

BuzzFeed's SVP of Ad Strategy on How Advertising Behavior Has Shifted During Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic has significantly affected publishers' short-term ad revenues. A March 2020 survey from the [Interactive Advertising Bureau \(IAB\)](#) found the majority of US news publishers have dealt with pauses, adjustments and cancellations of campaigns, while the same has been true to a lesser degree for non-news publishers in the US.

Are US Publishers Experiencing Short-Term* Revenue Changes due to the Coronavirus Pandemic?

% of respondents, March 2020



Note: total publishers n=142; news publishers n=58; nonnews publishers n=84; includes advertising sales, ad network and supply-side revenue; *March-June 2020

Source: Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), "Coronavirus: Ad Revenue Impact on Publishers & Other Sellers," April 15, 2020

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In late April, we spoke to Ken Blom, senior vice president of ad strategy and partnerships at BuzzFeed, about how its advertisers reacted to the pandemic and what might change going forward.

How have advertiser attitudes changed since the beginning of the outbreak?

We're out of the phase of advertisers saying, "Let's pause, and we'll get back to you." The conversation is now about going live with different creative. This isn't everybody, but many brands have taken the time and tweaked their creative and approach. They now know a little more about what their ask is. Before, the uncertainty was so great that it was hard for anyone to decide whether to keep spending or not.

How has BuzzFeed responded to COVID-19 editorially?

Our three pillars today are (1) news and reporting that keeps readers informed on the coronavirus, (2) lockdown or quarantine content—for example, Tasty recipes with ingredients already in your pantry—and then (3) counter-programming, content where readers can escape from thinking about [the coronavirus] right now.

How are advertisers navigating this content?

Some of the insights from advertisers willing to spend is that no one wants to be opportunistic. That has been changing week over week. Many advertisers want to ride along that quarantine lockdown content,

but there is a narrative that is shifting a little bit. Normally, advertisers know exactly what they want to say and come to BuzzFeed to make more content or seed this content out. But they don't know what their message is right now, so they look to the publisher for ideas and insights.

Have advertisers been avoiding that news bucket in favor of the other two?

News is typically harder to sell, so it's not too dissimilar from pre-pandemic times. An advertiser might be overly cautious or concerned about brand safety. There's a debate about coronavirus as a keyword being blacklisted. It's in every article, so it's hard to say that it's not brand safe, but some advertisers might feel that way, and you're going to have to be flexible.

Much of the news surrounding digital publishers and advertising has been negative. Are there any silver linings?

There's more storytelling to be done now that businesses need to reinvent themselves. We had a great partnership with Bumble, a dating app that needs to reinvent what dating is like when it's over video chat. We created a series of videos to help explain some of their new products. As new behaviors are happening, it's a really interesting time to experiment.

Have any trends emerged during the coronavirus that might stick around going forward?

We have creators filming at home. Many people assumed the result would be a lower production value, and who wants to be aligned with that? But in the comments of these articles and videos, people are connecting with creators on a deeper level because they feel like they're in their home. Now with deeper audience engagement, we've discussed that once we return to the studio, some videos will still be filmed at home. The act of not overly producing—being more authentic—has always worked, but when you take some things away from creative people and add constraints, you see some really powerful things.

Will advertisers change their perceptions on the value of premium vs. creator video?

Advertisers will still say that if they are paying for something, they want really great lighting. But we're always looking at the value of the audience, views and story. It's a bit at odds with what advertisers are hoping to do. We needed to shift to being more authentic. Currently, the authentic people are rising to the top. So we're moving our lens on that. But the advertisers will have an opportunity to make that shift. Not all of them are going to do it, but some of them will.