

Getting to the Root of Brand Relevance in 2020: A 360PR+ Report with Insights from Marketing Decision-Makers

INTRODUCTION

The events of 2020 have taken us all by surprise. Just prior to the pandemic, when we were all still working in offices and gathering around the conference room table to share updates on summer and fall campaign plans, 360PR+ undertook research with 300 U.S. marketing decisionmakers across a variety of industry sectors: automotive, tech, entertainment, health & wellness, food & beverage, fashion and travel.

The findings of this quantitative research, conducted by Engine Insights March 5-15, 2020, provide insight to how marketers define, build and measure brand relevance. We've culled the takeaways most important for how we move forward today, as many brands seek to regain ground lost amid the pandemic, and others consider what it means to be relevant in a more socially aware world. One thing is certain: customer expectations for brands to communicate and be present in our lives have never been higher.

To dive deeper into some of the themes of our quantitative research, we spoke directly with marketing leaders at Trek Bicycle, The Rockport Company and America's Test Kitchen (all 360 clients) about their experiences the past several months. Each candidly shared what's working internally and externally, and what they'll be leaning into in the months and year ahead.

"If there's anything these past few months have taught me, it's to stay incredibly adaptive in marketing planning and execution. One of the best muscles we've developed here at Rockport is to use real-time data to inform marketing strategies and then go and deploy them QUICKLY. I'm optimistic that if we continue to stay close to the data, and respond to what consumers want quickly, we can find opportunities to keep Rockport relevant and can grow with our current customer base."

– Lisa Laich, Chief Marketing Officer for The Rockport Company

KEY FINDINGS

We began by gauging how marketing executives view their own brand's relevance. At the time of the survey, marketers ranked their brands as being highly relevant, with an aggregate score of 8.2 on a scale of 1-10. Nearly one-third (30%) ranked their brand as "completely relevant." When asked how they've achieved relevance, half of marketers (50%) said their ability to understand the needs of their customers is the most important factor. Differentiation from other brands (31%), having a well-articulated purpose (28%), inspiring customers (21%) and affordability (19%) were cited as contributing factors, as well.

BUILDING RELEVANCE

Relatability (52%), interest (49%), and awareness (48%) are the terms marketers associate most with relevance.

The best brands build and sustain relevance amid even the most challenging economic times, with a keen understanding of their brand's role in the broader cultural landscape. Marketing leaders cite a number of attributes and practices as critical to growing and sustaining brand relevance month after month and year after year, among them:

- + Adaptability, no matter what the circumstances
- + A commitment to active listening and real-time response to customers
- + Having a defined purpose and being true to your brand

Creating more custom, branded content was cited as a high priority, a trend we expect to continue well into 2021.

"Brands that have created relatable content and an experience that motivates customers to remain brand loyal are the ones winning the fight for relevance."

– Survey Respondent

Already a multiplatform content powerhouse, America's Test Kitchen is doubling-down on its content stream by creating content that's relatable for the average consumer and available with greater frequency across its website and social channels, especially Instagram and YouTube.

“I think our cooks like to see other real cooks in their kitchen. I’ve been doing a series of Instagram stories every week from my garden that starts out with what I’m picking in my garden and then comes back into the kitchen.”

– Jack Bishop, Chief Creative Officer, America’s Test Kitchen

Brands have taken steps to produce content that’s more inclusive. Rockport has partnered with Black professionals and social influencers for its Fall 2020 campaign catalog and related content on its web site and social channels. “Knowing how diverse our consumer is, we need to be reflecting that, and we’re going to be looking to do more of this,” Rockport’s Laich shared.

In addition to investing in content creation, marketers said they plan to increase advertising (13%), influencer marketing (8%), customer research (8%), PR (6%) and channel marketing (6%), including ecommerce and retail.



Image provided by The Rockport Company.

MEASURING BRAND RELEVANCE

Marketers weighed in on metrics they rely upon most heavily to measure brand relevance. Positive customer feedback/reviews and sales were the top two metrics, each selected by 42% of marketers surveyed. Brand recall (35%), growth among new audiences (26%), web site traffic (21%) and engagement on social media (18%) are also recognized as important measures of brand relevance.

Related to customer feedback, brands with annual revenue over \$50 million are more likely than smaller ones to associate engagement with relevance. Marketers said that actively listening to customers – via social media and customer reviews, for example – is key to increasing relevance.

MOST RELEVANT BRANDS

The top-10 brands most admired by marketers for achieving relevance include:

- | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. Apple | 5. Microsoft | 9. Facebook |
| 2. Amazon | 6. Target | 10. Disney |
| 3. Google | 7. Walmart | |
| 4. Nike | 8. Samsung | |

When asked what these brands have done right to achieve relevance, marketers' comments focused on four key areas:

- + Actively listening and responding to customers
- + Adaptability
- + A sense of purpose
- + Product innovation and marketing

"They are always seeking out customer feedback and seeking ways to improve."

"The brands are very quick to innovate and are very aware that the world and society is frequently changing, and this is one reason why the brand's products and/or services change with the times."

"They have stayed true to their brands. They are interested in what is important to their customers."

"They have a compelling mission and make changes to products, offer new products, and tie products to a purpose or larger mission."

"The brands that continue to innovate and adapt technology and marketing to stay relevant set themselves apart from others in their industry and brands in general."

"They continue to create new products, marketing them such that consumers have to have them and want to use them."

REI and Trader Joe's were also cited as examples of brands that are intentional about who they are and what they stand for. "Trader Joe's works to really help their employees and make strong connections with customers," commented one marketing leader.

CHALLENGES TO BUILDING RELEVANCE

Limited budget/resources (16%), competition from other brands (15%), making customers aware of brands/products (11%), and trying to be all things to all people (11%) are the biggest barriers brands face when trying to achieve relevance.

LEARNING NEW TRICKS

"We're a 45-year-old brand and we became a start-up company overnight."
– Eric Bjorling, Trek Bicycle

In an upended year, many brands seized the opportunity to turn what could've been a dire situation into a win for all. Imagine having a fully assembled bike delivered straight to your door. That's exactly what Trek made possible by building a bridge between TrekBicycle.com and the company's retail and consumer customers. "We came up with a free home delivery protocol, rolled that out in mid-March and all of a sudden things start to happen and start to pick up a little," explains Eric Bjorling, Director of Marketing at Trek.

REAPING THE REWARDS OF RELEVANCE

Marketers pointed to reach, differentiation and ROI, including sales and other results, as tangible benefits of achieving relevance. They said the greatest benefit bestowed on brands that achieve and sustain relevance with the audiences they serve is permission to innovate and write their brand's next chapter.



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