

2021 SEARCH & DIGITAL MARKETING TRENDS REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

SEO, and digital marketing more generally, have been among the few marketing disciplines to see budget increases during a year of economic and societal uncertainty. That's great if you're working with an agency – but for those working in-house, it means your job just got a little harder and where maintenance may once have been the watch word, you may find yourself playing catch-up.

At times like this, it can be difficult to know where to start in order to deliver SEO that can drive a brand or business forward. For that reason, we've put together this report to help identify issues, prioritise tasks and implement solutions. We're going to deal predominately with the 'why' here, but while we don't go in to too much detail on the how, we'll add a reading list at the end for those that need a little more information.



CONTRIBUTORS

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KEY INSIGHTS

The following is a little bit of a tl;dr – some of the most interesting trends Senior Marketing & Content Exec Scott Rumsey has spotted while we have pieced this report together:

- Machine learning is on the rise – not just in coverage or in the way the algorithms work, but in useful tools for the industry. Search and digital marketers need to spend a little time considering how it will impact their brand.
- Improving technology may mean that testing your device at 2G speeds becomes a thing of the past – but either way, with the coming addition of core web vitals (CWV) as a ranking factor, brands will need to test to find a balance between performance and user experience (UX).
- The increase in working from home has led to cyber security issues which will need to be addressed as work from home doesn't seem likely to go away.
- Online shopping has been one of the few winners during 2020, and while things may return to how they were before the pandemic in some areas, we'd expect a significant number of consumers will have learned to love the online experience.
- I know we've said it before, but you really need to start using schema properly.
- Brands need to start optimising their ad accounts and get ready for a smart bidding revolution.
- The buyer's journey has changed and will keep changing, so brands need to reassess and tweak their sales funnel
- Local search is massive and growing, so brands need to target 'near me' searches – especially as the local footfall may see increases if people are heading out at lunchtimes while working from home.
- There are opportunities to fill voids left by businesses who have unfortunately closed due to covid. While we can lament that businesses had to close, we should still look to whether there are services we can offer in their place.
- Brand recognition and user focused content (UFC) set to be vital in the coming months, and tone of voice plays a part. Brands should be authoritative on why consumers need them and how they can help.
- The cross-channel approach is key. Brands need to adapt their ideas and content for as many of the 5, 10 or 15 channels as they are present on in order to gain maximum exposure.



INDUSTRY TRENDS

While we're going to deal with service specific trends each in their own section, there are obviously going to be factors that will impact the industry as a whole.

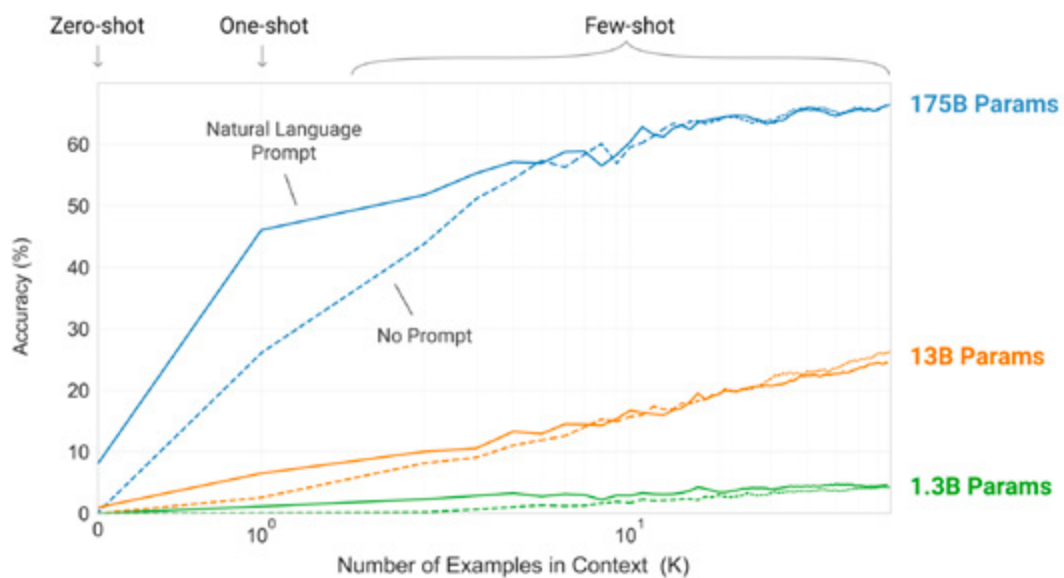
2020 has demonstrated that, as Mike Tyson once opined, 'everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face', but we're going to try to extrapolate from what we know already and hope the arrival of aliens, a giant Bruce-Willis-proof meteor, or some other storyline extravagance from the writers of 2020, doesn't crop up until at least the beginning of 2021.



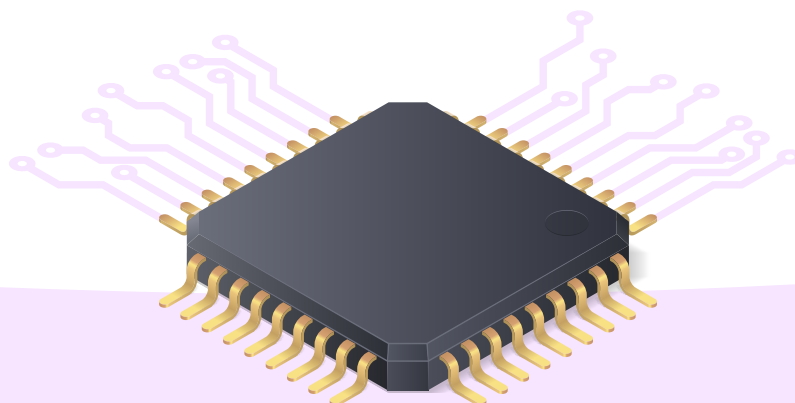
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & MACHINE LEARNING

The digital marketing industry – and much of the rest of the world, to be fair to the sector – continuously confuses artificial intelligence and machine learning, or use the terms interchangeably. This is becoming increasingly forgivable as machine learning models become more impressive. However, even the most advanced algorithms are a couple of leaps away from intelligence and what we are presented with at the moment, no matter how impressive, are still machine learning algorithms.

GPT-3 is the latest in a series of fairly rapid leaps forward, and has the potential to revolutionise the way the industry tackles large scale content production – whether that's for ads or product descriptions. The Open-AI product – which has been released on a limited beta – has proven itself capable, with human oversight, of producing content at a standard high enough for use.



Whether this happens in 2021 depends, really, on whether the GPT-3 beta program is expanded and whether a reasonably easy to use interface is developed which will allow broader access. If so, we could see a revolution in content production – allowing copywriters more time to undertake creative work while machines carry out repetitive processes.



WEARABLE TECH

With 5G set to greatly improve the speed and connectivity potential of wearable tech, and rumours of ‘Apple Glass’, the tech giant’s Lidar equipped, AR ready, prescription lens ready glasses, placing a release date between Spring of 2021 and 2023, the era of the wearable may be due at last.

There are existing use cases for industry, education and more (including AR tutorials and HUDs), but the slow uptake on glasses specifically has been caused predominately by connectivity and pricing problems, but if rumours are to be believed, the Apple Glass is likely to retail at under \$500 – which is a price within the range of some designer, non-smart, spectacles.



The reason I mention Apple is not that I expect their product to exceed the capacity of other similar products, but their design – if there’s a company that can shift wearable glass technology away from the look of the lab goggle and into something more fashionable, then I don’t know of it.

As insurance companies begin offering reduced premiums in return for the adoption of wearable health trackers, AR is increasing its number of use cases while becoming a more common occurrence in gaming, retail and more, and digital assistants are growing smarter, the overall utility of wearables is about to reach a tipping point.

While I still believe the missing piece is a sub-vocalisation device which enables voice interaction with the various devices, there has been significant progress with this – and Facebook recently filed a patent for a variation on this theme.

2021 is likely to see large increases in the prevalence of wearable tech – and you can expect to see wearable brands capitalise on what is likely to be a supercharged post-Christmas fitness push. This has obvious ramifications for eCommerce in this sector, but also for search and digital – with brands potentially facing a new screen type to optimise their sites and UX for.

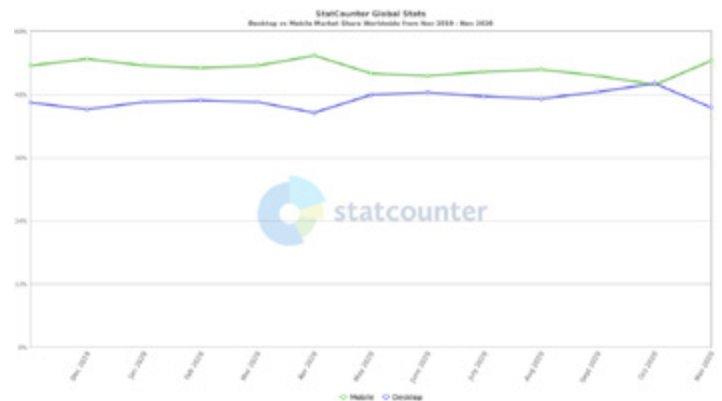
The main changes that will come as a result of this aren’t likely to be felt in 2021, but it does make sense to pay even more attention to the upcoming introduction of Core Web Vitals to the ranking calculations – as several of these factors will be as, if not more, important to any new devices and screen types.

WORKING FROM HOME

Reuters reported in October that more than 70% of 1200 CIOs surveyed had reported either an increase in productivity (48.6%) or no significant change (22.7%). With the pandemic set to extend in to the middle of 2021, and many companies looking to allow employees to continue working from home – in no small part due to this increased productivity – there are likely to be knock on effects as parts of the country wave at least a partial goodbye to the traditional 9-5.

This has obvious implications for the wider business community – and I think we'll find the drop in Zoom's share price when news of the vaccine was released will have been a little premature. There's a long way to go for meeting apps to mature, and 2021 should provide ample opportunity both for established brands to develop and for start-ups to break out.

Where it is likely to impact on search and where predictions become difficult is in the changes that will be necessary in our understanding of the return of the desktop and how we need to approach that from an advertising perspective.



Mobile devices surpassed desktop use back in around 2017, but the rise in work from home saw a brief return to parity for the two types. While instinct suggests that this is more likely a rise in desktop than a decrease in mobile use that led to this brief return to equal footing, it should be high up on the list of agency tasks to investigate how the pandemic has impacted ad performance and whether changes need to be made to capitalise.



ANTI-TRUST LAWSUITS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF US TECH BREAK-UPS

The Biden administration is almost certain to continue the ongoing anti-trust lawsuit against Google for abuse of monopoly powers in search, and the role of pro-breakup senator Elizabeth Warren yet to be decided, tech firms can expect a bumpy four years – and that could start immediately as Biden enters The White House on the 20th January 2021.

This plays in to the diversification trends we'll cover in both the organic and paid media sections, as – if the tech giants are forced to open up their respective walled gardens – we could see opportunities for challengers to gain ground and for more lawsuits to spread quickly around the world. The EU, for example, which has pursued several prominent legal cases against top tech companies, will likely be watching with interest.



While its impact on 2021 is likely to be dependent on how prominent Sanders and Warren are within the administration, there are likely to be a lot of changes to tech companies and how the digital world works during the course of Biden's first term – especially as a ballot measure similar to the EU's GDPR passed in California in November. In fact, since this section was first written, there has been a move to attempt to force Facebook to sell Instagram and WhatsApp.

PRIVACY & SECURITY

Encompassing some of the other trends – the likely continuation of working from home, the possible legislative changes and shifts in the ways and devices we search in and with. Cookies are set to be phased out by the end of 2021, for example, which will have an impact on how we build our user profiles, while the digital security sector is likely to receive a huge boost from brands looking to secure the home offices of a new remote workforce.

All of this will impact how we approach the security of our websites – whether employers are prepared to pay for static IPs or how they'll support content

creators and back-end users which, if using traditional broadband (at least in the UK) will have a dynamic IP address and require continuous updating of htaccess files. There are a lot of questions which, having anticipated a swift return to normal following the introduction of the vaccine, have yet to be answered by brands of all sizes.

Add to this the growing and seemingly competing demands for both privacy and personalisation, and we're looking at a year and more of brands needing to take a long hard look at their infrastructure – both for users and staff.

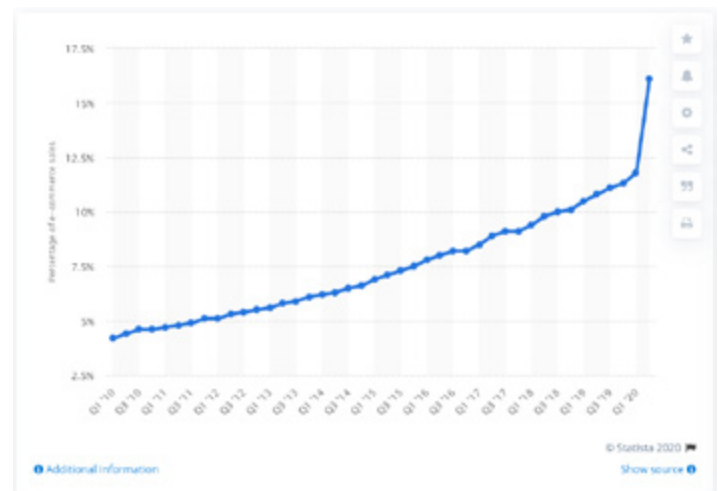
THE RISE AND RISE OF ECOMMERCE

If you can't shop at a store, you'll still buy the things you need online – this seems to be the message from 2020 as eCommerce benefited hugely from the pandemic and various local and national lockdowns. In fact, the Q1 US performance of eCommerce (which was growing steadily) is such a clear aberration that, if you were to show someone fresh back from Mars or out from under a rock where 2020 couldn't reach them, they would be able to infer that something world changing had happened.

This year must surely convince even the most reluctant sectors that online purchasing has to at least be an option. Take cars, for example, which have seen an 89% reduction in new registrations year on year – some of this will be caused by the fact that there has been a reduced need for a car throughout the pandemic, but equally there has to have been a considerable loss as the business model requiring in person purchase has been rendered unsustainable in at least the short term.

In fact, there has been a massive increase in the second-hand market – which is much more open to online sales, and even the Wallstreet Journal began covering the need to move online in June 2020 in an article which carried the following quote:

I truly believe we sold more cars last month because we're finally utilizing technology more efficiently[.]



SEO TRENDS

If there's one thing that brands should have taken from this year, it should be the importance of their online presence. With many environmental scientists, climatologists and global health experts predicting that this may just be the first in a series of deadly pandemics necessitating lockdowns and similar restrictive precautions, brands should be taking their digital offering even more seriously. Combined with the addition of user experience (UX) factors as ranking signals, the ability of brands to provide a positive UX should be of paramount importance.



CORE WEB VITALS (CWV)

Core web vitals are a series of user focused metrics which measure loading, interactivity, and visual stability.



Google defines these metrics as following:

- Largest Contentful Paint (LCP): measures loading performance. To provide a good user experience, LCP should occur within 2.5 seconds of when the page first starts loading.
- First Input Delay (FID): measures interactivity. To provide a good user experience, pages should have an FID of less than 100 milliseconds.
- Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS): measures visual stability. To provide a good user experience, pages should maintain a CLS of less than 0.1.

While it may not have the immediate impact of the earlier named updates, this change in ranking factors will likely increase in importance over the next few years. That doesn't mean brands can wait, however!

Charlotte Chapman –
Head of Technical SEO



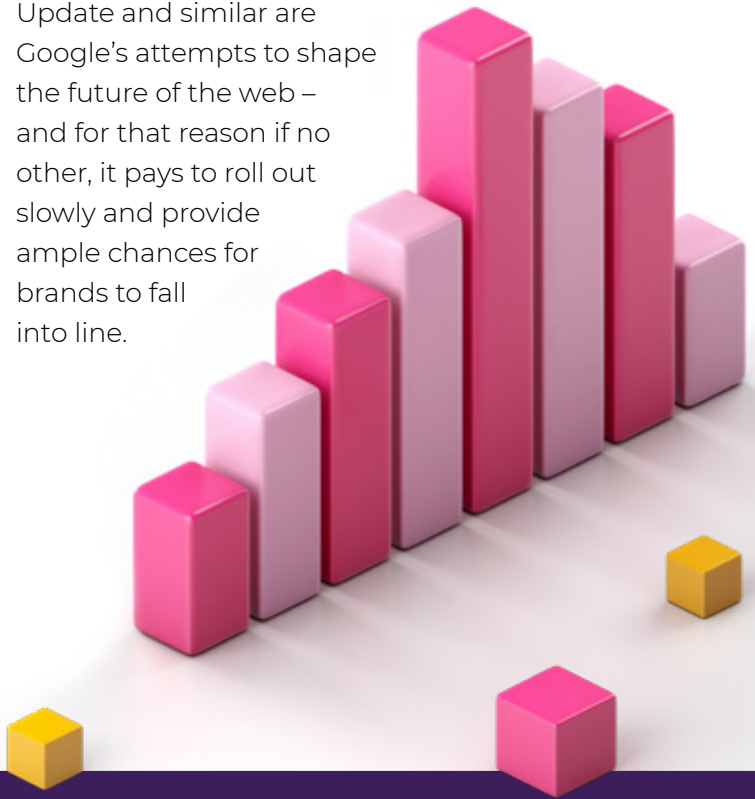
Why are CWV important for 2021

Earlier in 2020, Google announced that they would be adding CWV to the ranking signals in 2021, they recently confirmed a roll out date of May 2021, meaning that the first confirmed algorithm update of 2021 has already been announced.

While this has the potential to make a huge difference to the SERPs, in recent history Google has tended to roll out such changes relatively slowly (see the move to mobile and the addition of speed) and then increase the weighting over time.

While there has been no information released on how many sites or the percentage of searches that they expect these changes to impact (when is there ever!), there is little reason to believe that a huge initial shift in rankings is desirable to Google for updates of this nature.

While some updates – for example those tackling spam, dishonesty, manipulation or for EAT – there is ample reason for them to want the change to be immediate (sites practicing these tactics need to be ‘punished’ and before tactics adapt), changes such as the Mobile Friendly update, the Speed Update and similar are Google’s attempts to shape the future of the web – and for that reason if no other, it pays to roll out slowly and provide ample chances for brands to fall into line.



Likely impact in 2021

At first, it's likely that all but the worst examples will see minimal change as a result of the rollout – though, as some of those with awful CLS tend to be ad-funded and that could cause problems for some news organisations and other sites which drop ads in to the load after the content (how many times have you accidentally clicked an ad because of a sudden layout shift?).

That being said, this will have significant impact as time passes – and the brands that get on top of this early are going to be the ones that see the benefits. If you're competing for top ten positions for trophy keywords, or even particularly competitive high traffic terms, this kind of change could be the deciding factor in whether you're able to outperform a competitor.

Google isn't likely to lose it's market share to a competitor any time soon, but there may be a few upsets on the cards depending on how some legal cases go.

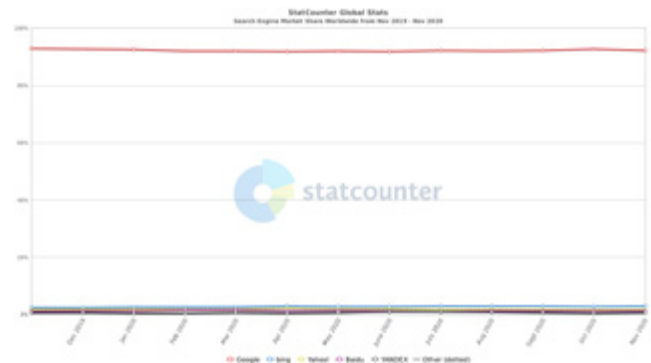
Charlotte Chapman – Head of Technical SEO



APPLE SEARCH & DIVERSIFICATION

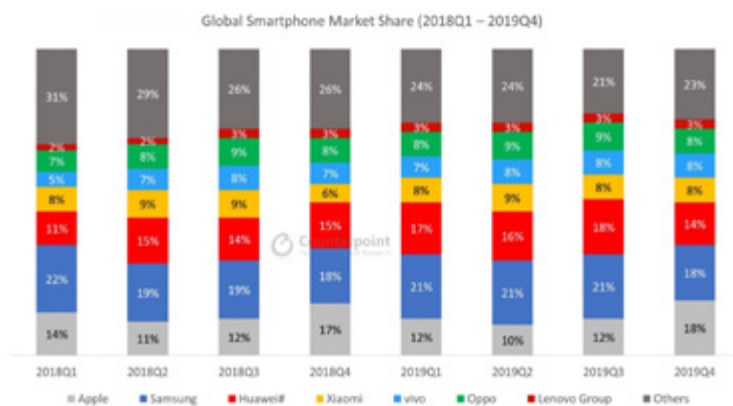
Will Apple Search dethrone Google? No. Next section...

Well, okay, it's not quite that simple. Google and Microsoft have been competing to be the default search engine for Apple devices for more than a decade – and both have held the position at one time or another, and Google has been paying a reported \$12 Bn a year for the privilege. There's a reason they do that – and it's not because they fear the ability of Apple to challenge them in search.



With a lot of search, understandably, focused on the search engine with a >90%, any significant change in the landscape will likely cause more of a change to search and digital marketing than the introduction of CWV as a ranking signal.

Whether this will have any major impact on 2021 remains to be seen – these things take time, but we should certainly see some indications throughout the year. While Asia and Eurasia have been regions with a strong local presence in search, Baidu and Yandex are still falling short of 2% globally – how will the possibility of Baidu and Yandex powered iPhones change that?



The 11.8% share of the global market for mobile devices (down from 20% pre-pandemic) represents a huge share of mobile search and with the launch of Apple Search likely to have been at least partially driven by the monopoly investigation in to Google, this is a bit of a chicken and egg situation – did they announce a search product because they were about to need one, or because they wanted one?

However, as the lawsuits begin to mount up and – as mentioned in the previous chapter – with there being a significant proportion of the Democratic party in the US seemingly convinced by arguments about the need to break up tech giants, there may well be a growing need to diversify our thought as an industry.

In addition, Microsoft has been making huge progress with the semantic web, visual and image search, and with natural language processing – some of the most important search trends for the mid-term. The ability for them to grow their userbase in the US and Europe, and consequently their profitability could potentially be massive.

Likely impact in 2021

Again, there's only a remote possibility that this will have a major impact on SEO in general, but it is a trend well worth SEOs keeping at the forefront of their minds. It may be that SEO can continue to deal primarily with strategies aimed at improving rankings and traffic from Google, but it is well worthwhile spending some time in 2021 familiarising ourselves with the workings of other search engines – as we could come to need them a lot more in coming years.

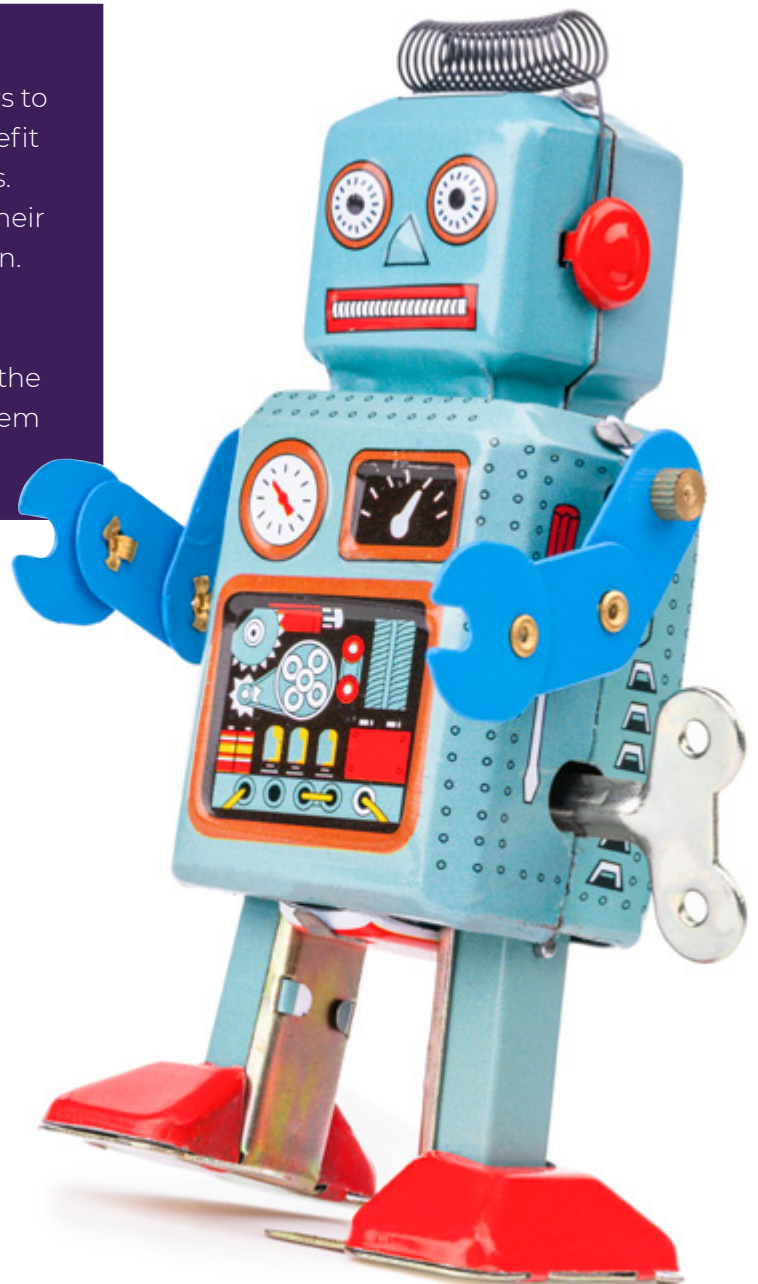
AUTOMATION

Automation is always trending upward – and the ability of less experienced SEOs to complete complex tasks grows along with it. It's for this reason that log file analysis isn't as common – although it can still offer insights that the tools which replaced it can miss. However, as search engines have advanced and the techniques that SEOs use have also developed, this automation has shifted focus.

The ever-growing use of Python and other languages, while sometimes dismissed by big names in the industry, is providing short-cuts for tasks that either took a long time, or were simply avoided. This is combined with the improving range of reports offered by tools such as SEMrush, Screaming Frog, Ahrefs and more, which are improving their ability to detect and diagnose schema issues and run content analysis all reduce the manual requirement of SEO and, therefore, offer opportunities to improve performance as well as efficiency.

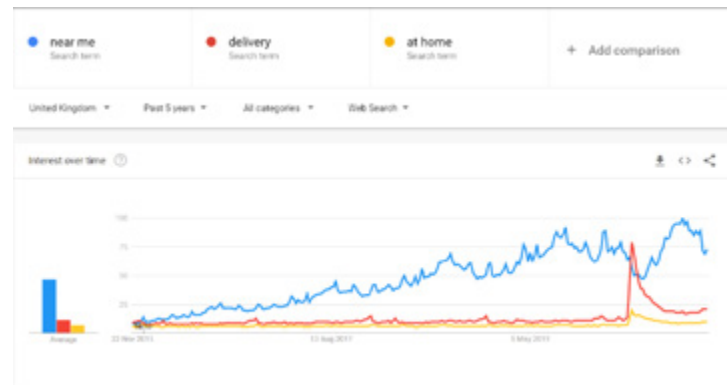
Likely impact in 2021

While these improvements can lower the barriers to entry for junior team members – their main benefit will be in freeing up the time of your senior SEOs. What is vital, however, is not to simply increase their workload, but to allow them to join this revolution. Let your team invest the hours saved in learning. It has been this approach that has led to the improvements so far, but only your team knows the thing that will make the biggest difference to them – let them make it.

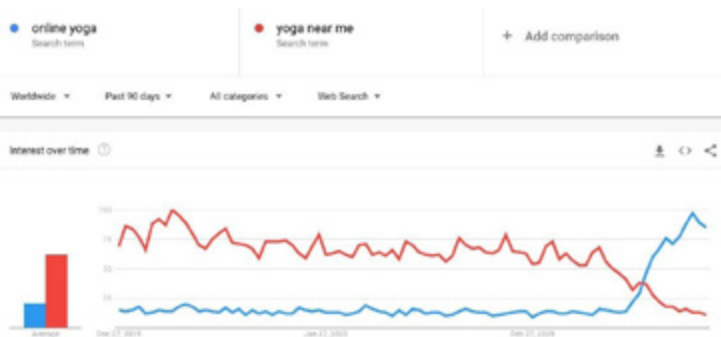


HOW WE'RE SEARCHING

Just as the devices we're searching with have changed since the beginning of 2020, the way we search is also changing. Take the below, for example – 'near me' searches have risen consistently for five years, but obviously not this year. Delivery is something we've taken for granted with eCommerce in general, but we've searched far more for other delivery types (and even after the initial lockdown, this didn't return to pre-pandemic levels), while we've also been looking far more for things to do 'at home'.



This is just an indication, however – there have been similar switches and shifts across the majority of verticals and while we can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief that the vaccines will arrive within the timescale we've been predicting, we still have months ahead of partial and full lockdowns and the chance that we may see permanent shifts in expectations and search patterns.



Necessary Action for 2021

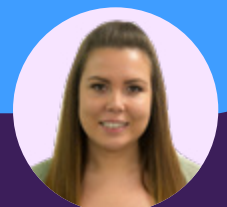
Brands need to re-examine how users are looking for and finding their site. There will certainly be new key terms emerging that will deliver traffic and it will be important to get in at the ground floor to ensure they are not lost to the competition.

For that reason, a full keyword review needs to be conducted and that it likely going to require a content project and maybe even a shift of targeting for page titles and meta descriptions for existing pages as well as tweaks to existing content.

While there is an inertia that develops in big brands, and there seems to have been a hope that things will just return to normal once the vaccine is available to the general public, there is ample opportunity for agile brands to steal a step on their competition.

While it may seem obvious, machine learning algorithms need to learn – and we need to teach them what great websites look like. Part of how we do that is with structured data.

Charlotte Chapman –
Head of Technical SEO



SEMANTIC SEO & KNOWLEDGE GRAPHS

The more faith Google and other search engines place in machine learning, the more SEOs need to be able to satisfy what it's looking for. BERT – which is the particular NLP algorithm used by Google – is now a part of the process of returning virtually every search result, and Microsoft has exclusively licensed the even more powerful GPT-3 from OpenAI, but even with these tools, the search engines will require additional information layers for the time being.

This is where structured data and knowledge graphs come in – while we've been firm believers in the Schema.org project for some time, there seems to be a tipping point approaching both in general understanding and in ease of adoption. While the tools available are far from perfect, they are a good start – and if your competition isn't making that start, it might just be enough.

The NLP that search engines are using may help them to read the content on your site, but structured data will help them to understand it, and that is increasingly important as the technology matures.

The knowledge graph, therefore, becomes of paramount importance. The knowledge graph is how your information connects with the wider web, and it is this that you need to be thinking about. Adding structured data to your site needs to be part of the process, but it needs to be preceded by a strategy development process – you need to know how your data relates to the web and plan how you can make the link to it.



Necessary Action for 2021

By now, you should have at least some schema on your site – most web-developers will throw in org schema and maybe website schema while building the site, but that is simply not enough. SEOs will need to begin planning their schema implementation rather than adding it ad hoc to websites when they get the chance.

The way search engines are developing is only going to speed up as we trust more of its refinement to machine learning – while we're some way of the point of the singularity, it is in

accordance with the theory that machines will continually improve their own performance until the point at which we see what is commonly referred to as an 'intelligence explosion'.

While the various weightings and measurement of core ranking factors is likely to vary, maybe wildly, in the course of 2021, one thing will remain fairly stable – and that is the need for machines to require this second information layer to understand your content, and SEOs will need to take it a lot more seriously.

PAID MEDIA TRENDS

Google seems to have decided to make 2021 the year they thoroughly destroy their relationship with paid media professionals. With Premier Partner status set to rely upon accepting, without question, 80% of their recommendations, their move to hide auto-enrolment into various smart bidding options (including adding keywords and even ads to campaigns), there is likely to be a bit of bad blood when it comes to paid search. How that impacts spend and performance is difficult to predict, but it should certainly be an interesting year.

The end is in sight for third-party cookies, so brands need to start finding solutions straight away to avoid losing out to the competition.

Will Dixon – Senior Paid Media Strategist



END OF THIRD-PARTY COOKIES ON CHROME

Third party cookies have been the driving force behind the success of many of the big names in tech, so it may surprise some people that Google has decided to phase out third party cookies on Chrome early – by the end of 2021 according to their announcement – until you realise that it's likely to hamper competition.

Nevertheless, with the end of third-party cookies in sight, what remains to be seen is whether a consensus emerges around what comes next for advertising. Google, for example, is to opt for a browser-based mechanism as part of its Privacy Sandbox, but as yet there is no firm solution in place to tackle things such as personalisation, segmentation and more besides.

What may prove to be useful is the 'Federative Learning' process that Google has been working on:

"In federated optimization, the devices are used as compute nodes performing computation on their local data in order to update a global model. We suppose that we have extremely large number of devices in the network --- as many as the number of users of a given service, each of which has only a tiny fraction of the total data available. In particular, we expect the number of data points available locally to be much smaller than the number of devices. Additionally, since different users generate data with different patterns, it is reasonable to assume that no device has a representative sample of the overall distribution.

We show that existing algorithms are not suitable for this setting, and propose a new algorithm which shows encouraging experimental results for sparse convex problems. This work also sets a path for future research needed in the context of federated optimization."



By treating user devices as nodes which train the algorithm before uploading its learnings, no personal data is kept anywhere – meaning that there is no intrusion in to any user's privacy while at the same time the algorithm is constantly learning which behaviour leads to what action, which sites are indicative of what other interests and constantly refine a predictive model.

If this is applied to paid search and to browsers, then your interaction with the internet may not teach a specific service provider about you personally, or allow them to build a named profile of you, but it will teach a machine learning algorithm about people like you who do what you do – allowing for a similar, if not improved, level of personalisation without the need for cookies or the transfer of any personal data. It will also, completely coincidentally of course, provide a significant barrier to entry for competitors.

Deloitte has a slightly less cynical view of the coming change:

“Ultimately, I believe that the answer isn't simply to find new ways to do the same things. It's time for brands to collaborate with end users and consumers to create a more personalized, human online experience combined with greater control, transparency and respect for privacy.”

Which sounds great – and, I fear, will ultimately be almost entirely inaccurate barring the fact that it will be almost this exact description used to describe whichever dystopian system is actually being used.

That being said, there are suggestions about walled gardens and more efficient use of existing data that could be really useful.

Likely impact in 2021

2021 will be a year of preparation in this regard – brands, agencies, all paid search advertisers need to be thinking about how they approach the cookieless world – whether they are going to wait for Google to reveal its answer, look for potential data partners or tools, begin implementing required sign-in to aid personalisation, or just move to a more generic and broad style of advertising – similar to how brands operate on traditional media platforms like television, radio and newspapers.

FIRST PARTY DATA

This brings us to the need to make the most of first party data – a point made in the Deloitte article linked to previously. While there is an end in sight for third-party cookies, the same does not apply to first party cookies – which means that it is still possible for publishers to build profiles of their users.

As first-party cookies are not automatically blocked by browsers (unlike third-party cookies which are blocked by Firefox, Safari and, soon, Chrome), publishers can implement cookies which allow them to build a profile of their audience which will allow them to serve relevant ads. In a whitepaper by Digiday, Director of Data Partnerships at BuzzFeed Josh Peters states:

“[The] best course of action for publishers is to focus on first-party data strategy and find the tools to help them do so. This way, publishers can navigate this privacy-focused future, separate themselves from the effects of the crackdown on third parties, and take the opportunity to not only survive, but thrive as the third-party cookie crumbles.”

While it pains me to quote any member of the evil empire, News Corp’s Global Head of Programmatic, Chris Guenther, had a few good points when he said:

“We’re the holders of the [reader] relationship [...] The [data privacy] regulatory environment and the moves of the browsers have highlighted how important it is to embrace that stewardship and ensure our users come to us.”

Of course, the reverse is also true – and paid media teams will need to start building relationships with specific publishers if they want to make the most of their ad campaigns.

Likely impact in 2021

The end of third-party cookies on Chrome isn't due until the very end of 2021, so it is unlikely there'll be any impact on either the publisher or advertiser side until after that, but publishers should nevertheless begin implementing a first-party cookie strategy in preparation for it, while advertisers should begin building lists of publishers and start reaching out to find their plans for it.

Automation is here to stay, and Google and the other major search engines are going to continue imposing machine learning – that leaves us having to find ways to ensure performance doesn't dip and workarounds to boost performance where it does.

Will Dixon –
Senior Paid Media Strategist

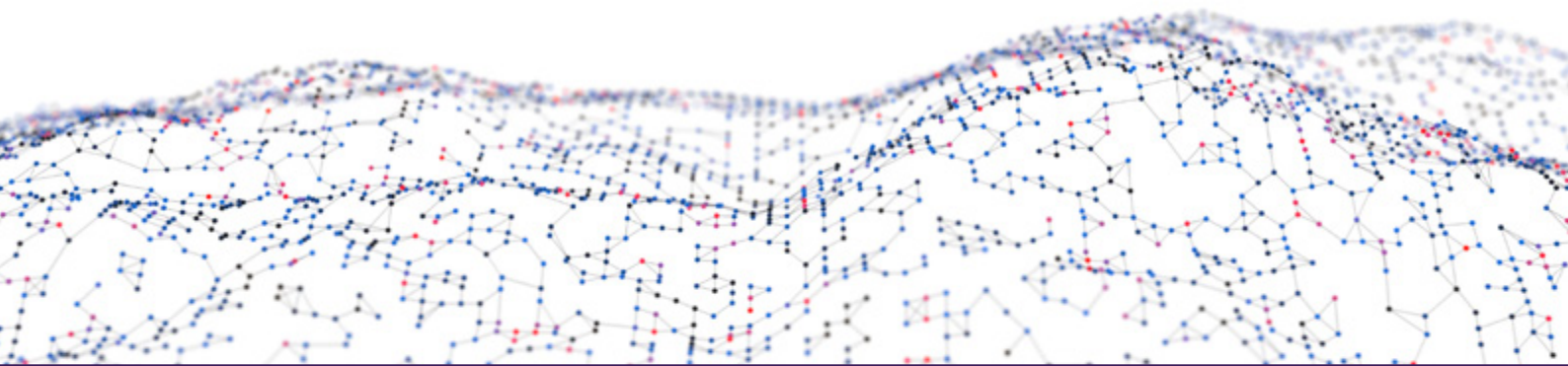


SMART BIDDING

As alluded to in the introduction, there are a number of changes to paid search that are unpopular with the industry in general – with Premier Partner status requiring 80% adoption of recommendations and auto enrolment in the Auto Applied Recommendations (AAR) programme. Google has been pushing their automation for some time now and this is one of the firmest yet shoves yet.

As mentioned elsewhere, there's a huge imbalance of power here – the search engine, which accounts for more than 90% of all search, really doesn't have much competition for paid search budgets, so there really is nowhere people can go as yet if they want to protest such decisions.

We can assume, therefore, that automation is here to stay – which means that paid search professionals really have little choice than to adapt. That is not to say they need to simply accept Google's say so and give in – they will need to better understand how these machine learning systems are operating, keep track of the changes that are being made and start ensuring that their accounts don't become 'garbage in, garbage out' machine.



Required actions in 2021

Brands will need to ensure that they are only feeding the best data into their Ads accounts and coming up with methods to track the changes that are being made to the account both to ensure there are no detrimental changes being made to the account and also to diagnose whether there are reasons the algorithm is making the changes it is.

Machine learning – as we know from widely publicised issues with various ML models and bias. The best paid search accounts may be controlled by machine learning, but they will be closely monitored by humans.

The end is in sight for third-party cookies, so brands need to start finding solutions straight away to avoid losing out to the competition.

Will Dixon – Senior Paid Media Strategist



DIVERSIFICATION

One of the consequences of disempowering paid search experts is that there is growing talk of diversifying the platforms brands are spending on. As mentioned previously, it's questionable whether this will happen as the majority of brands and account managers have become entrenched within the Google ecosphere.

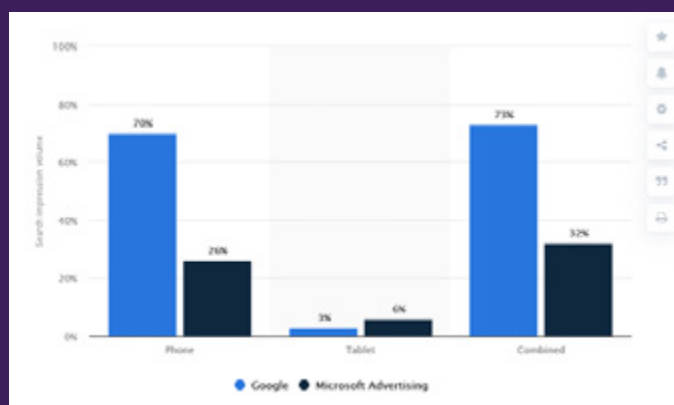
However, while – as mentioned earlier – there are methods to retain visibility, if not control, the reason for diversification isn't simply because

of the recent announcements by Google. Or at least not entirely. There is also a need to evaluate which platforms are the right ones for a brand's messaging.

If 2020 has taught us anything more than that our houses have more cobwebs than we'd have expected, it's that many brands have lost a step when it comes to agility and a sudden change in behaviour is easier to adapt to if your media mix is more diverse.

Required actions in 2021

2021 is likely to be a year of experimentation across the digital marketing industry, and mixing things up with ad platforms should be on the list for paid media professionals in every vertical. While the industry has become reliant on Google as the primary platform, there has been too little ongoing experimentation with emerging platforms. However, with ad and eCommerce options maturing across social and the way we search changing, there needs to be a re-examination – even when performance is good.



The above, for example, shows the clicks on ads as a result of mobile searches in the third quarter of 2020 – Microsoft tends not to be a default search engine for mobile, so this figure surprised me

a little, and with the various lawsuits underway regarding mobile search engines, Microsoft's share of overall searches is likely to increase (perhaps not by much, but even a small gain here is big numbers), so how much mobile targeting will brands need if they are using Microsoft Ads, and if they aren't – should they consider experimenting with their budgets.

Industry and demographic also a growing concern – Amazon is slowly increasing its share of all shopping searches, while YouTube has grown its over-55 demographic and various social media platforms have experienced a 2020 surge in active users.

While it may be the case for many that Google is the right platform for ad spend, it should no longer be viewed as a certainty without testing – and it's this testing that should experience growth in 2021.

MOBILE

The mobile friendly update went some way to resolving a lot of the issues with the mobile web, and it's possible that the addition of Core Web Vitals to the confirmed ranking signals will help further, but while progress has been made, there is still much further to go.

While this is perhaps a wider digital marketing issue, the reason I've placed it in the paid search section is due to the improved ability to directly tackle some of the issues. Take cart abandonment, for example, which is far higher on mobile devices than on desktop. Though some of this could be put down to the tendency by users to browse on their mobile phones, the difference is so substantial as to indicate that there are also contributing underlying issue.

There are obviously changes that will need to be made by web developers and members of other teams in order to optimise for mobile devices, with paid media, there is the option to specifically target these users and to test with greater precision the various factors that may be contributing to these numbers.

In addition to this, there's the fact that mobile eCommerce is increasing its share of the total eCommerce market – having trebled in the four years to 2020, growing from just under one to just under three trillion dollars, which means that however seriously we have taken mobile so far, we should be seeing what else we can do.



BUYER'S JOURNEY

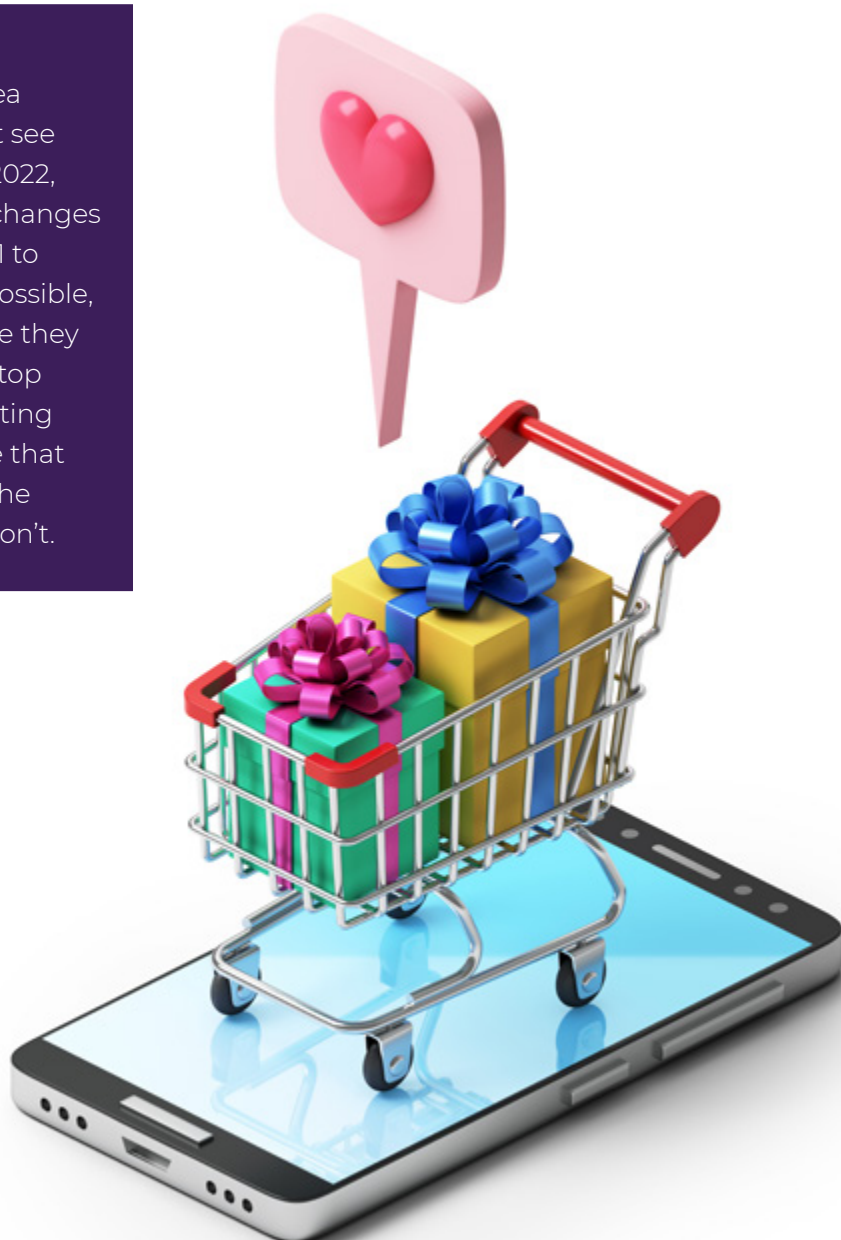
All of this leads inexorably to the need to improve our understanding of the buyer's journey. This could really have been on every trend report for a decade, but with more time spent online and spent in more places, we need to make sure that we're reaching people where they are – both literally and figuratively, from device to platform to physical location.

The reasons for this are manifold – we're not going to have the same level of targeting once third-

party cookies are stopped (at least for a while), nor are we going to have the same control over our ads with the increasing reliance on machine learning. Understanding our buyer's journey will allow us to better limit the automation's impact by ensuring that our bid modifiers are used properly, that our landing pages are catering to the right audience, that we're using the right platforms – whether that's social, search or otherwise – to reach buyers as our information reduces.

Required Action in 2021

Again, the action we need to take in this area comes down to research. While we may not see the impact of the shift in paid search until 2022, the people that manage to weather these changes the best are going to be those that use 2021 to conduct as much testing and research as possible, build up as much data as possible, to ensure they are prepared for the changes. We need to stop putting off conversion rate optimisation testing and landing page redesigns and make sure that everything is prepared for 2022 which has the potential to be a tough one for those that don't.



SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

Social media has taken a huge step up in the consciousness of many marketers this year and we expect a consequent rise in social media budgets for 2021. Not only are there new selling options on the way, there is also an argument from experience available that wasn't there before – brands which took political stands in 2020 include everything from Nike (who have done so before) to Ben & Jerry's ice cream – and contrary to the 'go woke go broke' proclamations, sales of Ben & Jerry's saw Unilever massively outperform expectations.



REMIXING

Its rise in 2020 hasn't been exactly meteoric, but it has been significant enough to catch the eye of various outlets and earn GoMeta (parent company of a remixing app Koji) a number of mentions in major business outlets – including featuring in Hubspot's 2021 Social Media Trends report.

Essentially remixing seems to be a corporate take on traditional meme culture – providing a more polished final result than the traditional social media meme, but following the same rules. The concept insofar as it may apply to 2021 is to provide an audience with a meme template, be that a video, games, AR or any other content type and encouraging users to create their own interpretations.

Hubspot says the following in their report:

"This new creativity will be embraced by brands and social media channels alike. Companies will look to provide users with more creative outlets, arming them with templates, tools, and assets to create original content.

While more apps, and the larger social platforms, will adapt to meet these demands. And to counteract rising competitors. Offering other outlets for users to create beyond video—expect to see a greater number of games, 3D pics, and even VR and AR user-generated content led by Smartphone advances.

Likely impact in 2021

I'm generally dubious about trends like these – they're unreliable even for large brands and can backfire spectacularly more often than we'd like (leading to conspiracy theories about brands fostering backlashes to increase reach). Then Kantar Media CEO, Andy Brown was quoted in Marketing week back in 2017 on the subject of pulled adverts stating:

"They [consumers] are smart and quite cynical, and they very quickly see whether a brand is being authentic in its association with a social cause. And if they see through it the negatives could be quite significant"

While it's possible we'll see more of the 'remixing is the new UGC' takes, its actual impact is likely to be restricted to brands that can afford to take the risk. Periods of recession – which we're likely to enjoy more of in 2021 often see brands become more risk averse and more likely to reduce ad budgets (though research suggests the opposite is better). As such, we can probably expect minimal uptake in 2021, with big brands seeing mixed results, some viral success stories and, maybe, a lot of imitation in the following year.

We expect the types of influencer used by brands to change on social media. With areas like gaming and e-sports taking over, brands will be looking at ways to work with this type of influencer rather than the traditional route of bloggers, fashion YouTubers or reality television stars.

Adam McKinley – Head of Social



OPTIMISM

With politicians keen to encourage any kind of economic growth on both sides of the Atlantic following the end of the Trump administrations and, all things being well, in the wake of the covid vaccine rollout, we can expect an increase in 'everything is fine now' messaging from certain sectors – particularly finance, although there will be plenty of industries keen to take an optimistic approach to their social media messaging.

Likely impact in 2021

We'll touch on this a little more in the next section (and did a little in the previous), but the impact here is hugely dependent on both how sincere the messaging is, and how well it's borne out by reality. While the vaccine roll-out and end of lockdowns should certainly add a little buoyancy to public mood, it will depend on how deep the recession bites in the meantime how much that will matter.



MEANINGFUL

Another trend picked up by Hubspot's report – and mentioned earlier – is the need to connect with consumers where they are on the issues that matter to them. While taking a stand on issues is tricky ground to traverse, it's something that can work as long as there is sincerity.



Generation Z has had it particularly tough, and has already lived through the most severe recession in a hundred years and is currently going through one even more severe. They have had their education, career and lives interrupted by a global pandemic and all the while, as a backdrop, there has been a level of social and political unrest equivalent to that of the 1960s, with mass movements springing up globally around issues of social justice, environmentalism, mental health and more.

In January 2019, Morgan Stanley was predicting a boom time as Gen-Z took its place in the workforce, indicating that they could overcome the economic drag caused by the decreasing productivity and economic activity of the Boomers. Obviously, that now seems like an exercise in mindless optimism, but it doesn't change the fact that many brands have to look to Gen Y & Z as the future of their business and that means they're going to need to understand and cater to what is important to them.

Likely impact in 2021

As mentioned in the intro to this section, there have been brands dipping their toes into the water of purpose driven marketing (Hotjar, in the digital marketing sphere, for example, denied its services to the Trump campaign) and while it is unlikely to surpass 'brand' as the key marketing target for 2021, there will be plenty of brands keen to take a stand on an issue. How many of them will be Pepsi Kendal Jenner ads and how many will be genuine remains to be seen – but such things need to be driven by the c-suite and not the marketing department.

For 2021, people will be a lot more conscious to how brands react to global issues on social media and we feel they will almost expect brands to use the platforms in a conversational manner/ more human like, updating on every aspect of the brand rather than just promoting products etc.

Adam McKinley – Head of Social



NOSTALGIA

While some brands may try to choose an optimistic portrayal of the future, for others it'll be attractive to look backward. While this has always been a marketing technique, times of recession often see increases in nostalgia led content. Hark back to the before times of 2009 when we assumed we were suffering through a once in a generation recession – when The New York Times published a piece called Warm and Fuzzy Makes a Comeback which dealt with precisely this tendency and carried the following:

“In a time of anxiety, people are seeking out brands they're comfortable with and they can trust,”



Likely impact in 2021

We'll see throw-back packaging, slogans, adverts and influencers. The human tendency to look back with fondness on the past is well documented – Proust alone added seven volumes – so this is one of the trends I'm most convinced will come to pass. For that reason, it may be an idea to get on the phone to Timmy Mallet's agent now, before Itsy Bitsy hits number one and he's too busy to promote your products.

Nostalgia marketing began to see growth in 2020, and will continue in 2021. An effective technique for engagement is to inspire people to remember the 'good times' even when they seem to be elusive at the moment.

Adam McKinley – Head of Social



INSTAGRAM SHOPPING

Instagram Shopping launched in November 2020 in the UK and it has the potential to be huge. While Pinterest has offered a shopping experience for some time, Instagram's active user numbers and its demographic makeup mean that it could be ideal for eCommerce. I have not come across any numbers from the US launch yet, but parent company Facebook are expecting to generate \$30Bn from the exercise, which suggests they have reason to believe there will be good adoption.

In truth, for its users, Instagram is already an integral part of the shopping process – and, like Pinterest – the visual nature of the platform makes it an ideal storefront for eCommerce brands. In addition, the relative ease of setup could see small independent businesses add Instagram as a selling platform in areas that were dominated by Etsy.

Likely impact in 2021

2021 is likely to be a rough year for all businesses and eCommerce brands could see this as an excellent opportunity to boost revenue through a novel platform. As such I'd expect there to be a quick buy in and for Facebook to get close to their target – whether this translates for the brands using it is the issue – for some, the additional time may prove too much, but overall Instagram is likely to be an even bigger revenue driver for some brands next year.



CONTENT MARKETING TRENDS

As an industry – digital or otherwise - there's a consensus that a pivot to brand building is recommended for 2021. This obviously means different things for different marketing teams – for content it means a move to build consumer trust and confidence, providing content that satisfies consumer needs and develops relationships.

For this section, based on the recommendations of our head of campaign outreach, we'll go through some methods of achieving the main goal of content marketing for 2021 – as the major trend will be in brands looking for new ways to build brand recognition and relationships.

2020 has been a year like no other, filled with uncertainty and time away from loved ones. The brands that have shown compassion for customers and employees will be the ones to succeed in 2021. Brands have a lot of work to do to build consumer confidence and encourage people to spend their hard-earned money with them during an economic downturn. This can be assisted with a focus on brand and relationship building content marketing in early 2021.

Sophie Edwards – Head of Campaign Outreach



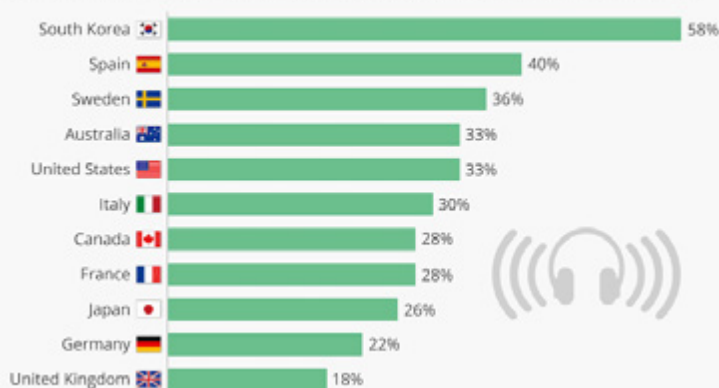
PODCASTS

Underused by brands despite their popularity, podcasts have yet to reach the peak of their popularity. The UK is lagging behind most western countries at the moment, but that may have something to do with the lack of relevant content, with much UK content provided by the BBC while independent UK content is more difficult to come by.

This provides brands with an opportunity, however, to either fund independent creators, or to provide UK consumers with something unique and enjoyable to help get them through what is likely to be a tricky year.

The State of Podcasting

% of respondents in selected countries who listened to any podcast in the past month



Especially popular with consumers as they are convenient and can be listened to anywhere from the gym to at your desk, a podcast can be anything your brand wants, whether or not it's related to your core service or products – and if it is, you can have special guests such as industry experts and even customers themselves.

Sophie Edwards – Head of Campaign Outreach



UGC

We've mentioned this before in the social media remixing section, but while UGC can have its pitfalls, it can be a really useful content marketing method if the right precautions are taken to limit the potential for misuse.

Again, as the primary requirement for content in the coming year is to build brand recognition, trust and confidence, reaching out to consumers in this way can be a fantastic method of spreading a little joy and building relationships. Make such interactions fun, use them as competition entries so there's an exchange of value, but most of all – focus on the consumer.

People love to be featured by brands, and this has never been simpler with Instagram stories and the creation of reactive content.

Sophie Edwards –
Head of Campaign Outreach



YOUTUBE

YouTube videos don't need to be big budget affairs, but they do need to address a genuine consumer concern or interest. Your videos need to speak to and not at your consumers for them to have any impact at all. So do your research, see what your customer base is watching and listening to and try to add to the conversation.

As with any marketing technique, insincerity is the enemy of good content and consumers will be able to tell whether or not your brand is producing content for its own sake or for theirs.

Consumers like to see the face behind the business, and video is the best way to do this. Having a presence on video can also build consumer confidence by creating a character for your brand.

Sophie Edwards –
Head of Campaign Outreach



MESSAGING STRATEGY

Just as messaging will be important to social media in 2021, it's important across your marketing mix – and it's just as important, therefore, to have a consistent brand message. Whether or not you choose to have your brand participate in the conversations that come around in 2021, it's important that all parts of the brand are singing from the same hymn sheet.

Make sure you say something meaningful and decide on a brand message so that all content has consistent messaging.

Sophie Edwards –
Head of Campaign Outreach



DIGITAL PR

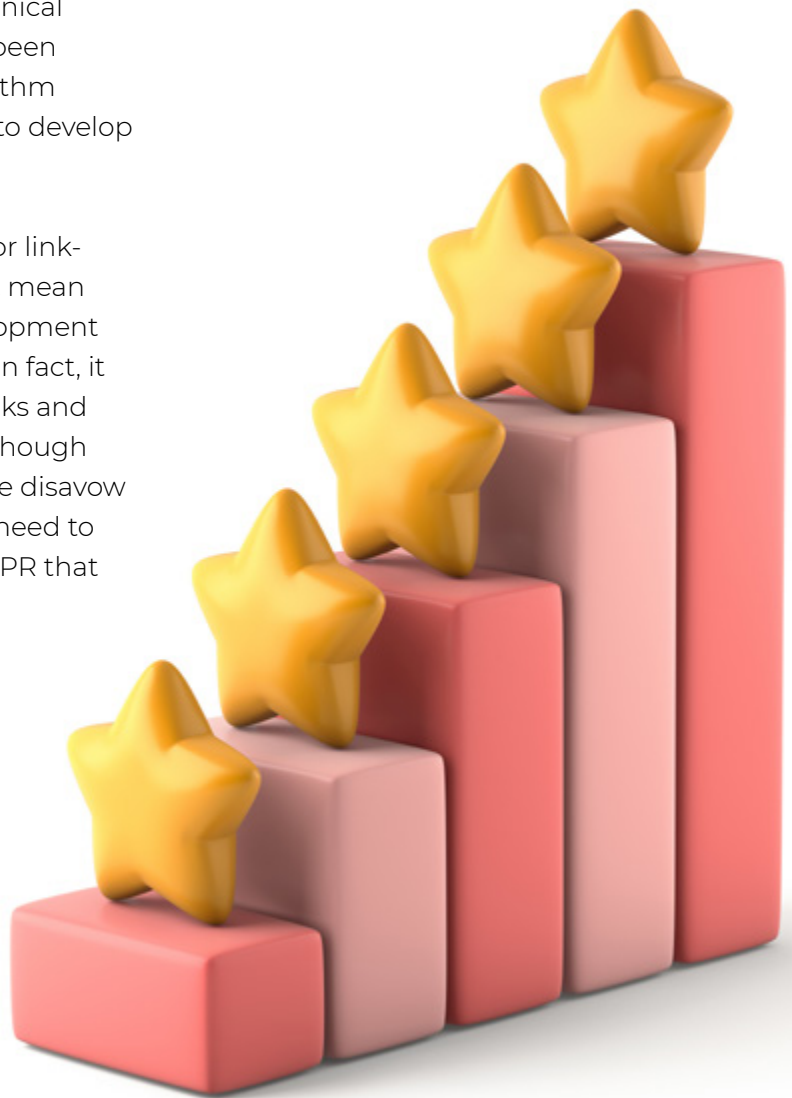
Digital PR has become increasingly important as algorithms have improved their ability to judge overall brand citations and relevance. This capacity is only going to grow over the next 12 months – and, in turn, brands are going to need to focus more than ever on digital PR exercises in order to build their brand and secure top-tier coverage.



MORE COMPETITIVE THAN EVER

As digital and traditional marketing grow closer together, we would expect the requirements for success to grow also. Just as old technical techniques for boosting rankings have been consigned to the past as Google's algorithm developed, content marketing has had to develop too.

Though there are fewer manual action or link-based penalties these days, that doesn't mean Google has neglected links in the development of the algorithms it uses to rank pages. In fact, it is just better at judging the quality of links and adjusting the weighting it gives them (though it's not perfect, so keep submitting those disavow files) and that means digital marketers need to up their game – and it's through digital PR that brands can do this.



The industry has shifted away from traditional guest posting and blogger collaborations to focus on bigger, bolder and more creative PR campaigns that will attract the attention of journalists.

More digital marketers are creating PR campaigns than ever before, which is great to see, but it also makes coming up with campaigns that cut through the noise that much harder. Content marketers will need to be on their A game in 2021, delivering world-class campaigns in order to stay ahead of the curve. This means you should put more time than ever before into research and ideation.

Andy Smith – Head of Content Marketing



INTERACTIVITY IS KEY

The more competition there is, the more you're going to have to stand out to earn that coverage. However, with so many new and emerging ways that brands can easily (or at least with reduced difficulty) present data and ideas, there should be no excuses for supplying anything less than unique.

Journalists, in an age with underfunded and understaffed newsrooms, need content – but they won't cover just anything, so make sure your content offers something unique, interactive and useful to the journalist's audience.

SEO knowledge in the media is still a little old-fashioned. There are a number of publications who fear that any external links will damage their search performance, for instance, and will avoid using them if possible. This makes link acquisition from journalists difficult unless you give them a really good reason to link.

For that reason, we expect to see more interactive campaigns in 2021, such as calculators, maps and interactive tools. Because they require readers to go to the web page itself, journalists can't avoid linking to them.

Andy Smith – Head of Content Marketing



CROSS-CHANNEL CAMPAIGNS WILL BE A MUST

With even the top news sources – the BBC, The New York Times, Der Bilde, The Guardian etc. – all using social media as a source for news stories, brands have other ways to capture the attention of journalists – and they will be using them. So, while #journorequest may remain a great start for a campaign, they will need to offer a little more in the coming year.

Pitching your campaigns directly to journalists is, of course, the main way to grab their attention. However, in an age where journalists source stories from Twitter, TikTok and Instagram just as much as a traditional press release, content marketers may wish to explore more cross-channel campaigns in 2021.

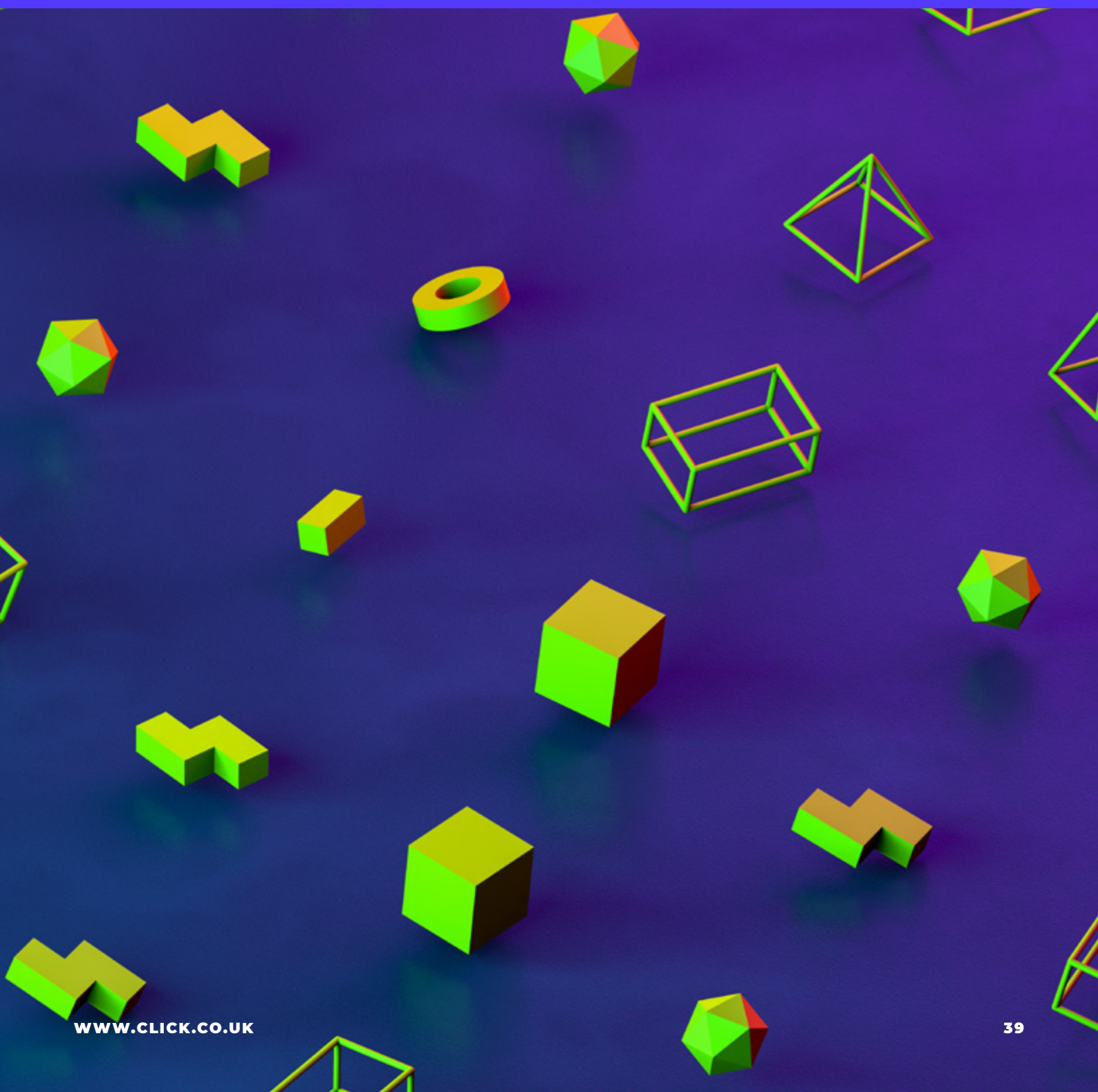
This means bolstering your digital PR efforts with a social media launch plan and utilising other platforms, from video to VR, to help your campaigns succeed.

Andy Smith –
Head of Content Marketing



DESIGN

Often overlooked, design is vital to search and digital marketing – which is an increasingly visual discipline. Just as with any other facet of marketing, design has shifts in trends, from colours to illustration styles – and brands which depend on being current, and appealing to audiences which expect it, will need to keep one eye on the way these trends progress.



NATURE INSPIRED

The outside! Remember outside? Well, so does everybody else – and that has apparently got us thinking about nature. As such, our Head of Design believes that we will see an influx of nature inspired design in the coming year as we look to bring the outside indoors as much as possible and put 2021 behind us – far, far behind us.



There's nothing quite like spending a year indoors to make the outside look incredibly appealing – so we're expecting nature and the natural to be increasingly prominent in design work across industries in 2021

Dave Ashworth –
Head of Design



CARTOON ILLUSTRATION

Cartoonish design has been a branding trend for a couple of years now, but there are likely an awful lot of people and brands alike that will be looking for a little cheerfulness in the new year and so this trend is likely to take another boost from the year behind us and the uncertainty that lies ahead. There's a year of questions coming – a year where, in the UK at least, we're going to be finding out how our supply chains will cope with Brexit and how long it will take for lockdowns to stop and vaccines to roll out – so a friendly cartoon design will start to look like a great idea and a sign of a good buy.

So much of design is influenced by changes in the social and political landscape. Cartoons in particular have flourished following hard times, we'd expect to see the same next year.

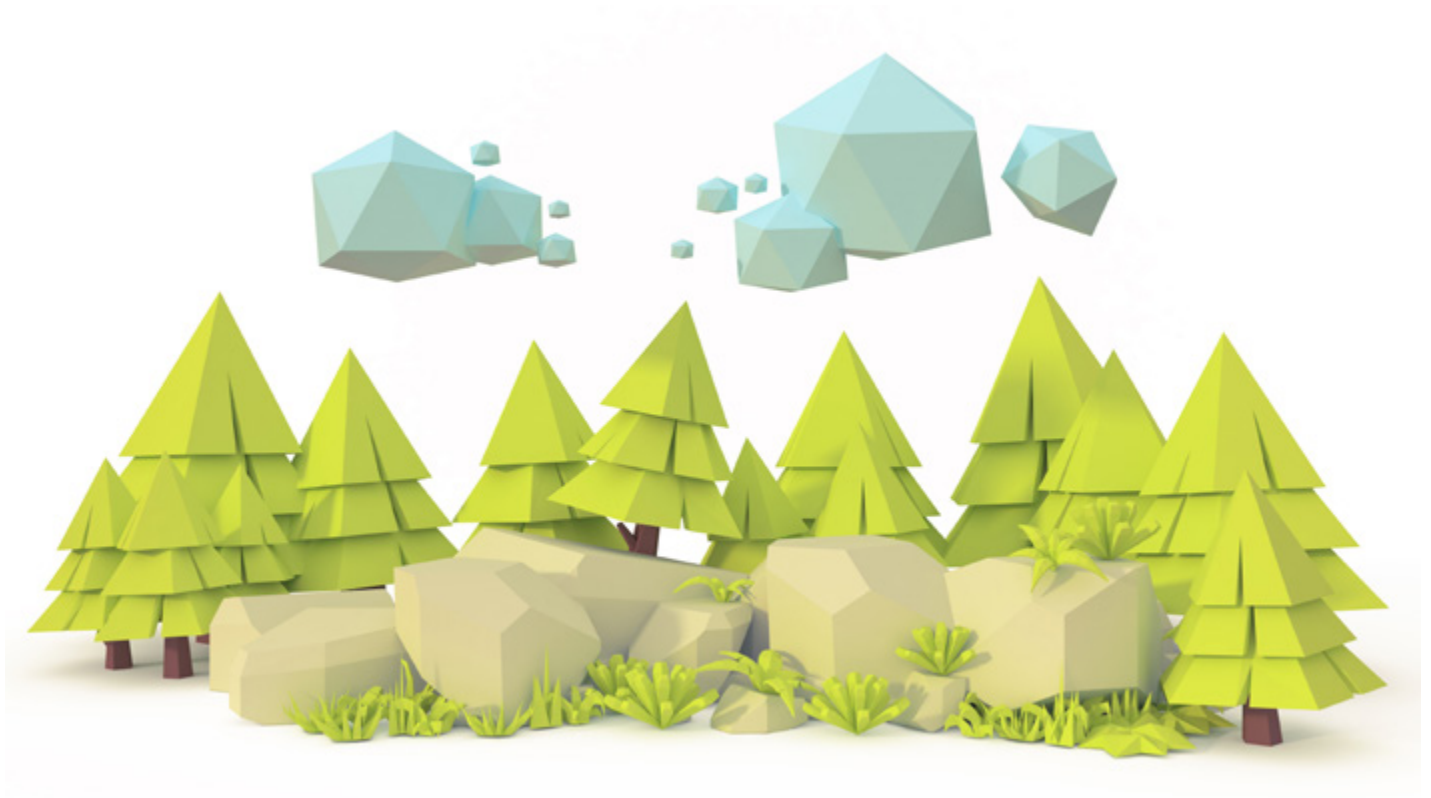
Dave Ashworth –
Head of Design



3D DESIGN

Thanks more to the changing technological rather than medical and political landscape, the rise we see in 3D design will be thanks in large part to augmented reality and virtual reality products. Brands will be increasingly capable of creating campaigns using these technologies as various SaaS companies bring cheaper, more user-friendly options for their creation to market. That's not the end of it, however, there are different ways we see this design type flourishing:

- **Voxel design:** - Another trend that's been around for a while, this 3D pixel art will also receive a boost from AR and VR as brands look for ways to make their 3D design work stand out from the rest.
- **Geometric and chaotic design:** - while the hyper-real may get the most coverage, we think we'll see an increase in 3D design which features more unique use of shape and structure to create visually striking compositions that treat reality playfully and experiment with our perceptions a little more.



With an expected increase in 3D design, there will be brands looking for ways to distinguish their particular brand – making for a boom in a variety of different 3D design types from voxel to typography, visual illusions, geometric and more. To stand out from the crowd, brands will need to find a type that not only reflects their brand but also stands out from the others.

Dave Ashworth – Head of Design



CONCLUSIONS

2021 is a year difficult to make predictions about – there are plenty of questions left from 2020 that will need to be answered in the first quarter of 2021 before we can really start to see the year take shape, but there is data from which we can draw inference – and that's what we've tried to do here.

The trends present are continuations of development over the last few years which, barring the final act of 2020 featuring cataclysmic coronal mass ejection or aliens, we're confident should play a part in the way 2021 develops for digital marketing and, therefore, for how brands can grow online.

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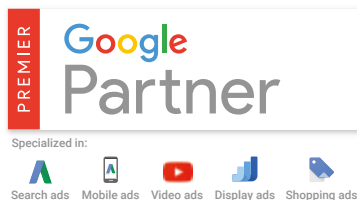
ABOUT US

Click Consult is a multi award-winning digital and search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, outreach, social media, conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and international/multilingual search marketing. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named both SEO Agency of the Year and Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020; ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, and a Microsoft Advertising Select Agency Partner.

OUR ACCREDITATIONS



HOW CAN WE HELP?

Find out what an award-winning search agency can do you for your brand.

Call us on **0330 158 8234** or send us an email via **hello@click.co.uk** and we can arrange a video consultation to help you get started with your next digital marketing project.

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