



# HOW MARKETERS CAN REFRESH THEIR PLANS IN 2021

For business-to-business marketers, the start of a new year typically begins with planning. They review last year's strategies and effectiveness, take stock of how the marketplace is shifting and develop a plan for the coming quarters.

But 2020 upended the status quo on that and every other front. Marketers largely have been improvising ever since they had to throw out their playbooks in response to the unprecedented global emergency. Now, as they are working through their plans for 2021, it's difficult to predict what the year will bring.

Major shifts have occurred in how people meet and work. The widespread shift to remote work last year increased the importance of digital marketing

in reaching prospects, who were spending much more time in front of screens. The absence of live events also elevated the value of virtual events, webinars and direct marketing tools such as email. While 2021 eventually may see a return to in-person meetings and events, it's largely accepted that many aspects of virtual work will remain.

There is no script. Marketers must understand these shifts and re-imagine their strategies to ensure they meet buyers wherever they are now — which is undoubtedly somewhere new. The first step is understanding what has changed, which this report will do with a focus on content marketing and events, two areas critical to B2B marketing.

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## THE ROLE OF CONTENT MARKETING

Content marketing has long been a bedrock of B2B marketing. When nearly all nonessential work shifted online, it became a lifeline for reaching prospects.

Email and web channels became an even more useful source of inbound leads in 2020, said Joe Webster, vice president of B2B marketing and global email strategy at Future, SmartBrief's parent company.

"Email marketing benefits greatly from having a captive audience. Everybody was home and on their computers," Webster said. SmartBrief newsletters saw a spike in click-thru rates, and its website inbound lead count grew 94% year-over-year.

Across industries, the effectiveness of email marketing skyrocketed. Omnisend, a marketing automation company, told [ClickZ](#) that third-quarter rates of conversion for promotional emails in an analysis of over 3 billion emails increased 169% year-over-year. SMS messaging saw even higher growth at 237%.

What those results demonstrate is the importance of connecting with prospects through digital channels, and content marketing is key.

Data from SmartBrief's marketing newsletters offers additional insight into what marketers prioritized last year. Emily Crowe, editor of the company's marketing briefs, said articles about content appeared in marketing leadership and B2B newsletters almost daily and continue to do so.

"I think having a solid content strategy for this year is very important," Crowe said. "Consumers and buyers alike want to be seen and heard, and content needs to reflect that more than ever."

SmartBrief reader data shows one of the year's top stories focused on the efficacy of B2B marketers in meeting buyers' content needs, while another noted the pivot of a major consumer brand to digital marketing channels. Readers demonstrated a clear interest in learning more about how their marketing peers were adapting and how customers' buying journeys were evolving.

Even when offices reopen, many people will continue to work remotely. This will make virtual ways of connecting more valuable, and the content served through those channels will remain an important way for marketers to reach prospects and influence them.

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— Emily Crowe  
EDITOR, SMARTBRIEF





# SMARTBRIEF DRIVES CONTENT-MARKETING RESULTS

Executing a successful content-marketing strategy requires careful consideration, not to mention high-quality content in the right format and a way to deliver it to the ideal audience. SmartBrief has worked with companies large and small on using content as a way to set themselves apart from the pack.

**VTech MIT:** SmartBrief created a comprehensive, custom branded-content campaign reaching more than 100,000 qualified IT professionals to promote Virginia Tech’s Online Master of Information Technology Program. The branded white paper series was promoted to various industries including technology, health care and engineering and delivered above-average engagement across multiple platforms, including three times the click-thru rate for fixed placements.

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— Tracey Allen

ADVERTISING & MEDIA SPECIALIST,  
VIRGINIA TECH -  
NORTHERN VIRGINIA CENTER

“With SmartBrief, we have been able to target and reach industry-specific audiences across platforms and devices with content that is current, relevant and informative,” said Tracey Allen, advertising and media specialist at Virginia Tech — Northern Virginia Center.

**Unata, an Instacart company:** A webinar series became the ideal platform for this collaboration, which was designed to generate high-quality leads for Unata while demonstrating the Instacart company’s software platform for grocery outlets. SmartBrief developed the webinar content and reached out to food retailers to promote the events, cultivating an engaged audience that attended 57 out of 60 minutes on average.

“The results (both number and quality of attendees) were way better than we expected,” Unata’s Alexis Clarfield-Henry said

**Keen Decision Systems:** SmartBrief developed and promoted a co-branded white paper to help establish Keen as a thought leader among its ideal audience of high-level marketing executives. The paper, called “Rebranding the CMO,” featured original content from interviews conducted by SmartBrief’s editorial experts and generated more than 600 qualified leads. An accompanying webinar achieved a 63% webinar attendance conversion rate, and the overall project served over 1.5 million impressions.

“The leads and overall lead quality exceeded our goals to become our most impactful campaign of 2019,” Keen’s Nanette Kirsch said. ■



“Now, there needs to be a 365-day journey that you can take your customers and your prospects on,” Webster said. “You’re not selling them along the way; you’re creating content that’s going to be useful to them and that demonstrates that your solution is going to be useful to them.”

That includes webinars, newsletter subscriptions, brand newsletters, blogs and more — all of which will be important going forward and not just because of pandemic-related trends. The phasing-out of browser cookies is another factor, noted Mike Driehorst, digital media editor at SmartBrief.

“Brands need to develop closer one-to-one relationships with prospects,” Driehorst said.

## THE EVOLUTION OF EVENTS

Another major factor for B2B marketers to consider as they plan for 2021 is how events will evolve as a result of last year’s lockdowns. Live events are expected to restart this year at some point, but it’s likely that some gatherings will remain virtual for some time.

Travel budgets remain in limbo, with budgets either reduced or earmarked for a later date. Many companies also have dispersed workforces, as work-from-home arrangements and remote work

proliferated during the pandemic. That means getting together in person will happen less frequently.

Webster expects in-person interactions to coalesce around major conferences, as sales teams use these gatherings to bring client teams together and finalize deals.

“There’s going to be this hybrid of virtual events for the foreseeable future,” Webster said.

“The big conferences are going to take on a new role. Smaller shows will be primarily virtual.”

In between shows, Webster anticipates the culture of videoconferencing to stay strong.

“People are going to be a lot more comfortable having a video call rather than a phone call, even when we go back to an office environment,” he said. “That is going to be something that marketers are going to try to get more of on behalf of their sales teams.”

Video is gaining importance in other ways, as well. Marketers have been ramping up their investments in video ads, with SmartBrief reporting a more than 50% revenue increase in video ads in 2020. These investments have paid off — SmartBrief found that video ads outperformed image-text ads with a 50% increase in average click-thru rate.



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INSTAGRAM

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Those trends are likely to amplify the importance of content marketing as well, Webster noted. But content that is less evergreen and more topical makes sense for now, as events are unraveling so quickly and the marketplace is shifting so fast that generic content can hit a false note.

"You have to become almost more like a newsroom than a content marketing shop," Webster advised. SmartBrief readers have been following these trends. Driehorst said that stories about how

the pandemic has changed work lives and careers were often the most read in 2020. They are an indication that the nature of work is evolving and, along with it, the way marketers can reach prospects.

## CONCLUSION

While planning for 2021 may remain difficult given the year's unpredictability, there are some clear trends emerging that can offer marketers guideposts for how to form strategies. Digital marketing is unquestionably a crucial part of any marketing plan. Content marketing that fits the moment is likely to resonate. And establishing a personal connection with prospects is more important now than ever. ■

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**VICE PRESIDENT OF B2B MARKETING  
AND GLOBAL EMAIL STRATEGY AT FUTURE**



## ABOUT SMARTBRIEF

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