

2021 OUTLOOK:

What's Changed, What's Coming for the New Year

ADVANCE
TRAVEL & TOURISM
destination marketers

What a crazy year 2020 has been, especially for the travel and tourism industry. At the beginning of the pandemic, bookings were down 90-95% in the early stages of the pandemic and with the prevalence of upheld travel restrictions, we all know it's not a reach to say the industry has taken a huge hit this year. As destination marketing budgets contracted and less revenue came through the door, destination marketers were tasked with figuring out how to keep their destinations afloat while no one was traveling to them.

In our whitepaper released in April ([We Will Travel Again](#)), we talked about how travel marketers have a unique opportunity during this time to connect with travelers and offer hope for future trips and dream vacations, and we outlined a four-phase approach to gradually build marketing messages back up to where they were pre-pandemic in accordance with local infection numbers.

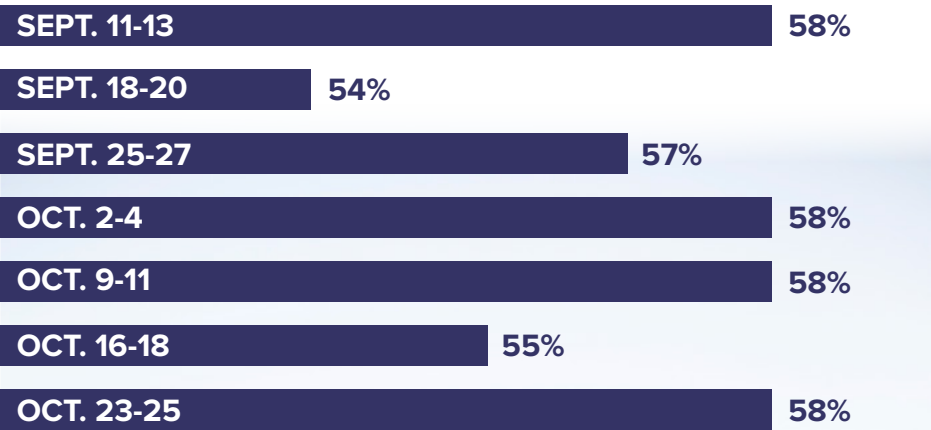
After the year everyone has had, people are going to be itching to get out of town for a vacation. According

to data collected through October, 2020 from Data Analysts¹, 58.4% of travelers are happy to schedule a vacation in the next 6 months. In late 2020 we are already seeing an increase in air travel as TSA reported² in early October that they had seen the most travelers come through airports in a single day since the pandemic began.

As we compiled this whitepaper, we wanted to make sure you have all the knowledge and tools in your arsenal to be successful for this upcoming year. We are in unique circumstances compared to last year, which require a careful look at how we can take what we learned and what happened in 2020 and apply it to 2021.

We talked with industry leaders and researched the top marketing channels to deliver a framework for a 2021 destination marketing outlook. We hope you find some helpful nuggets of information to push your travel marketing strategy forward.

Percentage of travelers who are happy to schedule a vacation in the next 6 months



¹<https://www.destinationanalysts.com/covid-19-insights/coronavirusw-travel-sentiment-index-report/>
²<https://www.tsa.gov/news/press/releases/2020/10/19/tsa-screens-over-1m-passengers-single-day-first-time-march>

The Biggest Challenge for 2021 – Uncertainty

“We don’t know what we don’t know” is cliché, but it captures the challenge many of us face for 2021. When will we have a vaccine? Will spring break be cancelled by school districts like it has been by some colleges and universities? When will travelers start to travel again like they did pre-pandemic?

Advance Travel and Tourism Regional Manager Jacqueline Blackwell says, “It’s important to be flexible and fluid but still consistent in some way. The possibility of spring break not happening could create a new opportunity to focus on travelers who aren’t necessarily looking to travel just within the typical spring break period.” Successful marketers will look for new opportunities created by a change in the traditional calendar.

For Joseph Dabbs, Advance Travel and Tourism’s Senior Director, it’s about growing audience and market share. “Creating demand now with new segments while ultimately growing overall market share should be our goal as we head into the new year.”



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“

JOSEPH DABBS

Senior Director,
Advance Travel & Tourism

The Channels – What Happened, What’s Next

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has seen a huge boost this year - engagement has increased by [61%](#) compared to normal usage rates. This should come as no surprise as more people are staying home and may have more free time to browse social media.

Given people spending more time on social platforms, we have also seen an increase in social advertising spend - [Social media budgets](#) accounted for almost one-quarter of total US marketing budgets during Q2 of 2020, up from 13% last winter.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, marketers are increasingly making customer retention a priority via social media. This will continue well into 2021. What should destinations’ social messaging and imagery look like heading into the new year? Joseph Dabbs believes it’s important to be transparent and open.

“Whether it’s through content, video, or storytelling, acknowledgement of your market’s current situation will continue to be important in all messaging in order for destinations to demonstrate that they care not only about their own community but also about the people they’re inviting to their destination,” said Dabbs.

Continuing to leverage what’s appropriately available in your market such as images of socially-distanced gatherings, people wearing masks and outdoor beauty

shots will reign supreme over taking an ‘everything is back to normal’ approach.

This year, we’ve seen social media’s misinformation battle rear its ugly head. We saw the effects misinformation on social media could have during the [2016 election](#), but with COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and a presidential election all taking place in 2020, the spread of misinformation on social platforms became ubiquitous.



What are social platforms doing about this, if anything? Many believe major social media sites should take responsibility for harmful information published on their respective platforms. And, some have.

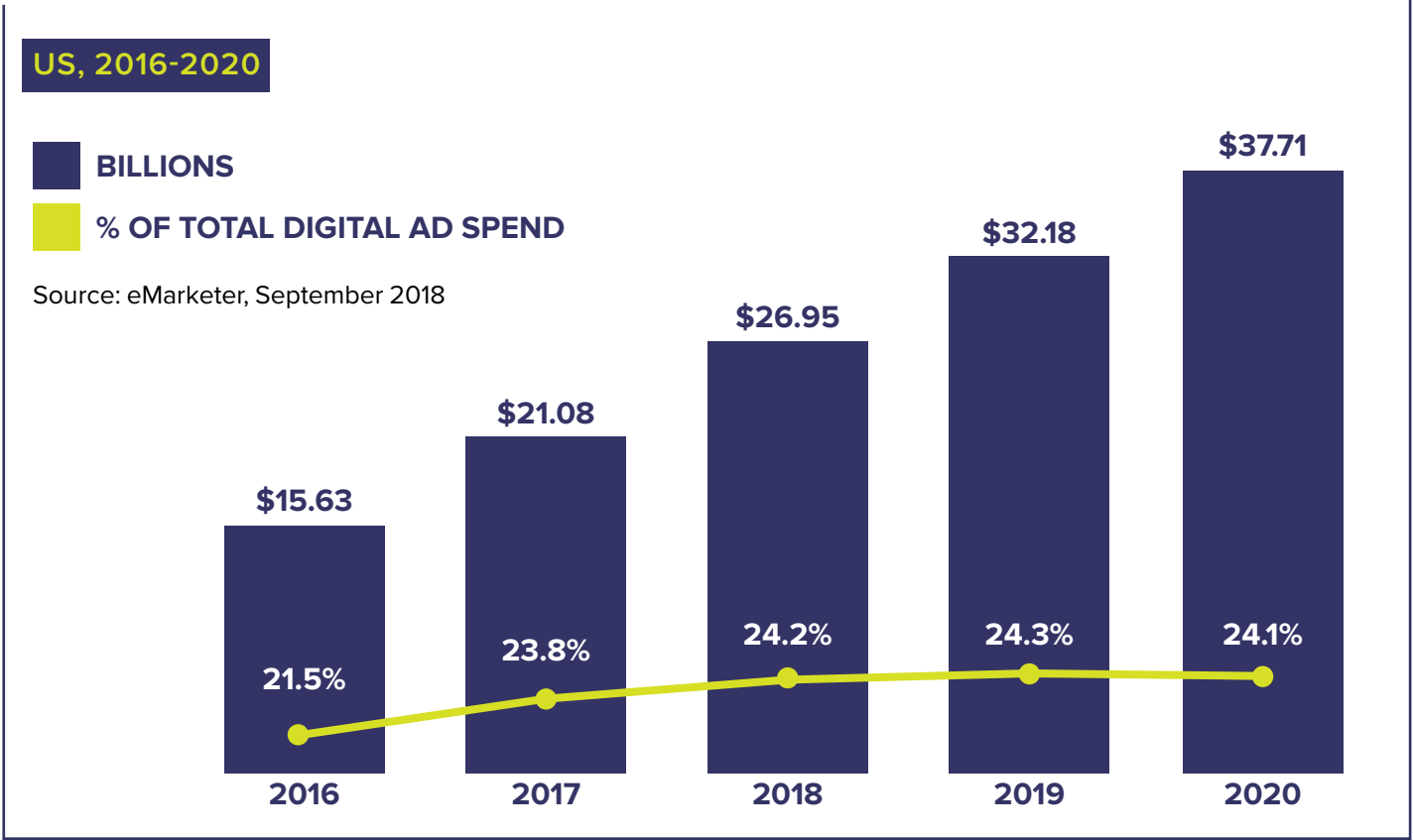
As early as February 2020, YouTube [outlined updated policies](#) to bar content that is edited or doctored with the intent to mislead YouTube users and “may pose a serious risk of egregious harm” ahead of the presidential election. Most recently, the Google-owned platform [said](#) it will expand its medical misinformation policy to include COVID-19 vaccine information that contradicts health authorities. YouTube even has [a page](#) dedicated to how it aims to combat misinformation on its platform.

Twitter has similarly made efforts to tackle misinformation on its platform with warning labels on tweets that contain “[synthetic or manipulated media that are likely to cause harm](#).” Tweets with these labels aren’t easy to spread as users aren’t allowed to reply to them or retweet without adding comment. [Additionally](#), tweets with this warning label are not recommended by Twitter’s algorithms, meaning users won’t see them in their main timelines. Like YouTube, Twitter also has [information on its blog](#) about tackling information and how the warning labels work.

What about Facebook? Two years after admitting under political pressure that [Facebook](#) must do more to prevent disinformation campaigns on its platform, founder Mark Zuckerberg [said that the company](#) ‘shouldn’t be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online.’ One month later, a movement to ‘hit pause on hate’ with a Facebook ad boycott gained speed. Major advertisers like The North Face, Unilever, [Verizon](#), Sony, Microsoft [among others](#) joined

the boycott of pausing their advertising spend on Facebook in July. In response to this, Zuckerberg said “Of course we care, but we’re also not going to set our content policies because of advertisers.” The social giant has most recently come out with policies to take on [COVID-19 vaccine misinformation](#) as well as limit [voter misinformation](#) amid the presidential election. You can find Facebook’s policy on misinformation [here](#).

Social network ad spending



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TRAVEL MARKETERS IN 2021?

Especially on Facebook, there are all kinds of customizations advertisers can make when it comes to ad placement. To elevate brand safety, here are some recommended measures to take:

- First consider who your current and potential travelers are and what content they might consider appropriate. You should also consider what won't be conducive to your brand, such as having advertising revenue attributed to your competitors' mobile apps and such.
- [Create a block list](#). You can upload a file of URLs that include apps and pages within the audience network, in-stream videos and instant articles where you don't want your ads to appear.
- Too many pages to block? Create an allow list that outlines which [content](#) and/or [publishers](#) are approved (by you) for your ads to run alongside.



**Decide what
your travelers
consider
appropriate**

**Block URLs
where you don't
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**Create an
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CONTENT MARKETING & SEARCH

Because content marketing and search go hand-in-hand, we are combining them for this report. As people are spending more time online this year, it's safe to assume they are consuming more digital content than before. This highlights the need for a robust content and search marketing strategy that aligns with your target audience's needs as well as your destination's mission.

"We are really turning our digital and social content to focus more on our mission, which is to inspire children and adults to see beyond," said Discovery Park of America's Marketing and PR Manager Katie Jarvis. Prior to COVID-19, Discovery Park of America shared little educational content, and focused more on promoting events and classes they offered before realizing their audience would be better suited with a heavy emphasis on educational content relevant to the park.

Developing high-quality content that's aligned with your traveler personas and intent has never been more important if you want to show up prominently in search results related to your destination. You have to engage with prospects who are ready to travel and those who



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KATIE JARVIS

Marketing and PR Manager,
Discovery Park of America

aren't as well. Expanding your online experience will keep travelers in the pipeline who are still delaying plans and help convert the ones that are planning trips right now.

Regional Sales Manager Jacque Blackwell advises travel marketers not to be afraid to try something new and test the results to decide how to move forward.

"The dynamic flexibility within digital marketing allows for a playground of sorts for marketers to experiment and explore what works for them, no matter how big or small the budget," said Blackwell.



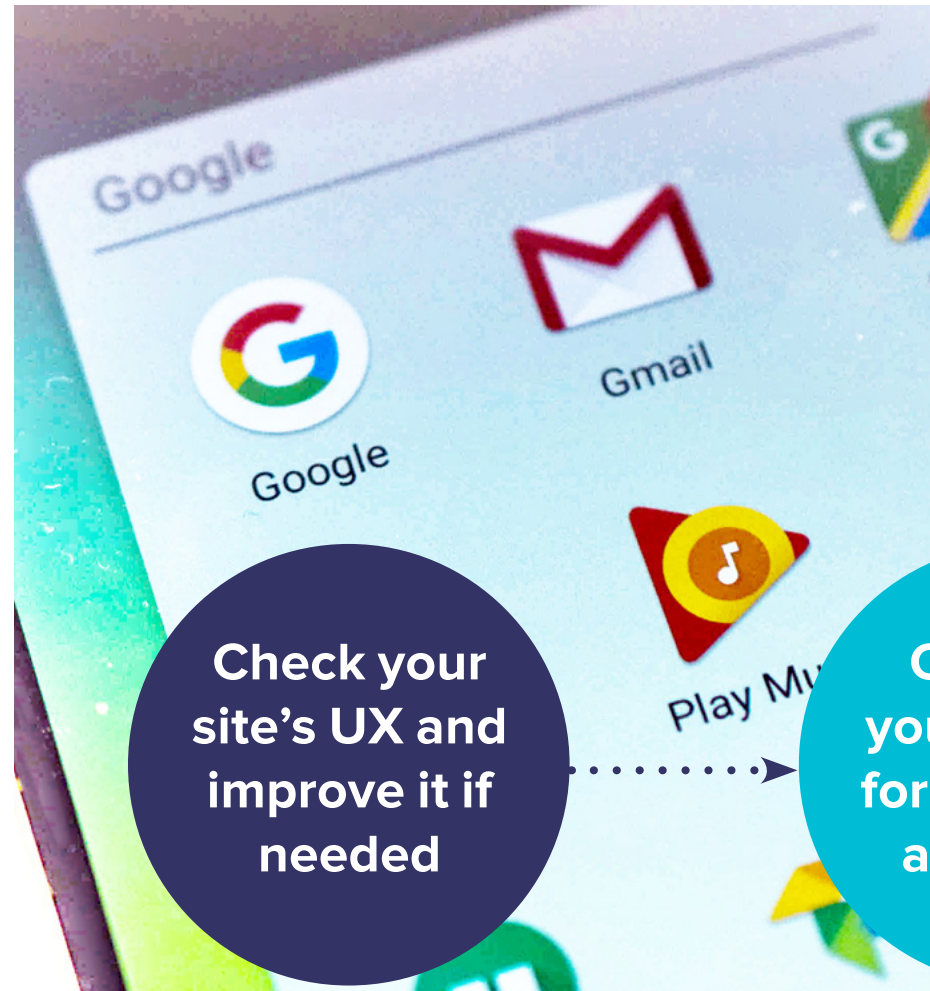
User experience (UX) will need to become a priority in 2021 if not already, as Google has unveiled updates to its rankings algorithm. The new [Web Vitals](#) uses quality signals triggered by various user experience factors such as page load speed, interactivity and stability of content as it loads.

People are now searching in a more conversational way, and semantic search is becoming more prevalent. Semantic search refers to how search engines use all the data at hand to determine the context, intent, and meaning they need to serve up the most relevant and complete content possible rather than zeroing in on top-of-the-funnel and long-tail keywords.

It's important to contemplate the intent behind the user's search. People are searching with [four different core 'intents'](#) – to get information, make a purchase, shop and compare products and to get to a certain website. Develop content that speaks to these.

Do you have a Google My Business account? Do you keep it updated? Google My Business optimization factors heavily into local search experiences.

[Engagement and activity](#) on a GMB listing are strong ranking signals for Google, so the more complete and optimized your listing, the more likely your destination is to show up in local searches. Google My Business has been extremely helpful during COVID-19 – allowing users to keep up with updated store hours. If yours isn't updated and someone comes to your business thinking you're open when you actually aren't, they won't be happy.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TRAVEL MARKETERS IN 2021?

Here are some actions to take to stay on top of search:

1. Check your site's UX: Google has a [tool](#) that will rank your pages based on UX. If you aren't ranking where you should, talk to our experts about how to improve the experience and better engage prospects.
2. Understand your travelers' intent and optimize your content for both relevance to the traveler and lifetime value for your destination.
3. Make it a point to update your Google My Business account on a regular basis.

DIGITAL DISPLAY

According to data from [eMarketer](#), display is driving digital advertising's growth during this year's recession. Within display, increased investments will be heavily concentrated on mobile, video and programmatic ads in 2021.

We are in the midst of a data privacy revolution. With recent government regulation on [how companies collect and use consumer data](#) and numerous company [customer data breaches](#), it's clear that consumers' online privacy should be protected.

Google's answer to creating a more private web? To eliminate the use of third-party cookies from its Chrome browser [by 2022](#). (Apple Safari [has announced](#) a similar policy, and Firefox already blocks cookies on its browser.)

But what in the world will happen to digital display advertising? Two words: contextual advertising - the natural successor to cookies that will allow digital advertisers to target at scale without breaching audience privacy.

What is it? Instead of targeting an audience behaviorally with cookies (tracking users' online behavior via clicks, views etc.), contextual advertising places the most appropriate ads within the right context. For example, it would make sense to run a suitcase ad on [cntraveler.com](#). This is done through contextual targeting within an ad network that segments ads based on parameters like keyword or website topic.

How effective is contextual advertising? A new study from GumGum found that its contextual intelligence tool is [more effective](#) and less expensive compared

to behavioral, with the cost-per-click (CPC) being [48%](#) lower than behaviorally-targeted ads.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TRAVEL MARKETERS IN 2021?

Over the next year it will be important for advertisers to start testing contextually-targeted display ads while cookies are still available. This way, you can compare the two in real time and be ahead of the curve BEFORE the cookie crumbles.

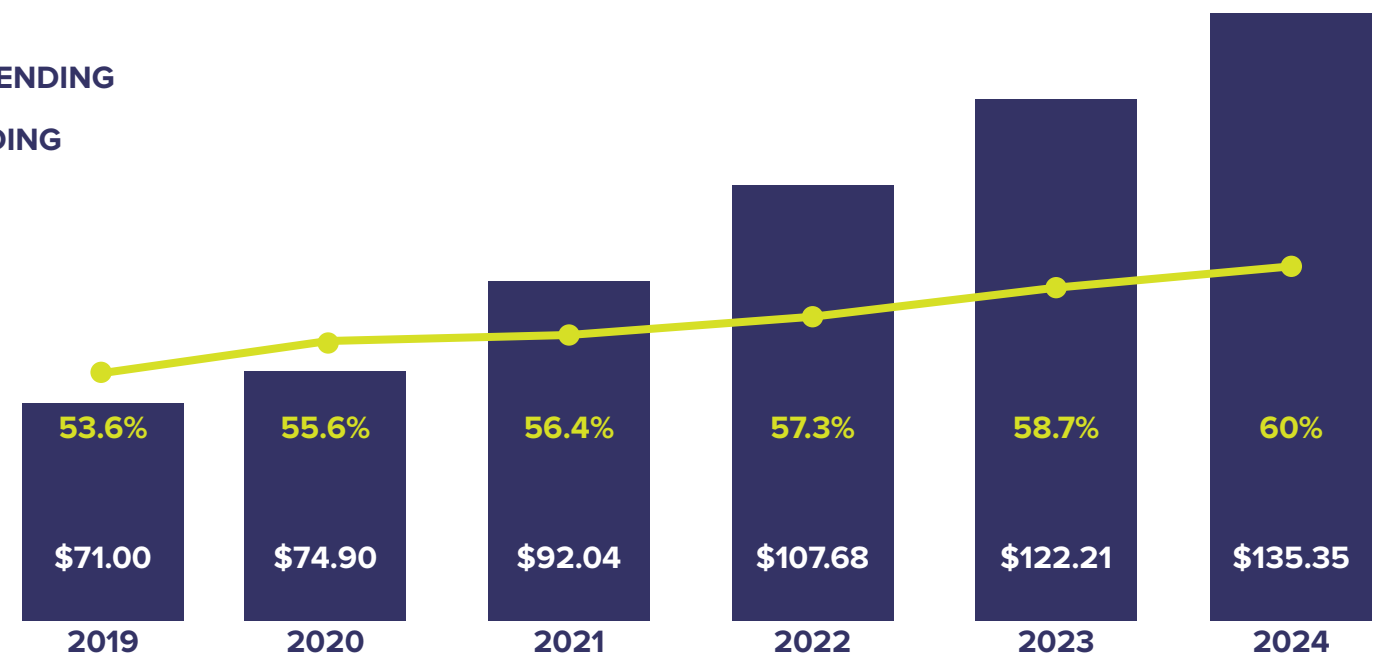
Test contextually-targeted display ads while cookies are still available

US digital display ad spending 2019-2024

DIGITAL DISPLAY AD SPENDING
% OF DIGITAL AD SPENDING

Source: eMarketer, June 2020

Note: Includes advertising that appears on desktop and laptop computers as well as mobile phones, tablets and other internet-connected devices; includes banners, rich media, sponsorships, video and ads such as Facebook's News Feed Ads and Twitter's Promoted Tweets



Add Empathy to your Marketing Strategy

2021 will be a year of rebuilding for the travel & tourism industry, and we see several trends carrying over from this year, such as an increase in small group travel and short-term rentals.

“Minus the shutdown, I think 2021 will look a lot like this year,” said Blackwell. “Travel will become more diversified, not only seasonally but also geographically.”

For Dabbs, it will be important for travel marketers to continue to showcase their destination virtually when and where possible.

THE BOTTOM LINE: EMPATHIZE WITH YOUR TRAVELERS AND COLLEAGUES

When we asked various destination marketers about themes for 2021, similar words were spoken: perseverance, flexibility, innovation, adaptability, empathy.

Have you noticed a theme here? There has never been a stronger call for a people-first approach to



marketing. Prioritizing connection over conversion and demonstrating empathy not only in marketing messages but also extending it to ensure travelers are reached when and where they are in life and the travel journey is crucial in resonating with your audience and will ultimately benefit your destination's bottom line.

Empathy in the workplace is just as important as employees seek support during these trying times.

A great example of this is [Patagonia](#) continuing regular

pay for all its employees when all operations were closed

due to COVID-19. It all boils down to fulfilling the personal connection we as humans crave – 2021 might just be the year of connection we didn't know we needed.

Prioritizing connection over conversion and demonstrating empathy is crucial in resonating with your audience and will ultimately benefit your destination's bottom line.



About Advance Travel & Tourism

Advance Travel & Tourism is a destination marketing team within Advance Local, one of the leading media and marketing companies in the United States. From local to regional, national or international, we reach travelers everywhere.

Advance Travel & Tourism works with travel partners across the US, with local account managers waiting to meet you in person (or on Zoom in today's environment). Our hands-on approach ensures we understand your needs and creates a solution that meets your goals and budget.

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