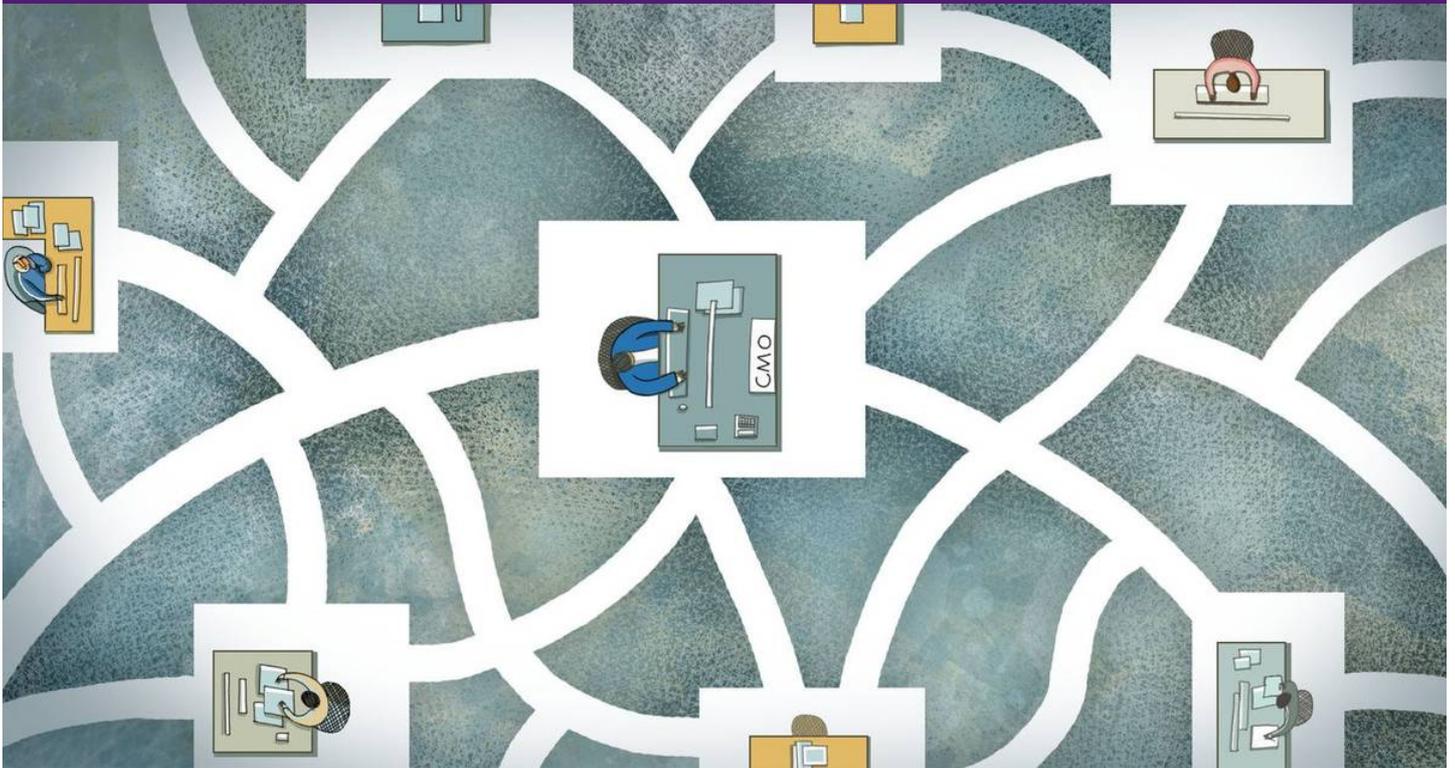


## Explore Our Coronavirus Coverage



Yevgenia Nayberg

MARKETING INNOVATION

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# How Have Top Marketers Responded to the Pandemic? With Rapid Innovation.

Leaders in industries from healthcare to casual dining are fast-tracking changes to the customer experience. Here are four of their stories.

💡 BASED ON INSIGHTS FROM

**Eric Leininger**   **Nicholas Caffentzis**   **Gregory Carpenter**   Patricia Corsi  
 Joel Yashinsky   Sandra Moore   Dana Krueger

How are marketing leaders at some of the world's largest and most influential organizations responding to the coronavirus crisis?

First, they are busy innovating: for the immediate moment as well as the future.

This goes against the grain. "The common wisdom now is not to sell," says [Eric Leininger](#), a clinical professor of executive education at Kellogg. Given today's economic uncertainty, plenty of marketers are feeling pressure to wait out the storm, conserving their marketing resources until sufficient demand begins to build.

But Leininger, who speaks regularly with global marketing leaders, has a different take. "I do not see this as the right framing. Customers are dealing with unprecedented complexity right now, and brands help them decomplexify. Now is the time for CMOs to innovate to meet new customer needs that are appearing due to the crisis as well as to demonstrate how their brands continue to be relevant in this particular moment."

"When customers are afraid or uncertain, they look to regain control and familiar brands can enable this by providing effective digital tools," says [Greg Carpenter](#), a professor of marketing strategy at Kellogg.

Leininger, Carpenter, and [Nick Caffentzis](#), senior fellow and director of the Kellogg Chief Marketing Officer Program, recently asked four marketing leaders across different industries—healthcare, automotive, restaurant, and consumer health—how their teams are innovating in response to COVID-19.

Despite the different circumstances facing each company, some consistent themes emerged from these conversations: First, rather than putting their foot on the brakes, companies are going all-in with new ways of serving and staying relevant to their customers. Second, some are viewing COVID-19 as an opportunity to gain quick traction on longstanding internal challenges. And third, everyone is actively preparing for a very different future.

[Dara Krueger](#), the senior marketing director at healthcare system Cleveland Clinic, saw a seismic shift in the way patient visits were handled.

“Two months ago, fewer than 10 percent of our patients saw us through a virtual visit,” she says. “Now more than 75 percent of our patient interactions are virtual—and in some areas, it’s 100 percent.”

That shift has pushed people throughout the organization to find workable virtual solutions. In some areas, providers have had to find some very creative ways to deliver care. For instance, pediatric ophthalmologists, unable to see children for routine eye care, started emailing PDF eye charts to parents, along with instructions to print and hang the chart, measure the requisite distance, and have them test from home.

“The head of our Cancer Institute sent a communication to all cancer caregivers, reminding them that there are technological challenges to telehealth, but also that there are workarounds,” Krueger says. “Then he shared a link to a great journal article about how to see cancer patients effectively using telehealth.”

For FordDirect, the company that serves as a liaison between Ford Motor Company and its dealerships, solving the customer-interaction question meant looking past shuttered dealer showrooms and toward designing a full digital customer buying experience.

“In early March, consumer demand in the car business fell to pieces,” says [Sandra Moore](#), FordDirect’s vice president for marketing. “So, we took a look at what consumers were still doing, and believe it or not, even though many dealerships were closed, and people weren’t coming to buy vehicles, their website traffic had shot up tremendously. People were

still looking at vehicles, still submitting leads, in the hopes that in the next month or two they could buy a vehicle.”

COVID-19 is accelerating an existing trend: customers want to conduct as much business as possible before they step foot in the dealership. So FordDirect is helping its dealerships lean into that customer preference, up to and including figuring out how to deliver vehicles to customers’ driveways.

Few industries have been as profoundly affected by the pandemic as restaurants. According to [Joel Yashinsky](#), chief marketing officer for casual dining chain Applebee’s, the company is overhauling the customer experience in real time.

“The overall, standard sit-down restaurant experience really hasn’t changed much over the last 50, 75, 100 years: you go into a restaurant, you look at the menu, you place your order, the food comes to you, and you take a break from the day,” Yashinsky says.

The company now has to try to understand how to create the best possible dining experience under social-distancing constraints, from deliberately emptied tables to masked employees. “We’re gathering a lot of information to inform our decisions, knowing that we will have to adjust on the fly almost daily: What are people searching for online when it comes to restaurants? What’s important to them? What’s going to make them feel comfortable?”

Customers will be handed disposable menus and will be encouraged to download the Applebee’s app to place orders. The company is even exploring QR code menus.

Decision-making in large companies can be deliberate in the best of times, with leaders weighing the advantages of change against tried-and-true approaches. But the fallout from the pandemic, as difficult as it has been, offers the opportunity to set aside some of the hurdles and take chances.

For the Cleveland Clinic, that meant revisiting the very way it had designed its telehealth delivery.

“Before the virus, telehealth was sold as an opportunity to see a provider in the middle of the night,” Krueger says. “But if you are dealing with a child with a fever, and you have to download an app and then go through a time-consuming process to register—well, your pitch goes out the window.”

And virtual visits were not offered readily by providers. They were not made a part of the contact-center scripting, and when patients did see their provider in person, they

weren't encouraged by their provider to use the telehealth function for follow-up.

Since COVID-19, regulations around telehealth have been relaxed, and Cleveland Clinic's app-and-registration process has been set aside in favor of other virtual platforms.

"There are now seven different platforms, so I can see my provider in a format that I'm comfortable with," Krueger says. "I think that's really helped everyone."

FordDirect has noticed more openness among dealers to innovate, particularly in the digital realm.

"I do see some innovation with dealers, even those small businesses that have been doing business the same way for 70 years," Moore says. "Originally it was, 'Let's do some tests.' Now it's all-hands-on-deck. So, while we're all looking forward to the time where we can go back to building cars and trucks, we are also learning how to speed innovation along and maybe bring things to market a little bit faster."

[Patricia Corsi](#), CMO of Bayer Consumer Health—which has experienced an uptick in demand as customers stock their shelves with aspirin and other products—is also noticing a new urgency toward innovation.

Pre-COVID-19, her team introduced a tool that helped to provide real-time insights into consumer habits. Initially, internal reception to the tool was cool. The pandemic—and its dramatic effect on consumer habits—changed that.

"There is a lot that we want to further understand," Corsi says. "Knowing if consumers are hoard-buying versus using our products, or if they have changed the channels where they buy our products from brick-and-mortar to e-commerce, will have a massive impact on the way we produce our products and make them available, as well as how we support people who are using our products."

"In 2019, just seven months ago, it took us months to convince people that this tool was a good idea!" she says. "And now, everyone is asking for it. I'm seeing much more openness to exploring the opportunities. These new tools and technologies that allow us to be closer to customers and consumers have much more interest and utilization now and are now here to stay," she says.

A big part of planning for a new normal is determining what customers want this new normal to look like.

At least in the near term, this will almost certainly include getting the balance right between being transparent about which safety measures are being taken to keep customers (and employees) safe, while not triggering alarm.

Take, for example, all of those masks for waitstaff.

"There are little things that aren't so little: How do you brand those face masks?" says Yashinsky. "How do you put up signage in the restaurants that says, 'This table is not open for business due to social distancing' with graphics that explain to the guest in a way that they understand and makes them comfortable?"

"The guests want to see masks on our employees who are serving food," he continues. "They want to see we have people whose only job is to sanitize every restaurant table once a guest leaves the premises, and people stationed outside the restaurants to ensure social distancing is taking place at the doorways."

For Cleveland Clinic, a key to preparing for the future is determining how they will continue to use distance health tools to see patients securely and easily, as well as determining how customers actually feel about telehealth. Will they want to continue meeting virtually with their provider, even when in-person visits become a more viable option?

"We're working on a patient survey to understand attitudes about coming to our facilities versus virtual health," Krueger says, "though we haven't had time to sit back and ask how it's working. It will also take time to figure out customization, because a one-size-fits-all approach to telehealth is going to be difficult for regulatory reasons as well as for the style of work that various providers do. But it takes an environment like this one to force people to look for more of a common denominator, then figure out how they make adjustments."

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Reflecting on the actions and insights from these four marketers, Caffentzis points out that one of the most lasting effects of the pandemic on marketing might be the longtime barriers to innovation that have fallen by the wayside.

"Decision-making can go faster," he says, "which provides great opportunity to try new approaches with your customers and accelerate digitization."

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