

THE ULTIMATE
CORONAVIRUS
SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR E-COMMERCE RETAILERS



maisie

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Introduction

To state the obvious, this is not business as usual. We're faced with a rapidly spreading global pandemic unlike anything we've experienced in our lifetimes.

We're experiencing more and more constraints around how we live our daily lives with cities placed under lockdown, forcing non-essential businesses to close. Consumers are staying clear of public places as much as possible.

As e-Commerce retailers we need to adapt quickly and remain flexible to meet rapidly changing consumer needs and government risk reduction measures. However, at times of such great uncertainty it can be difficult to know what decisions to make especially when it comes to your business. We want to help you navigate these uncharted waters, so we've written this guide to offer a variety of actions you could take to give your e-commerce business the best chance of surviving and thriving over both the short- and long-term.

In this guide we will discuss:

1. How consumer behavior is evolving
2. Where consumers are currently spending time online
3. How search behavior has changed
4. How online advertising has been impacted
5. What actions you can take to position your business for success

Consumer behavior continues to evolve as the virus spreads

There are several factors shaping consumer behavior in these turbulent times.

Firstly, behavior has been changing as consumers digest and process new information about COVID-19 and then make spending decisions based on that news.

For example, many of us have seen empty supermarket shelves first hand due to the stockpiling of essential grocery and health items. This has been driven by (self-fulfilling) concerns about supplies running out and our desire to reduce the frequency of visits to public places as well as the expectation of enforced lockdowns.

Secondly, social distancing measures and business closures mean consumers have been forced to change their behaviors in certain ways, whether they want to or not. For example, with restaurants closed in many areas, consumers have little choice but to cook and eat more at home. And in some good news for e-commerce retailers, consumers who previously felt uncomfortable shopping online are being forced to adopt it out of necessity.

Thirdly, forced business closures are leading to significant job losses, particularly in the retail and travel industries. In the US alone there were 9.9 million new jobless claims lodged in the 2 weeks ending 28 March. Significant increases in unemployment mean many consumers have little money to spend. In addition, those with jobs are often having to reduce their working hours and are becoming increasingly nervous about their own employment prospects and, as a result, are curtailing their spending.

Consumers are spending more time online but in different places

With more people choosing to, or forced to, stay at home it hardly comes as a surprise that there has been a significant increase in total time spent online.

However, whilst internet usage has shot up, it has not been spread evenly. Video streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube have seen big increases in traffic.

The DE-CIX Internet Exchange reports significant increases in video conferencing traffic (up 50%), online gaming (up 25%) and social media networks (up 25%).

Across its clients Wordstream has reported seeing a 20% drop in traffic from Google search ads and a 15% drop from Google shopping ads but a 21% increase in YouTube and a 13% increase in Google Display Network traffic.

Facebook has reported a 50% month-on-month increase in messaging volumes on its Messenger and Whatsapp services due to the coronavirus.

These shifts in online usage present opportunities for you to reach new and existing customers on messaging apps, social networks, YouTube and Google Display Network.

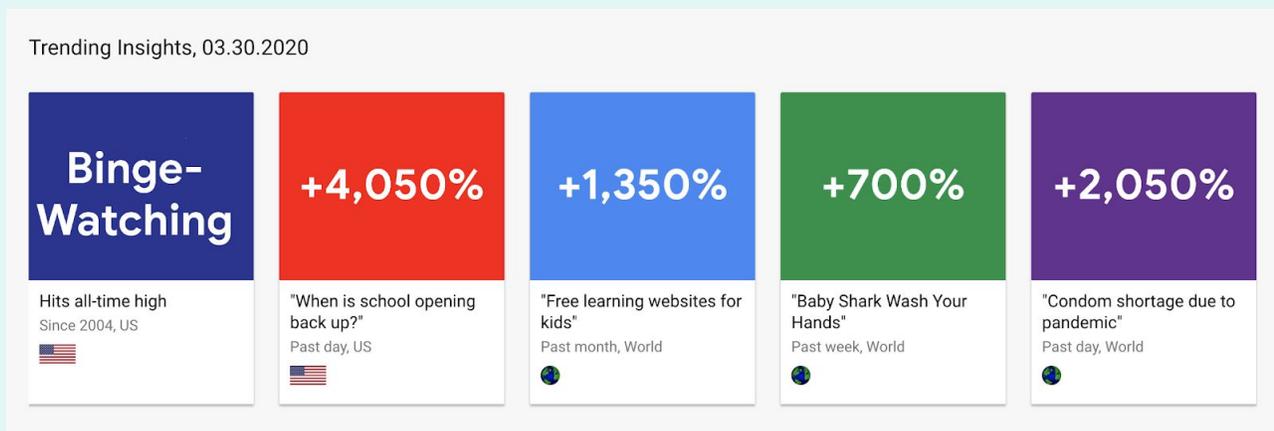
Consumers are searching differently

As coronavirus is pretty much all we're talking about at the moment it's no surprise that we are searching more and more for information about the virus and its implications.

Whilst the volume of Google searches is down overall there are some e-commerce categories where search volumes have increased significantly.

Wordstream reports a 41% increase in searches for beauty and personal care, with products like soap and hand sanitizer proving the most popular. Home appliances, bedding and linen have seen search volumes up by 7%.

Google Trends is a great way to understand how people are searching every day. As the current situation is extremely fluid it's important to keep a close eye on search trends to understand where opportunities might lie for your business.



Companies have cut back their digital ad spend

In stark contrast to the growth in internet traffic, online ad spend has declined sharply. The [Interactive Advertising Bureau \(IAB\)](#) reports US digital ad spend is already down by 33% in March - a response to concerns about consumers' willingness to open their wallets at this time.

Large retailers have cut back ad spend, most notably Amazon who [turned off](#) most of its Google ads from 11 March. This appears to be in response to Amazon's struggle to meet overwhelming demand for essential products.

The good news is that higher traffic levels and less competition means you can expect to see the costs of online advertising to decline. For example, [Wordstream](#) has already seen a 9% decrease in average cost-per-click (CPC) for its retail clients on Google search. So you should be able to get more traffic to your site more cheaply than before.

However, on the flipside, depending upon your retail category, you might expect to see a drop in your conversion rates as shoppers tighten their purse strings and browse e-commerce sites more for entertainment than a desire to purchase. [Wordstream](#) has reported a 14% overall drop in retail conversion rates on Google search. However, some retail categories are showing improved conversion rates. Wordstream is seeing a 15% increase in search conversion rates for cards and greetings, a 30% increase for gift baskets and a 43% increase for floral arrangements.

How to position your e-commerce business for success

It goes without saying that in such turbulent times you need to keep your business lean, agile and responsive to the evolving situation and changes in consumer behavior and needs. However, it's important to remain positive and optimistic as times of crisis can also be times of opportunity.

We have researched and compiled many ideas for you to evaluate and implement so that your business can survive and thrive during and after the coronavirus pandemic. We cover the following topics:

- [Marketing](#)
- [Merchandising](#)
- [Conversion](#)
- [Customer service](#)
- [Staffing](#)
- [Expenses](#)
- [Cash flow](#)
- [Grants & assistance](#)
- [Metrics](#)

Adapt your marketing strategy

Changing consumer behavior, constraints on the supply chain and the types of products you stock will all need to be factored in when deciding how to adapt your marketing strategy to best fit the evolving situation.

Focus on your best customers

It's always easier and cheaper to get existing customers to buy from you again than to acquire new customers. In these challenging times now, more than ever, it's important to focus your marketing efforts on nurturing and rewarding your most valuable customers.

Give your best customers the VIP treatment by rewarding their loyalty with discounts, free shipping or value-adds that will incentivize them to make purchases now.

For frequent purchasers consider offering a loyalty program like Amazon Prime where customers can get free shipping in return for a monthly subscription fee.

Reposition your products

Consumers have been spending up big both offline and online on essentials - stockpiling groceries and health products to build up their pandemic pantries and medicine cabinets.

If you sell any essential products you obviously want to focus your marketing efforts around those, assuming you have sufficient stock. But what are you to do if you don't sell essential products?

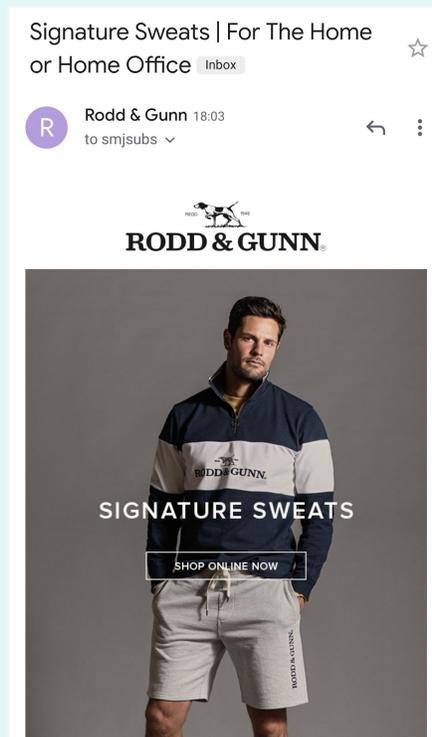
As more and more people are forced to, or choose to, work from and stay at home they have started to purchase more products that:

- Keep them and their families entertained
- Enable them to work productively from home
- Help them keep them fit and healthy
- Make them feel better emotionally

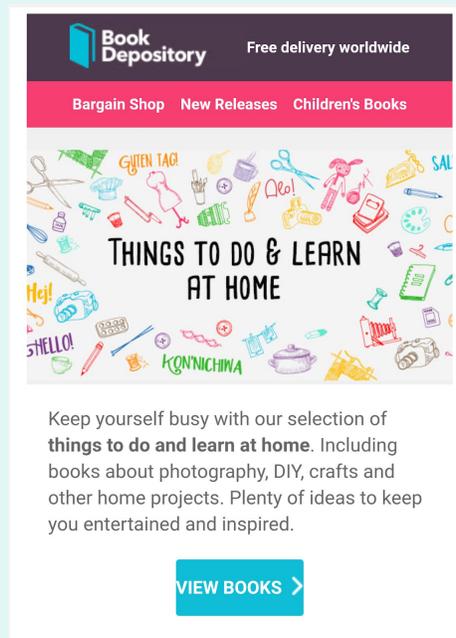
Products that meet these needs can be considered to be the **"new essentials"**.

Consider shifting your marketing efforts to the promotion of any new essential products you stock and focus on repositioning your products to show how they benefit people now they are spending most of their time at home.

For example, Rodd & Gunn, a New Zealand based menswear retailer, has repositioned its sweat tops and pants as the perfect solution for being comfortable whilst working from home.



International bookseller Book Depository has started focusing on promoting books about stay at home topics like cooking, DIY and arts & crafts.



Dell has started repositioning its products as the perfect solution to working from home.



When prioritizing products to promote focus on those with the best margin and the most reliable supply chains.

Boost your remarketing & retargeting efforts

It's worth considering shifting some of your marketing acquisition spend to remarketing and retargeting. Remarketing involves sending emails and messages to reconnect with known customers who recently visited your store without making a purchase. Retargeting is advertising your store and products on other websites and apps to known and unknown people who visited your store.

In these difficult times consumers may take longer than usual to make a purchase decision so reminding them of your store and the products they viewed can be an effective way to get them back.

Facebook Ads, Google Ads and Adroll are all great platforms that enable you to dynamically target ads that contain products to people who previously visited your store.

With the current constraints on supply chains it can be difficult to restock your products as they sell out. But you don't want to miss the opportunity to sell to people looking for out of stock products. Apps like Maisie enable you to subscribe customers and automatically send back in stock notifications via email, SMS or Facebook Messenger as soon as your inventory has been replenished.

If you're already running abandoned cart recovery emails through your e-commerce platform or email marketing platforms like Klaviyo you could also consider sending abandoned cart reminder messages in Facebook Messenger via apps like Maisie.

Create content that adds value to your customers

Content is a great way to find and engage new customers as well as strengthen your relationships with existing customers.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a great opportunity to create new and unique content that helps people better endure their time at home. Depending upon your brand, products and target audience you could create videos on topics like how to keep fit and healthy at home or produce educational “how to” guides on various home hobbies and interests. Alternatively you can create something humorous that helps people find a welcome distraction from all the bad news.

Expand your social media presence

As mentioned above, social media networks have seen a significant increase in usage since the start of the pandemic. You should look at ways to tap into this increased social media usage by asking your staff and best customers to spread word of mouth about their favorite products and how they enable a more comfortable homestay.

Test new channels

If you have the right products, sufficient stock levels and a reliable supply chain you could test selling in online marketplaces like Amazon and Walmart if you're in the United States.

You might also wish to explore marketing in new channels that have boomed during the pandemic. Some examples are online gaming sites and the apps Tiktok and House Party, usage of which has grown greatly due to social distancing measures. Of course, make sure any new channel matches your target audience and, if so, invest time to understand the best ways to engage and market to people in these channels.

Start building your audience on Facebook Messenger and/or Whatsapp

As mentioned above, [Facebook](#) reported a 50% month-on-month increase in messaging volumes on its Messenger and Whatsapp services due to the coronavirus.

If your customers are spending a lot of time in these messaging apps it makes sense for you to try to engage with them there as well. You can look at advertising directly within Messenger or Whatsapp or you could consider adding [Messenger plugins](#) to your website to help build your audience.

Focus on the profitability of your ad campaigns

Given the rapidly changing situation it's wise to be conservative and focus on the profitability of your ad campaigns to ensure you're making money from every sale. This means changing your focus from metrics like CPA (cost per acquisition) or ROAS (return on ad spend) to metrics like First-Order Profit.

To ensure every dollar you invest in advertising is profitable you should be thinking in terms of the marginal cost and marginal return. For example, if I spend an extra \$100 on an ad campaign, will that increase my profit by more than \$100? If not, you should be looking to reduce your spend to the point where that last dollar spent is break-even.

Note that the economics of your ad campaigns probably will have changed a lot over the last month. You might be seeing lower CPCs and CPMs but, depending upon your retail category, your conversion rates may be down.

Rethink your ad creatives

In the current environment the usual ad copy and creatives are unlikely to perform as well as they have in the past. Consumers are understandably nervous and worried and won't respond well to being sold to.

You should rethink your ad imagery and copy to emphasize the simple pleasures of being at home and the convenience of your service.

Adjust your paid search campaigns to reflect new search trends

As search behavior is shifting continually and no one knows what will be trending tomorrow it's important to review your search keywords regularly. You need to keep on top of how much traffic your search ads are generating and quickly add new negative keywords to your campaigns to ensure you're not reaching irrelevant panicked searchers.

As mentioned above, regularly visit [Google Trends](#) to understand changes to what people are searching for online so you can take advantage.

Shift ad spend from Google Search & Shopping to YouTube & Google Display Network

As ad traffic from Google Search and Google Shopping appears to have reduced sizably, either due to reduced search volume or people being less inclined to click on search ads, you might consider shifting some ad spend to YouTube and Google Display Network where ad traffic is up significantly. Whilst this should lead to increased website traffic you'll need to weigh up or test the relative latest conversion rates of these different channels to determine whether it will increase or reduce overall revenue.

Create geo-specific audiences

If you sell to customers in countries outside your home market remember that every country is at a different stage of the pandemic so consumers in those countries will have different needs. So you'll need to consider creating different audiences, creatives and messaging for your ad campaigns in each country to ensure you remain relevant.

Re-evaluate your merchandising

Given fast changing consumer behavior during this unprecedented time you need to re-evaluate the relevance of the products you stock, restock and promote on your website. This needs to be done bearing in mind the reliability of your supply chain.

Whilst every country is at a different stage in the evolution of the coronavirus pandemic, consumers typically follow a similar pattern:

Stage	Consumer behavior changes	COVID-19 situation
1. Proactive, health-minded buying	Interest rises in products that promote overall health and wellness.	Minimal local cases of COVID-19 generally linked to international arrivals.
2. Reactive health management	Prioritize products essential to virus containment, health & public safety (e.g. face masks)	Government launches health & safety campaign. Community transmission of COVID-19 and/or first deaths.
3. Pantry preparation	Pantry stockpiling of long-life foods and a broader range of health & safety products. Spike in store visits. Increased basket sizes & bulk buying.	Small quarantines begin. Borders close more broadly. Accelerating growth in the number of COVID-19 cases.
4. Quarantined living preparation	Increased online shopping. Set up working from home environment. Decrease in bricks & mortar store visits. Increasing stockouts & strains on the supply chain.	Localised COVID-19 emergency actions. Restrictions of large gatherings. Schools & public places shut down.
5. Restricted living	Focus on keeping entertained / fit & healthy / fighting off boredom. Severely restricted shopping trips. Online fulfilment is limited. Limited stock availability impacts pricing in some cases.	Mass cases of COVID-19. Communities ordered into lockdown. Restaurants closed. Small gatherings are restricted.
6. Living a new normal	People return to daily routines (work, schools, etc) but operate with a renewed cautiousness about health. Permanent shifts in the supply chain, use of e-commerce and hygiene.	COVID-19 quarantines lifted outside hotspots. Life starts to return to normal.

Source: [Nielsen](#)

As at the end of March many countries have moved to Stages 4 and 5 and intense stockpiling of food and health products has subsided.

Prioritize trending products

You should place your most consumer behavior stage relevant products on your website homepage and focus on them in your social channels and marketing activities. The types of products you should

prioritize will be determined by your retail category, your target customer and the stage of the pandemic in your country. Trending products by retail category in the US at 25 March were:

Retail category	Trending up	Trending down
Apparel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort clothing • Workout/fitness related • Women's apparel • Luxury • Wardrobe basics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men's apparel • Festival or event-driven clothing • Vacation & swimwear • Bridal
Auto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial truck parts & accessories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports cars/classic restoration parts & accessories
Beauty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At-home hair color • Self-care such as skincare masks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perfume, makeup
Electronics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertainment-related electronics (gaming) • Home office • Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portable accessories
Food & beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery food • Gift cards • Health food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate gifting • Catering
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crafts • Toys • Music • Gift boxes • Flower delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group activity driven items
Health & wellness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home gym equipment • Health supplements • At-home dental 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate-related
Home furnishings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home office • Decor • Bulk supplies • Kitchen supplies • Cooking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event-based items • Home entertaining • Novelty items
Outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Items for hiking/camping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/a
Pets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pet food & treats • Pet supplies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pet accessories • Pet health supplements
Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some individual or small group sports like soccer, cycling and running 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team sports apparel and equipment • Skateboarding & surfing equipment

Source: [Attentive Mobile](#)

It's worth investigating if you can reliably source more relevant, trending products quickly so that you can stock and sell them before buying patterns potentially shift again.

Offer value-added benefits

You may wish to consider adding new services or bonuses that will be appreciated by consumers and make them more likely to open their wallets. For example, offering to personalize purchases with etching or monogramming may be highly valued by consumers.

Improve your onsite conversion

Many online retailers, especially in non-essential product categories, have seen their website conversion rates drop over the past month or so as consumer uncertainty has increased.

It's now more critical than ever to do all you can to lift conversion by taking a fresh look at your website experience and your business policies.

Remove barriers to purchase

Put yourself in the shoes of a new website visitor and critically review your site from top to bottom to identify opportunities for improvement. If you're too close to your site to identify the issues either look to hire a professional or ask someone in your network to give you feedback.

You can start by reviewing your User Flow in your [Google Analytics](#) to see where visitors are dropping off. Your goal is to reduce as much as possible the number of steps a person has to take to complete a purchase. There are a few simple things you can do such as removing the need for visitors to create an account to complete their order. You can add simple one click payment options like Google Pay or Apple Pay so users don't have to key in their card details.

You should also ensure you use high quality images on your site and you provide detailed product descriptions including answers to common questions.

Finally, review any 3rd party plugins and apps you use that may prove to be annoying or distracting to your website visitors. Some websites have so much going on with popups, notifications, FOMO updates, flashing images, etc that you feel like you've wandered into a casino!

Conversion specialist CXL has an excellent [guide on best practices](#) to maximize e-commerce conversion.

Review your policies

Offering extended and/or free returns and free shipping will help increase your conversion rate but it comes at a cost. However, in the current environment where shoppers have become extremely risk averse and less willing to part with their money, you might need to consider testing these types of incentives to see how much they improve your conversion rate and whether the extra sales you make outweigh the costs of free shipping and returns.

You should think about how you need to adapt your returns policy to the current environment. Some customers may not be able to return products easily due to lockdown. Shipping companies may refuse to collect returned products from people's homes due to safety concerns. You also need to ensure you have a good process for safely handling returned items.

Update your website messaging

Check the messaging on your website to make sure it reflects the realities of your customers' current environment. Where possible, emphasize the simple pleasures of being at home or working remotely and the convenience of your service.

People don't like being sold to at the best of times and even more so now. Unless your value proposition is price-based you should shy away from salesy messaging and focus more on feelings and emotions.

Offer safer delivery options

Consider offering a specialized delivery service for people at most risk of suffering severe disease outcomes. For example, enable them to receive their orders outside the home and be notified of delivery so they can pick them up right away.

Elevate your customer service

In today's competitive online world great customer service is essential to success. In this time of uncertainty and stress it's even more important for e-commerce retailers to be transparent and show their human side.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Consumers are extremely apprehensive at this time so a lack of transparency on your part will add to their uncertainty and ensure their wallets remain firmly closed. However, consumers will be understanding of the constraints your business faces during this time if you're open and honest with them.

Make sure to continually update your website, social channels and marketplace with the following information:

- Delivery lead times
- Restocking lead times for out of stock items
- Which countries or regions you can't ship to (e.g. Italy, France and South Africa are no longer accepting international parcels)
- Returns policy

Consumers are anxious about the transfer of the virus so you need to lessen their fears by describing how your company is handling sanitation and health with respect to picking, packing and shipping.

If you face new delays or restrictions after a customer has placed an order with you ensure you promptly email or message them to explain the change in situation and what it means for them. Some customers may wish to cancel their orders as a result.

Add live chat & chatbots to communicate faster

In this environment your customers will have more questions than usual and will want them answered before making a purchase. Even if you put all of the information recommended above onto your website you'll still find many people won't read it.

If you don't have live chat on your website you'll find it difficult to respond to customer questions quickly enough to ensure you don't lose the sale.

If you don't have the resources to handle live chat 24/7 then think about adding chatbots, like [Maisie](#), that can answer common questions immediately without the need for staff involvement.

Keep your staff safe, engaged & motivated

It goes without saying that it is imperative to keep your employees and contractors safe. Where possible allow staff to work from home. Consider cancelling all internal meetings and run them instead via apps like Zoom, Google Hangouts or Skype. You should close your offices to outside visitors to reduce the risk of exposure.

If you have staff in warehouses or distribution centres be sure to educate them about the safety measures they should be following. You should ensure staff social distancing rules and provide them with protective gear such as hand wash, hand sanitizer, surgical gloves & face masks. If you feel you can't provide a safe environment you might have to consider closing down shipping and fulfilment for a while.

Your employees will be worried about their risk of contracting COVID-19 so if they feel unsafe they'll either tell you or you'll see increasing absenteeism.

Unless your business has benefited from increased demand during the pandemic, your employees will also be worried about the possibility of losing their jobs. It's important to be honest and transparent with your staff about how well the company is performing and to let them know how their jobs might be impacted. If you need to make cuts consider whether it's possible for your staff to share the pain by cutting everyone's hours and redeploying staff to other areas.

If your business is booming at the moment and you need to increase staff levels to meet your increased demand consider taking on people who have recently lost their jobs.

Eliminate unnecessary expenses

Whilst many of us run a tight ship now is a great time to review your expenditure and look for opportunities to cut back where it makes good business sense.

If you're having trouble replenishing stock or are selling products that people aren't interested in buying at the moment then you should think about significantly reducing or stopping paid advertising.

On the other hand, if your business is booming and unable to meet demand look at cutting back your paid advertising to the levels you can support.

If sales are down you might have had to let staff go so look at introducing automation to help cover the gap. For example, chatbots like [Maisie](#) can be a great way to handle common customer support queries automatically.

If you have a physical retail store(s) that you've been forced to close down or are seeing little or no foot traffic, be sure to speak to your landlord about sharing the pain with reduced rent or a rent holiday. It's in their interest to ensure your business survives as they won't have much chance of replacing you with another tenant in the next few months at least.

You should re-evaluate the software / apps that you use in your business and remove any you don't really use or generate little value from.

Improve your cash flow

Managing cash flow has always been a challenge for retailers, with most of us having to order and pay for inventory well in advance of being able to sell it. The situation has been made worse during February and March for those who source their products from China, with delayed shipments due to manufacturing plant and port closures.

If possible, ask your suppliers for extended payment terms. However, you will need to understand how much your suppliers have been affected by the pandemic and whether they too are facing cash flow challenges at this time.

Also think about how to bring your sales revenue forward. For example, for some product types, you could create new bundles and encourage customers to buy in bulk with discounted offers. For in-demand items that are out of stock you should think about offering a pre-order option so you can collect payment before you receive the items into stock.

Apply for small business grants and assistance

Many governments around the world and some large technology companies have announced programs to assist small businesses during the pandemic.

[Google](#) announced a plan to offer US\$340 million in Google Ads credits for all small businesses who have advertised with them over the past year. Credit notifications will appear in your Google Ads accounts and can be used at any point until the end of 2020 across all of Google's advertising platforms.

[Facebook](#) is introducing a Small Business Grants Program under which it is offering US\$100 million in cash grants and Facebook ad credits for up to 30,000 eligible small businesses in over 30 countries. Facebook will begin taking applications in the coming weeks so it might be a good idea to register on their [website](#) for updates so you don't miss out.

[Shopify](#) has compiled details of government assistance available across 17 countries so check it out to see if you're eligible.

Track key metrics daily

Keeping on top of your numbers is important at any time but is even more critical now with so much uncertainty and continual changes in consumer and competitor behavior and government measures.

You need to track revenue, sales volumes and average basket sizes to understand what's selling from day to day and adjust your merchandising and marketing strategies accordingly.

You'll need to keep a close eye on stock levels to ensure you're not wasting money promoting products you can't sell.

Look at your marketing metrics to understand changes in conversion rates, CPCs & CPMs and adjust your media spend accordingly.

Invest in yourself

If you're experiencing a slowdown and have more time on your hands it's a great idea to make the most of the opportunity and invest time in improving your skills and knowledge. Perhaps you've always wanted to learn to use your email marketing solution better. Or you've wanted to do a course on Facebook ads. Or you've wanted to start testing out some new apps. Whatever you decide to do it will pay you back many times over in future.

In conclusion, whilst the next few months will continue to be tough please remember that the positive actions you take today will help strengthen the foundations of your business and position it for long-term success when we emerge from this crisis.

Keep healthy, stay safe and be positive!

The Maisie Team

P.S. If you have any questions or comments please reach out to us at hello@maisie.ai

Useful Covid-19 e-commerce resources

[Shopify: Covid-19 Discussion Board](#)

[Shopify: Covid-19 Blog Articles](#)

[Google: Coronavirus Search Trends](#)

[Klaviyo: Marketing Amid Coronavirus](#)

[Nielsen: Covid-19 Content Hub](#)

[Within: Covid-19 Retail Pulse](#)

[eMarketer: Coronavirus Coverage](#)

[CXL: e-Commerce Conversion Best Practices](#)