentCal

ContentCal is an award-winning content marketing platform enabling over 40,000 businesses to plan, organise, collaborate on, distribute and analyse their marketing content in a simple and intuitive calendar interface

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About Third Light

Third Light is a software and internet services company based in Cambridge, UK. We develop a web-based product for remote working in teams, called Chorus. Our idea is to simplify the storage and management of digital media files, or 'digital assets'. By bringing this content into a single place for teams, we allow marketing and content professionals to build a searchable library that can be reached from anywhere.

Learn more: www.thirdlight.com