10 UNEXPECTED WAYS TO CHANGE UP YOUR MARKETING IN 2021

phrasee

Artificial intelligence.
Human language.
Awesome.

10 unexpected ways to change up your marketing in 2021

The year 2020 has been, to understate it quite a lot, a year of the unexpected. In marketing, seismic shifts defined pretty much every sector. As we look ahead to 2021, there is one certainty:

The only constant is change.

Since everything else has been upended, we thought it might make sense to take a look at the traditional marketing playbook — and perhaps throw large chunks of it out. When the world changes as dramatically as it has this past year, the old rulebooks have to change too. What "best practices" are now the worst? What are we doing because we've always done it that way and not because it's actually serving us? How can we change to keep up with the rapidly evolving times?

The human instinct in times like these is to play it safe, stay cautious, maintain the status quo as best you can until you reach the other side.

Absolutely not, we say!

This is no time to play it safe. This is a time for rapid evolution, trying new things, experimenting to find out what works in this crazy new world we're living in. Stasis doesn't exist anywhere else, and it shouldn't exist in your marketing playbook either.

With that in mind, we've brought together some of the smartest marketers in the world across a wide variety of industries to give you advice on what the heck to do next. Keep reading if you're ready to have your marketing game taken up a notch or twelve.

1 Stop testing everything.

2 Stop selling.

3 Send fewer emails.

4 Start small with big ads.

5 Kill your retargeted ads.

6 Let robots do the writing.

7 Be human.

8 Be funny.

9 Stop creating manual user journeys.

10 Stop recommending the wrong thing.

#1: Stop testing everything.

For years, the steady drumbeat in marketing has been the word "test." It's absolutely everywhere. "You should test that, and this, and that too. Test everything! All the time! Nothing but tests! MORE TESTS!!!" (You'd be forgiven for getting sick of the word.)

But what if you... didn't do that?

Now, let us be clear: we are NOT saying that testing isn't valuable. (Not trying to get pelted with rotten veggies by the marketing establishment here.) Of course you should test. Just not everything all the time. As Jen Capstraw, Co-Founder & President of Women of Email, tells us, "Not everything is worth testing and most tests are not statistically meaningful."

We couldn't agree more. As a business whose "whole thing" is testing, we only work with very large brands who are talking to millions of customers at a time. Why? Because there's not enough data in a small start-up's list to tell us what really works and doesn't. Tests should be done on a large enough sample to be statistically significant, but you also can't send it out to billions of people.

Also, what's worth testing and what isn't? Go back to your business goals (which are usually something along the lines of "make more money by doing X"). Pick a thing that might actually move that needle, and then work on it. Once you've got some good answers from testing, move onto the next thing. The waters can become very muddy when you're testing more than one thing at a time.

So the next time someone wants to test subject lines, personalization, animated content, and senders all at the same time, go ahead and throw a rotten vegetable at them.

Expert profile:

Name:
Jen Capstraw

Title:
President & Co-Founder

Company:
Women of Email

> *"Not everything is worth testing and most tests are not statistically meaningful."*

#2: Stop selling.

> **cancela lansbury**
> @gossipbabies
>
> Companies be like " Now more than ever , we will let you buy our product"

This year, brands (mostly) did a great job of pivoting their message to being empathetic and helpful instead of pushing a hard sell. As we (hopefully) move towards a post-COVID-19 world, there are plenty of marketers who are looking forward to ramping back up their high-pressure sales tactics.

Yeah, don't do that.

And not because of anything having to do with the pandemic, but because people don't like being sold to! They like to be entertained, informed, surprised, delighted. Being sold to stresses people out — in fact, in a survey of 400 marketers and 4,000 consumers across the UK and US, 76% said that they are turned off by brands that use high-pressure selling tactics. Pandemic or no, we don't need more of that in our world.

As Jen Kirchhofer, Digital Marketing Director of The Brown Dog Brand, puts it, "It's not just about selling — it's about your customer enjoying their experience with your brand." Jeanne Jennings, Founder of Email Optimization Shop, agrees: "This goes way past subject lines and discounts; to truly boost ROI you have to increase the value that your email program provides to subscribers. Email marketing is most effective when it builds relationships with subscribers, along with promoting products and services to drive sales."

Smart brands like Groupon have already made the shift away from the hard sell in their messaging. "It's become less transactional, more problem-solving," says Gabrielle Stafford, Groupon's VP of Global Consumer Marketing, about their messaging.

One brand that has been doing a great job of this even pre-COVID-19 is Chubbies, whose Weekender email is purely about having fun and bringing joy to their audience. With an average NPS score of 9.2, we think it's working. And here at Phrasee, we talk about things besides ourselves regularly (and if it is about us, we try to make it phun). Yes, we're serious about marketing, but we're also even more serious about the mental health and well-being of our audience — the last thing we want to do is stress them out by shoving ourselves in their face.

Just because you can start pushing a hard sell again doesn't mean you should. Take your empathy with you into 2021 and send out content that makes customers excited to be doing business with you.

#3: Send fewer emails.

You could email your subscribers multiple times a day if you wanted to. But should you? Because one of three things is going to happen:

1. You're going to delight the tiny segment of your audience that actually wants that many emails from you.

2. You're going to absolutely infuriate the much larger segment of your audience — sane humans with busy lives who don't have time to read all those emails — making them unsubscribe and damaging your brand reputation.

3. You're going to train your audience to ignore you, harming your open rate in the process.

Why are your customers coming to you? What value are you giving them? Is it a good product or service at a good price? Or do they want you to be their best friend in the whole wide world, their sole reason for existing? We're guessing it's probably the former, so adjust yourself accordingly.

Josh Gondelman ✔
@joshgondelman

Me: I'd like to buy a single item as a gift for my mom's birthday, please.

Store: He's playing it cool, but I bet he means he wants us to email him every day for the rest of his life.

And don't forget to consider context when you send. As Roxana Shershin, President & Co-Founder of Digital Additive, puts it, "When I see a brand send me three emails back-to-back-to-back, and it's really ill-coordinated and weird messaging — if they were all related and had purpose, that would be one thing — but that is when I cringe the most because that's avoidable. If I'm being told that my order's being delayed, and then look what else is on sale, it just seems tone-deaf."

Sending fewer emails might sound scary, so if you are going to do it, then you need to make sure that you're sending the absolute best, highest-converting emails you can possibly send. Now's the time to deck them out. Personalized content, animation, high-performing multivariant-tested subject lines — if you're going to send less, then focus all your energy on sending better.

" *Email is a lever that folks have leaned on, but it's a little addictive, because every time you pull on it, money comes out the other end. Just because every time you pull on the lever, money comes out, doesn't mean that it's the right thing to do.* "

Roxana Shershin, President & Co-Founder, **Digital Additive**

#4: Start small with big ads.

Once upon a time, there was a brand that spent $3 million and almost a whole year making a commercial. They hired a big-shot director, went hog-wild on costumes and set design, and used innovative technology to film. Important people were flown out to set to watch the proceedings, and the shrimp cocktail flowed like a horseradish-scented river. And then that ad failed spectacularly.

Filming new ads is going to continue to be tricky for the next several months. But before assembling a cast and crew and a COVID-19-compliance staffer, press pause.

Your team likely has more than one idea for a good ad. Figure out the absolute cheapest way to make something with those concepts. Is it using existing employees as your talent? Does it involve a lot of stock footage from affordable sources like Storyblocks? Can it be done with animation? Put together the cheapest possible proof of concept for each idea, and then test them out on YouTube and social media to see which one rises to the top. Once you've got some data to back up your assumptions (and at Phrasee, there's nothing we love more than that), then you can start constructing a more expensive version.

This is a model that is becoming more popular with brands who want to spend smarter. As Kelly Gillease, CMO of NerdWallet tells us, "Before launching our first national brand campaign, we launched a localized version with a much smaller budget. We looked at the impact it had on one city and were able to extrapolate what the campaign would do for NerdWallet's brand on a larger scale."

The moral of the story: don't spend $3 million on something that might crash and burn. By testing out simplified concepts and letting them earn their way to the top, you can make sure your next big ad buy/shrimp cocktail spree is money well-spent.
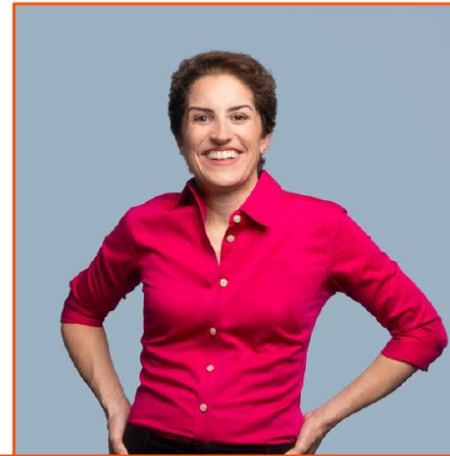
Expert profile:

Name:
Kelly Gillease

Title:
CMO

Company:
NerdWallet

Favorite quote:
"Imagination is more important than knowledge."
- Albert Einstein

> *Before launching our first national brand campaign, we launched a localized version with a much smaller budget. We looked at the impact it had on one city and were able to extrapolate what the campaign would do for NerdWallet's brand on a larger scale.*

#5: Kill your retargeted ads.

> **Andy Richter** ✔
> @AndyRichter
>
> I ordered a toilet seat from Amazon and now based on the ads I see they must think I have an insatiable toilet seat addiction

Retargeted ads are built for a very specific purpose: if someone leaves your site without converting, an algorithm can do the work of reminding them you exist and encourage them to come back and complete the process.

Sounds great, right?

As much as we love a good algorithm, this one can be problematic. If someone completes a purchase on your site like in the tweet above, they should not have ads for that item following them around anymore. Mission accomplished. Game over. Every one of these ad impressions is a waste of money.

What if a buyer converts on another site and you don't know about it? And what if it's for something they don't need more of? For example, if they browsed for a sofa on your site and then purchased on another, they're not going to buy more sofas from you. They're all sofa-ed out. Unless they're furnishing a mansion that consists solely of living rooms, you're done. Again, every ad impression here is a waste of your money.

Also, people don't always go to websites because they want to convert. Sometimes, they're just curious. Maybe their friend got a job at that company and they're just giving it a quick once-over. Maybe they were actually making fun of one of your products with their friends on a group chat and have no intention of buying it (or anything) from you. Following these people around with retargeted ads is again a waste of money.

But more importantly than wasting money is damage to your brand sentiment. We've all heard stories and experienced ourselves the annoyance of certain ads following you around. A survey from InSkin Media showed that the two most common reactions to repetitive ads are annoyance and anger. Which is just great for your brand!

Sure, retargeted ads might convert a few sales. But as marketing aficionado Neil Patel asks, "Are you gaining a few at the expense of alienating a majority?" Retargeted ads can waste money, damage your brand, and come across as creepy. Until there's a way to only target ads to confirmed potential buyers (who haven't already gone somewhere else and who are definitely interested), let's leave them behind and spend money on smarter things. (Or at the very least make sure they only get shown once instead of stalking your audience for two weeks.)

Viewing repeated online ads can cause the consumer to do the following:

55%	53%	10%
put off buying	get irritated	make a purchase
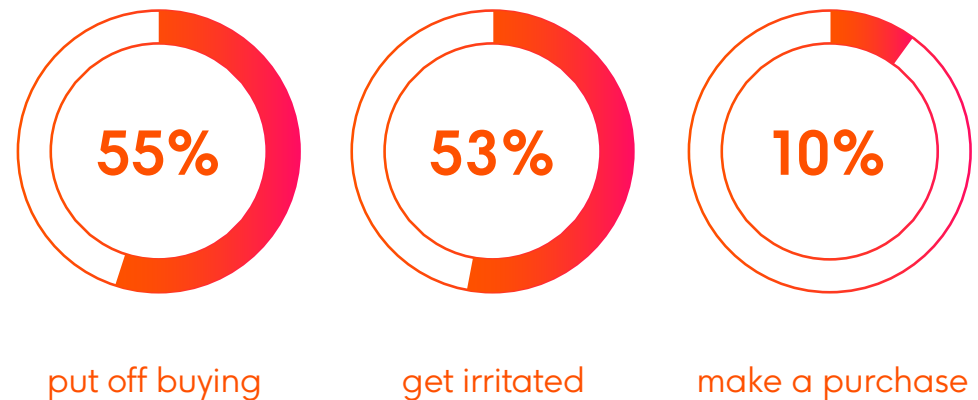
Source: InSkin Media

#6: Let robots do the writing.
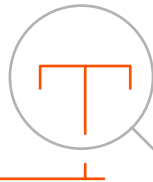
Marketing teams are expected to churn out daily content for several different social media channels, each with their own formats, rules, and word counts. There's content to create for their website, email campaigns, ads, blog posts, press releases, podcasts—the list goes on and on, always a new channel needing attention.

Tomorrow, some tech company in Silicon Valley is going to launch Grabblezook, the hot new social network for 18-24-year-old cottagecore anime feminauts (a shockingly large market), and you'll have to hire someone to make content for THAT. Then that CEO's college roommate is going to launch FURX, and—you see where this is going right? Before long, you're going to have a content creation horde the size of a small republic trying to keep up with it all.

Like so many infomercials in the 90s told us, there's got to be a better way. Well, there is, and it involves AI. In other words: let robots do the writing.

Now, we know that sounds problematic. As Justine Del Greco, Marketing Manager Global CRM at eBay, puts it, "Our copywriters were understandably worried—'Is AI going to be taking over our jobs?' But actually, our copywriters started to realize that the AI freed up more time for them to do other projects, to work on copy for other channels, so it actually turned into a positive thing. And of course, anything that we send to our customers does not go out without the approval of a copywriter and the brand team."

Her former colleague Molly Prosser, eBay's Associate Creative Director, agrees. "Not to be flippant, but if you think this AI is going to take your work away, then you're not thinking creatively. Ultimately, this is going to be a tool for you, to free you up to do the kinds of copywriting and the kinds of creative thinking that we all want to do. I ask those copywriters who are nervous about this cutting into their own workload, 'What kind of work do you want to be doing? Do you want to be writing 150 subject lines for emails, or do you want to spend your time thinking about the next innovative campaign that we're going to be putting out?' Ultimately, they always pick the latter."

Letting AI do some copywriting can actually be very freeing for the copywriters that you do have. So make sure they have the help they need to focus on the bigger picture.

With Phrasee, eBay has achieved:

15.8%
average open uplift

31.2%
average click uplift

700,000+
incremental opens per campaign

56,000+
incremental clicks per campaign

#7: Be human.

Though there's hope on the horizon in the form of effective vaccines, we've all lost a lot this year. Our entire way of life has been completely uprooted. People are struggling. Anxiety is rampant. Those things won't be cured overnight.

It's time for brands to show their human side, to react with empathy, to put aside their scheduled plans, and take their place in the larger social conversation. "To be empathetic to the larger societal context is always the right thing to do and is an effective way to drive business performance," says Marty Ellis, Senior Director Global CRM at Uber.

There are some trailblazing brands that agree with him. At FARFETCH, Global CMO Gareth Jones explains: "Shining a light on the small business owners whose livelihoods were affected by the crisis allowed us to form an emotional connection with our customers, educate them about FARFETCH's brand proposition, bring them closer to our mission and give them a tangible way to positively help a community in need."

And Facebook Reality Labs's Global CRM Leader, Leighton L. Chun, had another good example: "In a recent campaign during an NBA game, which was run by Oculus [a virtual reality video game developer and subsidiary of Facebook], the team pivoted on our original message and removed all Oculus marketing language and leaned into a moment in solidarity to drive change through voting. As a result of being agile, relevant and, most importantly, authentic, the message received greater coverage than anticipated because it was syndicated across other platforms by partner organizations and amplified through social media."

Phrasee's research shows that marketers feel brand language has never been more important

30% of respondents say that their CEO pays more attention to the power of language now than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

64% report that COVID-19 has made language more important than ever in helping them connect with customers.

71% expect to focus more on content and language when they do their next marketing plan and budgeting.

Powered by Dynata

Behaving with empathy and humanity was critical this year, and that's not going to change post-COVID-19. As Samantha Iodice, Founder of The Sauce Experience, so elegantly puts it, "Don't forget what we've learned this year about relationships and lose sight of your empathy post-pandemic. It's easy to fall into old habits, but empathy has forced so many to create powerful 1:1 relationships and be more specific and purposeful in their marketing. This new approach can only increase in benefit as well as deepening loyalty to your brand."
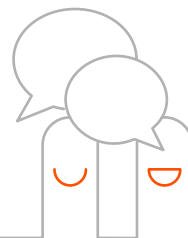
#8: Be funny.

2020 brought us oodles of slow, sad music with stock footage of people gazing off into the distance wistfully. Between the pandemic, social unrest, and wildfires that wouldn't stop burning, there wasn't much to laugh about. Brands have been pretty scared to use humor this year, and understandably so — no one wants to be seen as flippant or uncaring "in these unprecedented times."

But jiminy crickets, aren't we all tired of being sad and miserable? Don't we deserve a little levity? Is it OK to start laughing again? Because goodness gracious, we sure do need it.

If you've been waiting for permission, you have ours: use some humor. Yes, even now. Inject a little joy into your marketing, and you'll stand out from all those brands that are still using Philip Glass to score their ads.

Google Store dived in on this. As Global CRM Lead Shawn Tian tells us, "We launched a campaign to re-brand all of our products in witty ways that reflect how they are used in the context of the pandemic and working from home. For example, given the increase in food delivery during lockdown, our Nest Hello Doorbell with a camera became the Nest Pizza Detector."

Now of course, one must use humor responsibly. Don't put others down and don't make light of tragedy. Make sure your audience is in on the joke, and make sure your target is appropriate (yes, you can call workers working from home "sweatpants aficionados", and no, you shouldn't make fire jokes as a forest burns down).

Phrasee's marketed with humor since the beginning — it helps us stand out in an extremely crowded MarTech landscape. Think back on the ads that you most remember — were they sad or funny? We bet the funny ones outnumber the sad.

Experiment with some humor — even though it seems counterintuitive right now — and we bet you'll love the results.
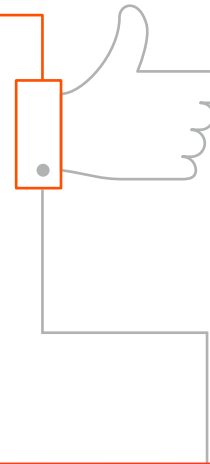
> *We launched a campaign to re-brand all of our products in witty ways that reflect how they are used in the context of the pandemic and working from home.*
>
> Shawn Tian, Global CRM Lead,

#9: Stop creating manual customer journeys.

"First, I want the user to do this, and then this, and then that. Once they go through all of those steps, I'll have them hooked!"

You sunny, optimistic marketer. It sure would be great if the world were that simple, wouldn't it?

But the fact is, people are going to end up on your virtual doorstep for all kinds of reasons and at all different stages of the buying cycle. Not to mention the different channels — between email, website, and a plethora of social media, there have never been so many ways to communicate with businesses.

There is no one-size-fits-all journey appropriate for everyone. And you could spend months trying to dream up elaborate communication chains that address every scenario, but is that really a good use of your time?

It's time to think smarter — or rather, let something else do the smart thinking for you. Patrick Tripp, SVP of Product Marketing at Cheetah Digital has a great idea: "Tap into analytics and tactics like machine and deep learning to help you automate the work and drive efficiency into the process. Machine learning can help you choose the right journey or path to send customers on, and deep learning can help you optimize the content and copy." Or, as the CEO of Marketing Insider Group Michael Brenner puts it, "Digital interactions produce a whole lot of data. And, if a modern-day business is to safeguard its future, it must use this data wisely."

So free up your time for something more important, and let a machine use data to decide where to send your customer next. Doesn't that sound nice?

> **❝**
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>
> Patrick Tripp, SVP of Product Marketing, **Cheetah Digital**
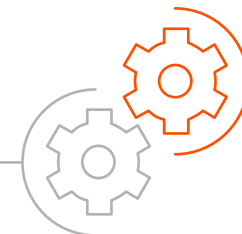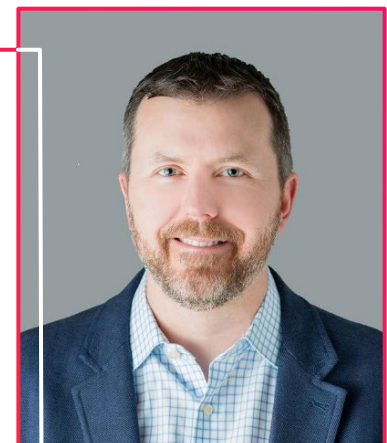
#10: Stop recommending the wrong thing.

"You might also like…"

Those are four words that can open the door to additional sales or engagement—if what's suggested is relevant.

The problem? A lot of "You might also like" algorithms are based on what everyone else has done. People who bought this also bought that. People who bought a bed also bought sheets. People who bought a breakfast sandwich also bought coffee. Makes sense, doesn't it?

Sure, but it's also completely inadequate. What if the person you're recommending items to is really happy with their sheets? Or they're a tea drinker? Telling them what the masses have done doesn't help you figure out who they are and what they need. Plus, you have their data—use it! As Patrick Tripp advises, "Start providing real individual-level experiences based on previous clicks, opens, purchases and history."

What if you don't have a lot of data to go on yet because the user is new to you? Patrick again has a great idea: "Focus on a value exchange. Get to know your consumers, their interests, and preferences. You can do this with simple questions, surveys, and quizzes. Make it fun, and offer something in exchange for their consumer info."

Once you pay attention to the signals your user—with their unique needs, circumstances, and identity—is giving you, you can begin delivering an experience that offers unique value to them. At Phrasee, we could analyze data from all industries and then tell you what word clusters are going to work best across all of them, but we believe that what works best for the travel industry won't necessarily translate to retail, and even what works for Retailer A won't necessarily work for Retailer B. That's why we build a bespoke language model for each brand.

We have to start thinking of every customer as impossibly unique. We can no longer put them into buckets or cohorts or groups and hope for the best because there will be outliers every time. Only by using the data we get on each individual customer—and using AI to power recommendations based on that person's unique info—can we hope to serve customers the best possible experience.

Want to know more about AI-Powered Copywriting?

Book a demo.

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