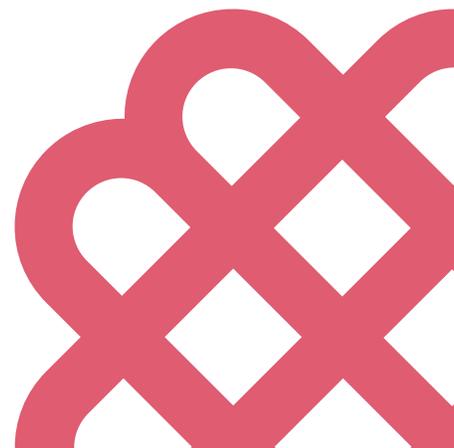




THE FUTURE OF CONTENT: HOW BRANDS CAN ADAPT TO THE NEW NORMAL



The impact of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter protests will be felt well beyond 2020. Brands marketing to women need to update their content marketing playbooks.



NAVIGATING A NEW SHARED EXPERIENCE

There has never been a set of challenges like what we've collectively faced over the past few months. American women are universally feeling the impacts of the COVID crisis, from health implications and the way they shop to the way they relate to friends and family, while also grappling with systemic racism and political polarization. Marketers, along with consumers, are working hard to navigate our new reality.

One of the few certainties is that we're all in it together; thoughtful and authentic participation in the cultural conversation is the best way for brands to create lasting connections with women right now. **In the current environment, silence in itself is a statement**—and one that's unlikely to endear brands to their customers, as we saw in the backlash against companies that were silent about Black Lives Matter. (Meredith Digital reaches 94% of American women, and two-thirds of them say brands should support the BLM movement by practicing what they preach, while half would like to see brands invest in new ad campaigns that champion diversity.¹)

Our insights indicate that the best approach is to acknowledge what American women are living through and provide education to empower them or entertainment to give them relief. Take Microban 24, which published a Better Homes & Gardens piece on [debunking cleaning myths](#) at a moment when the country was obsessed with how best to disinfect every surface. Or Febreze, which had a piece in Real Simple on [how to make the most of your home](#).

The bottom line is that brands should tap into their own unique expertise when trying to help.

In the pages that follow we will explore how marketers can adapt to—and thrive in—a new lived reality, with a focus on three guiding principles:

FLEXIBILITY FIRST:

Getting content to market quickly has never been more important, which makes nimble processes and close collaboration with agency and production partners key.

BE REAL:

From the nature of stories to the style of production, content must reflect the world as it is today in order to be authentic.

LESS IS MORE:

Brands should create lower-frequency, high-impact value exchanges via holistic branded and utility-driven environments.

¹Meredith Consumer Pulse: Racial Injustice June 2020.

FLEXIBILITY FIRST

The world is in flux, and brands must embrace the new normal.

Given the emotion and uncertainty of the past few months, it can feel as if our lives are changing day to day or even minute to minute. This puts the onus on brands to evolve their messaging in real time if they want to participate authentically in our shared experience.

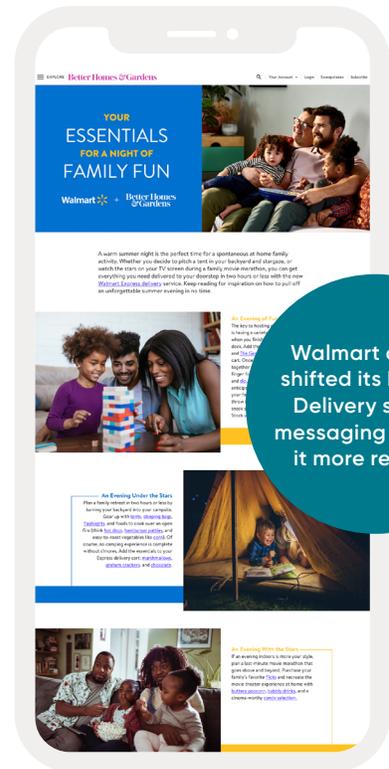
Gone are the days of setting campaign messaging and running with it for six months. Brands need to be agile in their approach to content production in order to keep up with shifts in collective experience. At the same time, publishers need to be more flexible in how they package and sell opportunities.

Agility is especially important in the context of more fluid brand loyalty. More than 77% of people have experimented with a different shopping behavior during the COVID crisis, including trying a new brand.² This opens up a unique opportunity for brands to win mindshare, and relevance is the key to unlocking it.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Getting content to market quickly has never been more important, and brands shouldn't be afraid to streamline traditional approval processes or production approaches to get work done faster. **Among marketers whose organizations invest in branded content, the majority (64%) report that their campaigns have been altered in some way by COVID-19.**³

Walmart's quick adjustments to the launch strategy for its Express Delivery service exemplify how to update campaign messaging in near real-time. The campaign was centered on the hashtag #LifeHappens, which began to seem tone-deaf against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter protests across the country. (cont. on pg 4)



² "Survey: US consumer sentiment during the coronavirus crisis." mck.co/3e4P7XV
³ Advertiser Perceptions Omnibus Report, July 2020.

There was no flexibility in the launch date, so Walmart, its agency partner and Foundry at Meredith quickly pivoted the campaign and all previously completed assets to focus on the hashtag #NeedItNow. Similarly, Meredith's [Foundry 360 helped](#) Massachusetts General Hospital pivot to bring its expertise directly to viewers through interviews with infectious disease specialists about COVID-19, and retooled Synchrony Bank's native content to advise people about [investing in a bear market](#).

In the current environment, brands need to challenge their preferred partners to be more nimble. But speed to market works only when a content partner delivers informed insights, understands the brand's message, knows their voice and shares their values.

COLLABORATE CONSTANTLY

Virtually every marketer has had creative work impacted by COVID-19, but virtually no brand can afford to go dark. Keeping work in-market in these times requires a more collaborative and responsive operational approach in which brands, agencies, production companies and other partners are in near-constant contact.

There are many logistical hurdles to overcome, such as identifying creative treatments that allow for minimal to no on-set presence. **Substituting animation for an in-studio shoot is one popular approach.** Remote photo shoots are also increasingly common, which makes it important to work with partners that are versed in directing talent remotely, as well as safety and sanitation best practices. On a recent shoot for a Boursin print campaign in Food + Wine, for example, Meredith's Foundry team provided creative direction virtually to help minimize the number of people on the set.

Virtual collaboration has a big upside: **it opens up the market for talent, which can provide an infusion of fresh thinking and creativity, and greater diversity.** (cont. on pg 5)



With geography removed from the equation, brands can consider a global pool of partners for their production needs, bringing people from more varied backgrounds into their talent and contributor pools, as well as to their in-house teams. Casting a wider net for content positions and production opportunities, and ensuring a diverse group of potential partners are RFP'd for new work can accelerate this influx.

For in-person shoots, brands can also take advantage of states, counties and municipalities that are more open for business. The European fintech giant Klarna [shot its first U.S. brand campaign in Sweden](#), which remained open during the early months of the pandemic, for example.

KNOW WHERE SHE'S GOING – AND BE READY TO MEET HER THERE

Brands must rethink their distribution strategies and be ready to meet consumers where they are. With the loss of huge swaths of sports inventory and the coming drought of fall comedies and dramas on linear TV, brands must find new digital avenues to connect with consumers—and spend their ad dollars.

Meredith saw record content consumption across platforms, with video views on Pinterest and IGTV soaring since March



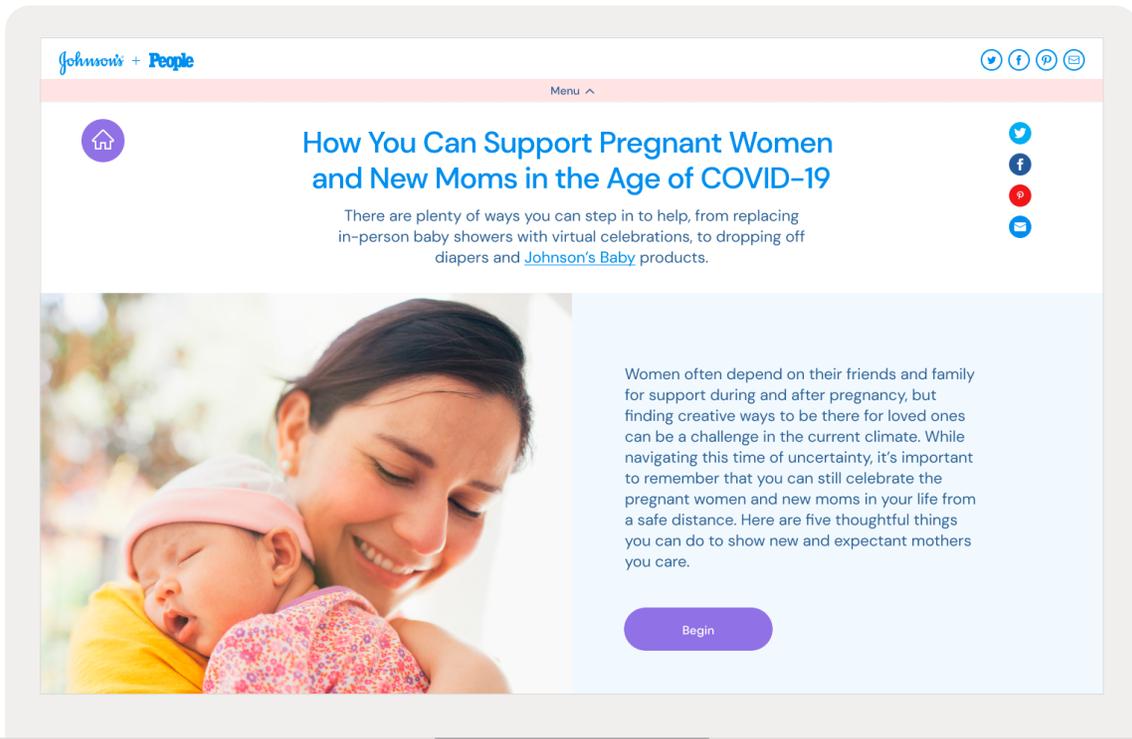
With millions of women working from home and largely staying at their desks all day, desktop engagement has jumped, as has the consumption of streaming video across screens. At Meredith, we've seen record consumption of our content across platforms, with video views up significantly on YouTube and our brand sites, but also up 87% on Pinterest and 83% on IGTV since March. This has implications for the experiences brands should create, as well as where they should “meet” their consumer. TikTok, once seen as a Gen Z phenomenon, has now moved into the video mainstream; depending on how government restrictions shake out, brands would be wise to start testing it and other short-form platforms.

Brands must also rethink their event strategies. Where live event programming can happen, it's attracting record attendees and viewers. Consider, for example, the **record tune-in to baseball games⁴ and golf tournaments** without live fans⁵, or the Food & Wine Classic at Home, which boasts nearly double the registrations it had at last year's in-person event. As brands reimagine how they engage consumers through events, digital must play a larger role.



The good news is that many brands are open to this new way of thinking: According to July research from Advertiser Perceptions, **a third of advertisers are now more willing to experiment with new ad formats and channels**—such as emerging social media platforms, voice technology, shoppable display units and virtual events—than they were six months ago.⁶

⁴ [Hollywood Reporter](#), July 2020. ⁵ [Sports Video](#), June 2002.
⁶ Advertiser Perceptions Omnibus Study, July 2020.



How Johnson’s quickly turned around a complete guide for new moms in the time of COVID

In the early days of the pandemic, Johnson’s Baby wanted to produce a comprehensive resource for new and expecting mothers that would answer important questions and ease anxiety about giving birth in the months to come. The challenge was to find a way to produce content that met high editorial standards quickly amid production shutdowns.

Partnering with Foundry and J3, its global media agency, Johnson’s developed high-quality articles, videos and audio bytes in a matter of weeks. All content was developed in collaboration with the editorial teams at Parents, Parents Latina, PEOPLE and PEOPLE en Español.

Since in-studio shoots weren’t possible, the production team sent video equipment to subjects—including nurses, doulas, OB/GYNs and new moms—and remotely directed them as they filmed themselves at home. An effort was also made to interview people from different parts of the country (including Spanish speakers) to ensure that an inclusive experience was being represented.

The content all lives on one URL (covidpregnancyguide.com)—complete with links to relevant Johnson’s products—in order to keep the customer journey simple. This campaign continues to drive engagement rates well above (nearly 4X) client benchmarks. ■



BE REAL

- Brands must transition from hyper-aspirational content to embrace our new reality.

Before the pandemic hit, many brands created content for women with an aspirational mindset, from super moms to voracious travelers to budding chefs de cuisine. With our ability to experience the outside world dramatically curtailed, our collective imagination has turned inward. Around 70% of Meredith women plan to continue focusing on family, home and wellness after the pandemic subsides. Though images of perfectly groomed people exploring exotic locations might be off-putting to these women, they're craving achievable luxuries—from at-home skin care to homemade bread to a more beautiful garden.

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Around 70% of Meredith women plan to continue focusing on family, home and wellness after the pandemic subsides.

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To succeed, brands must capture the world as it is today. This means **focusing less on the fear of missing out (FOMO) and more on the joy of missing out (JOMO)** through content that helps women make the most of isolated life.

ADDRESS THE NEED OF THE CONSUMER

Brands and publishers that can help women maximize the happiness and utility they derive from their homes and day-to-day routines will overperform right now. This trend will look

Green Giant gave homebound cooks new meal ideas using on-hand frozen staples



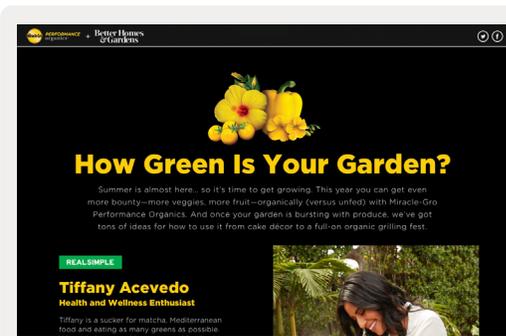
different from vertical to vertical, but the underlying idea is the same.

In food, it means helping her learn to bake or get a taste of fine dining again—or supporting them through all the extra cooking they have to do right now for their families. Food & Wine published a challenge urging people to attempt Gordon Ramsay's famous omelet, for example, while grocery, CPG and cookware brands are trying to give people new ideas in the kitchen. Take Green Giant's Allrecipes piece, [“7 Delicious New Ways to Use Frozen Veggies and Pantry Staples.”](#)

Travel brands might create immersive digital experiences, such as Travel + Leisure's curation of museum and cultural heritage sites and “Visit Great Britain's” virtual tour of a winery and gin distillery (click the glass of wine to start the tour). Retailers might promote their athleisure lines of clothing. Beauty companies might promote small indulgences, such as face masks, essential oils and at-home nail care products, and showcase expert *(cont. on pg 8)*



Visit Great Britain gave the world a taste of its culture through new virtual experiences



Scotts Miracle-Gro helped people reimagine their backyards as places to work, rest and relax

DIY tips and tricks instead of airbrushed celebrities. And gardening brands might urge people to reimagine their backyards as a place to work, relax, meditate and connect with loved ones, as a recent Scotts Miracle-Gro campaign did.

There are also significant implications for storytelling. Data shows that the majority of women are craving positive, **uplifting content and a more authentic, less staged approach.**⁷ Take, for example, PEOPLE's ["80+ Heartwarming Stories to Come Out of the Coronavirus Crisis to Make You Smile,"](#) PEOPLE TV's ["Dear John"](#) video featuring John Legend answering fan questions, or EW's reunion video, ["Chuck' Table Read."](#)

These videos break down the barriers between celebrities and the fans who love them, creating intimate experiences with relatively low production costs.

From a targeting perspective, personalization is more important than ever—with 63% of customers expecting it⁸—and brands must cater to individuals as much as possible to avoid sounding tone-deaf. There's clearly work to be done on this front when you consider that [only 54% of marketers](#) believe that their organizations currently give customers an optimal experience across their engagement journey.⁹

This calls for taking important nuances into account when building audience segments, such as divergent infection rates across states and regions and economic pain caused by the shutdowns, which has been felt more acutely in some communities.

RETHINK YOUR CTA

Driving people toward a transaction may still be a reasonable ask for lower-consideration products, like groceries, laundry detergent and toothpaste. But a softer touch that translates into a longer sales cycle fueled by thoughtful perception initiatives might be a better approach for nonessential goods and services—especially in the luxury category. *(cont. on pg 9)*

“...a softer touch that translates into a longer sales cycle fueled by thoughtful perception initiatives might be a better approach...”

⁷Meredith Consumer Pulse: COVID-19, Wave 7. ⁸RedPoint Global / The Harris Poll, 2019. ⁹"B2C Content Marketing 2020: Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends." bit.ly/2Z6kAER

It's probably unwise for a German automaker to optimize for test drives as a KPI right now, for example. The brand would be better served by telling stories about how it's helped employees and customers through COVID to increase its awareness and affinity scores and, hopefully, be higher in the consideration set when the crisis is over.

Sampling is another practical approach to pursue right now. By getting their products into people's hands, brands stand to be remembered when consumers have more disposable income in the future. To that end, Foundry has developed a native sampling product that empowers marketers to create a pipeline of future consumers by quickly and easily sharing their products with relevant women.

PRODUCE CONFIDENTLY IN NEW WAYS

Given that we collectively spend our days on Zoom and Facetime, women are more receptive to lo-fi video experiences than in the past. In fact, user-generated content (UGC) shot from an iPhone can also seem more authentic—and Meredith's latest client campaigns shot on smartphones are outperforming benchmarks. To improve video quality, brands can send **"drop kits" with basic camera, lighting and audio equipment** to subjects' homes and use apps like OpenReel that help production teams remotely capture and direct video.

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Creative minds thrive when forced to solve for a new set of circumstances...

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Lexus recently leaned into UGC to pivot an upcoming campaign. The brand was slated to be a sponsor of the in-person Food & Wine Classic, which was postponed and transformed into a virtual event due to COVID. Instead, Lexus enlisted its chef brand ambassadors to speak to how they were using Lexus grants to help feed their communities. The chefs recorded themselves on iPhones with remote direction from the production team, which gave the storytelling a sense of urgency.

Creative minds thrive when forced to solve for a new set of circumstances, and illustrations and beautifully curated stock imagery are also an option. This isn't to say that premium productions aren't needed anymore; people are craving escapism after months of quarantine or self-isolation, and only high-quality, professionally shot content can scratch that particular itch. (Significantly, 58% of Meredith Women are ready for messaging to shift away from COVID-19 topics.¹⁰) ■

LESS IS MORE

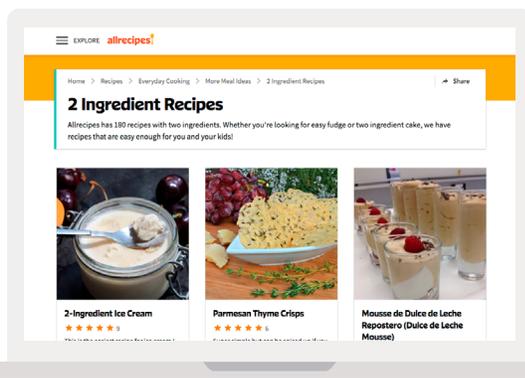
- Focus on adding value where you can provide it, and don't get overwhelmed by complexity.

American women are seeking trusted content like never before. As brands navigate how to engage in the current moment, the bottom line is **not to overdo it**. Brands should lean into their expertise and participate in the conversation, and they need to contribute in a way that doesn't disrupt the editorial experience people crave.

HELP HER GET VALUE FASTER

Branded content should never distract people from the information they're really seeking; it needs to be woven into an authentic experience via holistic branded and utility-driven environments.

Shorter-form content that simplifies daily life has been performing extremely well since the COVID crisis began, especially in categories like recipes and DIY. Views of "two ingredient recipes" on Allrecipes.com, for example, have jumped 78% year-over-year, while "one-dish" and "one-pot" meals have seen significant increases as well.



The majority of pre-COVID downloads happened between 7-9AM, but recent data shows downloads peaking across a longer window, with a high concentration between 4-6PM.



Meanwhile, new formats, like voice and audio, that deliver value faster will continue to gain traction, but it will differ from what was once expected. **Peak podcast consumption is shifting toward the afternoon** and away from morning commute hours as a result of offices being closed.¹¹ The majority of pre-COVID downloads happened between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., but recent data shows downloads peaking across a longer window, with a high concentration between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. New types of utility-driven content, like edutainment for kids, health and wellness podcasts, are also increasing in popularity.

And while voice technology has been labeled as a potential game-changer for some time, its value proposition to consumers has suddenly become stronger. A recent Capgemini survey found that 70% of American consumers would rather use voice interfaces to avoid touching surfaces in public places.¹² (cont. on pg 11)

¹¹ "Coronavirus seems to have made podcasts more of an afternoon thing than a morning thing." bit.ly/3ixxCTo.

¹² "How to use voice tech during COVID-19." bit.ly/3e4vvmD

At home, people continue to ask Alexa or Google Assistant to play music, tell them the weather or read the day's top headlines—but also, increasingly, to help them perform daily tasks.



“ Usage of Meredith voice skills—like the Allrecipes cooking skill, is up 38% month-over-month. ”

Usage of Meredith voice skills—like the Allrecipes cooking skill, for example—is up 38% month-over-month, illustrating this expansion. Still, hiccups with voice technology remain, and the code on ecommerce via voice has yet to be cracked.

SIMPLIFY YOUR INFLUENCER STRATEGY

In response to people's craving for authenticity, influencers have become more selective about the types of engagements they accept. They're pickier about their partners (asking questions about what companies are doing to support Black Lives Matter, for example), but it goes both ways. **Brands are likewise avoiding influencers whose feeds are flooded with sponsored posts**, which would undermine an endorsement of their own products.

“ Brands should check and double check that influencers on their shortlists truly represent their values. ”

Brands would do well to reexamine the cadence of sponsored influencer posts, as well; paying an influencer to create a one-off post might be preferable to a series of posts for the sake of authenticity.

The bottom line is that there will be fewer campaigns overall, and brands should seek out selective influencers. Since those individuals are in demand, and they are now being asked to take on additional production tasks once handled by a dedicated production crew, the cost to engage them is likely to increase—as will the time needed to manage those relationships. There's no such thing as overkill in the vetting process, and brands should check and double check that influencers on their shortlists truly represent their values. ■

Influencers are becoming their own crew.

Due to the pandemic, influencers are taking on additional tasks once performed by production crews. In a recent campaign in Real Simple, PEOPLE and Southern Living, Essie worked with influencers who took their own photos and handed them over for retouching and design.

MARKETER PLAYBOOK

- Creating content that deeply resonates with female audiences in a changed world.

1

FLEXIBILITY FIRST: Get content out quickly to ensure relevance, but not at the expense of quality. Streamline your approval processes, and foster a close collaboration with your agency and production partners to land the execution.

2

BE REAL: Focus on authenticity, and lean into UGC. Your audience is far less interested in seeing influencers with perfect hair pose on yachts right now. Give them content they can relate to or learn from.

3

LESS IS MORE: Honor user experience above all. Build campaigns that tap into your brand's unique expertise at a time when women are hungry for valuable information. Work with influencers who are selective about brand partnerships.



About Meredith Corporation. Meredith Corporation has been committed to service journalism for 118 years. Meredith uses multiple distribution platforms—including broadcast television, print, digital and video—to provide consumers with content they desire and to deliver the messages of its advertising and marketing partners. Meredith's National Media Group reaches

over 190 million unduplicated American consumers every month, including nearly 95 percent of U.S. women. Meredith is the No. 1 magazine operator in the U.S. and owner of the largest premium content digital network for American consumers. The company's Local Media Group includes 17 television stations, reaching 11 percent of U.S. households.