

The Importance of Brand Tracking During COVID-19

COVID-19 is a transformational event which has created a seismic shift in behavior. Much of this change is likely temporary and pre-pandemic behaviors will return. Yet a subset of current behavioral and perceptual changes will stick and affect several category and brand landscapes. There will be winners and losers.

The historical “M.O.” of brand tracking research is consistency in findings on a wave-to-wave basis with changes in brand perceptions and behavior observed over long periods of time. This is not the case in many consumer and professional categories where COVID-19 has disrupted business.

The pandemic has forced a re-examination of our most well-formed habits. Decision factors once secondary to some audiences (e.g., safety, price) will be more important in a health-focused, recessionary economy. Brands which deliver in these areas will benefit.

Russell Research believes now is a critical time to start or resume tracking for many brands. And a standard tracking questionnaire will need adjustments to be optimal in the current environment.

Below we outline 8 key areas to address to ensure success with tracking research during COVID-19:

1. Adjust Screening Requirements To Focus on Pre/Post-COVID

- Everyday behavior has been heavily disrupted over the past 6-8 weeks and will be for the immediate future. This extends beyond consumer behavior and into the business environment.
- Using the “typical” survey recruitment screener will not always be applicable in the current environment.
- For example, if your target audience is past year purchasers, re-framing the screening to purchases made between March 2019 – February 2020 would effectively reach this audience and decrease representation based on a short-term category sales decline.

2. Capture Category Perceptions In Addition to Brand Image

- Most tracking studies gauge perceptions of the client brand, many measure competitive perceptions, and occasionally they will examine category-level attitudes/importance.
- There will be a need for foundational insights which may have changed since the start of the pandemic.
- Adding category-level perceptions (attitudes and purchase decision factors) can be an important component of tracking as it will provide context to brand-level findings.

3. Contextualize Purchase Consideration & Other Intent-Based Metrics

- As a general rule, we strongly advocate for consistency in survey wording and order in tracking studies. This consistency is what allows us to help determine if change is real.
- However many non-essential purchases and behavior have been heavily restricted during the pandemic, whether by choice (e.g., delaying major purchases) or external forces (e.g., closed businesses).
- Examine the current future behavior metrics to ensure they are relevant to consumer and professional audiences. For example, a movie theater chain may need to ask about consideration “when theaters re-open and are deemed safe to visit”, or a restaurant may want to measure consideration by different methods (e.g., dine-in vs. delivery).
- This can be accomplished through modification of existing questions and/or new questions which act as supplements to current tracking questions. These additions can be subsequently removed at a later time.

4. Understand the “Why” Behind Future Intent

- Using derived importance analysis will identify the factors which drive purchase decisions though may go unstated by consumers (sub-conscious drivers).
- Adding this analysis allows brands to understand the core focus areas, identify opportunity / white spaces, and importantly, evaluate if these differ from before the pandemic.

5. Determine the Impact of COVID-19 Brand Actions

- Some brands have maintained or increased advertising spending during the pandemic while others have cut back (not always by choice).
- Further, consumers report having both more positive and negative opinions of brands due to recent brand communications.
- Ensuring the tracking study has a range of questions to address communications at the brand and campaign level can help understand efficacy and assist in message strategy development.

6. Measure Perceptions Towards COVID-19

- Overall, we see consumers and professionals expressing cautious optimism in terms of the pandemic's trajectory and their ability to return to a life which is "closer to normal".
- However there are considerable differences in opinion and action by gender, generation, and other demographic/regional segments.
- It's important to gauge these measures within your own category. In particular, analyzing tracking results by COVID-19 segments (e.g., those most eager to resume everyday behavior) can present targeting and messaging opportunities.
- Increase sample sizes where necessary in order to allow for confident analysis of key sub-groups of interest.

7. Gauge Safety Perceptions

- A key driver of consideration in many categories, particularly those which require social interaction, will be the ability of brands to deliver a safe experience for users. This ranges from casual dining restaurants to hotels.
- Adding questions to tracking studies which measure perceptions of individual brands' ability to provide a safe experience will be an important metric in the near term.

8. Review Your Tracking Cadence

- The frequency of fielding tracking studies range anywhere from annually to being conducted on a continuous basis.
- If your brand's annual tracking study was fielded in the months prior to the pandemic, it may be worthwhile to run an "in between" wave to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on the category and the brand.
- Conversely, for brands which run frequent or continuous tracking, and business is mostly shut down (e.g. airlines, gyms), running at a more infrequent cadence during this time can certainly make sense, with plans to fully resume when an "end is near".

Contact Russell Research
to learn more about conducting
tracking during COVID-19.

Russell RESEARCH

One Meadowlands Plaza
Suite 1001
East Rutherford, NJ 07073

Phone: (201) 528-0400
russellresearch.com
info@russellresearch.com