

# Why Tech Companies Can Regain Consumer Trust as Coronavirus Crisis Continues

**ARTICLE** | **MARCH 17, 2020**

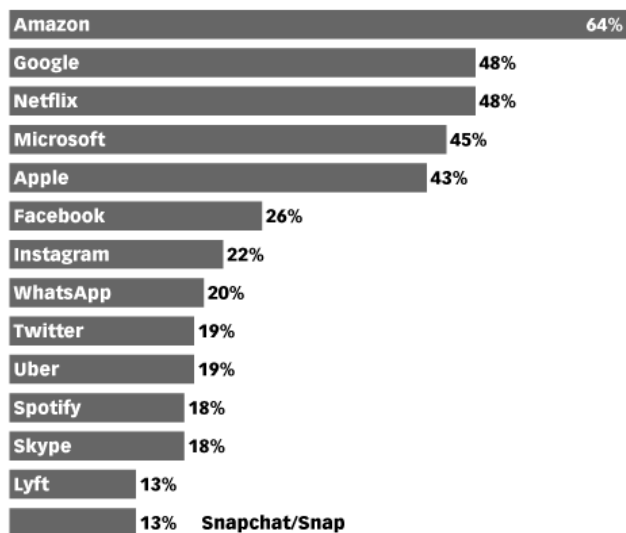
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**A**s the government continues to wrestle with the COVID-19 epidemic, US consumers and news organizations have rediscovered one of the things that made social media so valuable: Democratizing information about a fast-moving global story brings to light important narratives that official sources may miss, ignore or suppress.

Public trust in tech companies may have taken a hit in recent years as traditional sources of news have attacked misinformation and manipulation on social media. According to March 2019 polling by [Toluna](#) and entrepreneur forum [Cintrifuse](#), just 26% of US internet users said they generally trusted Facebook, and 19% trusted Twitter.

### Select Brands that US Internet Users Generally Trust, March 2019

% of respondents



Note: ages 18+

Source: Toluna and Cintrifuse survey, March 19, 2019

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But trust in more-traditional sources of information is also relatively low. In Q4 2019, data-driven ad tech provider [AudienceProject](#) found that almost two in five US internet users reported trusting digital news sites less than they had a year earlier, vs. just 9% who trusted such sites more. According to 2019 polling by the [Advertising Research Foundation \(ARF\)](#), just 34% of US internet users trusted the “media in general,” with 47% reporting they trusted TV news. While a somewhat low 44% reported trusting social media on a regular basis, social platforms do give a voice to the two most-trusted institutions: “people like me” and “scientists and experts.”

### Which Institutions Do US Internet Users Trust?

% of respondents, 2018 & 2019

	2018	2019
People like me	85%	84%
Scientists and experts	74%	73%
Local police	71%	69%
TV news	50%	47%
Social media (regularly)	45%	44%
Media in general	35%	34%
Social media (sometimes)	33%	30%
Advertising	30%	27%
US Congress	24%	26%

Source: Advertising Research Foundation (ARF), “2nd Annual Privacy Study”, Aug 14, 2019

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In the case of the pandemic, platforms like Twitter provided critical early information to business leaders and consumers in early 2020. But scrutiny of that content led Twitter to announce in January that it would prompt users looking for information on COVID-19 to “credible, authoritative information” from official sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO). Months later, it appears that those institutions were behind in responding to developments.

And just as news spreading on Twitter acted as an early warning for some media consumers, the actions of the tech industry became an early warning for the US. The need to halt or slow the spread of the coronavirus has now meant the cancellation of a slew of large public gatherings, from NBA games to Broadway shows, theme parks and concerts nationwide.

The social platforms that allowed key information to spread, and the companies that made early moves to encourage social distancing, stand to gain consumer trust as the crisis continues. Consumers are reeling, life is changing, and brands that can be seen as a source of help during this time will earn valuable goodwill.

Grubhub, for example, announced last week that it would temporarily suspend commission fees for independent restaurants during the crisis. The CEO of Zoom said the company would donate videoconferencing services to K-12 schools. Alphabet subsidiary Verily is working on a pilot project to help people in the San Francisco Bay Area understand whether they should seek a COVID-19 test. And plenty of more traditional brands have a role to play in easing the crisis. Some supermarkets are offering special senior-only shopping hours for vulnerable consumers to shop when it’s less crowded, and many broadband and telecom providers have pledged not to terminate services for late payment or charge late fees.

Institutions that were slow to respond will face a deficit of consumer trust in the coming months—and depending on their role, tough questions to answer. It seems clear that sclerotic institutions like the CDC and FDA have caused testing delays in the US, and political considerations by the WHO may have played a role in its advice, as

well. A slow federal response has left states, localities and business leaders to make their own decisions. Markets crashed, and major cities prepared to shut down just weeks after many mainstream media outlets urged Americans to focus more on the danger of the flu (and the danger of misinformation on social media). Americans, as well as residents of other countries, have struggled with institutional trust in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic looks set to continue that trend.