



No Wrong Answers:

Why Search is Mission
Critical for Brands



As the spread of COVID-19 has thrown the world into a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty, people are taking to their phones and computers with more questions than ever – many of them directed at brands. Consumers want to know how companies are responding to the crisis, and how they are operationally adjusting to the ensuing closures and social distancing measures. Anxiety is high; so is confusion. Every question feels urgent, and so many objectively are.

In the wake of this ongoing global crisis, consumers are more dependent on accurate and up-to-date online information than ever. This moment highlights how fundamental a well-executed search experience is to a brand's core customer service and conversion strategy – not just during a crisis, but always.

Searches for COVID-19, coronavirus, and many related terms are climbing. On March 29th, the U.S. saw more than 200k unique searches for "social distancing" alone.¹ Yext research also found queries spiking for key practical questions like "Is it safe to eat takeout during COVID?"²



Is it safe to eat takeout during COVID?



1. [Google Trends data, March 2020](#)

2. Yext proprietary data, 2020 ; [Google Trends data](#)

As healthcare providers scramble to issue reliable, clear, updated COVID-19 information, businesses in other verticals are feeling pressured to step up and stay proactively engaged with consumer questions. The recent deluge of online queries isn't limited to any one industry. Beyond questions about health and safety, the basic details of society's day-to-day operations – facts that most people wouldn't normally feel compelled to question – are suddenly unclear and thus subject to a high volume of online searches. Grocery stores, pharmacies, and retailers are seeing big spikes in searches related to information around stock and hours.³ The answers to these questions change rapidly, requiring updates in as close to real time as possible.

This challenge – to deliver accurate, up-to-date answers around the complex topic of coronavirus and its impact on different parts of business and society – also raises questions on the macro scale: **Even beyond times of crisis, how prepared is your brand to quickly update the information on your website?** Are you able to deliver updates with an instant reaction time? Can your customers trust you to give them the answers they need?

More than ever, we're seeing how much consumer trust hinges on brands' abilities to keep people informed quickly, seamlessly, and with responses to the actual questions they're asking. Our present crisis may be unique, but it shines a light on two evergreen truths:

- 1 Delivering official answers online is a critical component of customer success**
- 2 Success or failure in this area has a direct impact on consumers' brand perception**

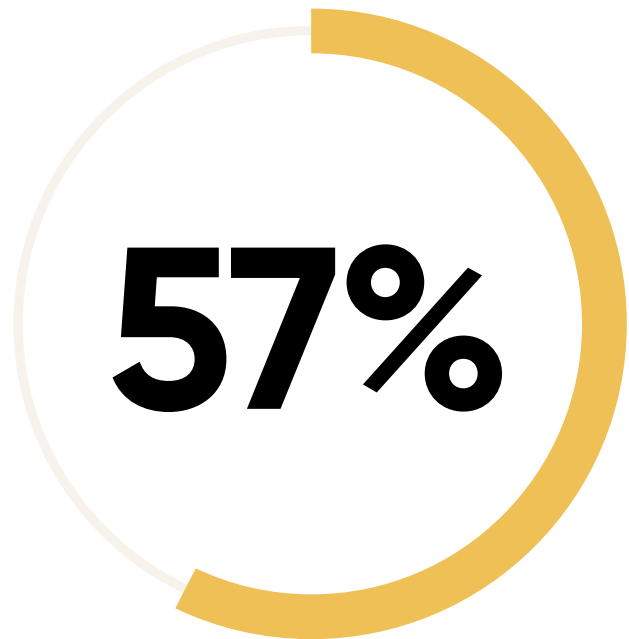
3. Yext proprietary data, 2020



Second only to product quality, a majority of consumers (57%) say they trust brands based on how that brand treats them when they need help. Within this category, the most important reasons for trusting a brand include that it has always treated the consumer and others well (39% global, 46% U.S.), and that it quickly addresses questions and customer service problems (36% global, 35% U.S.).⁴ This actually has a massive impact on a business' bottom line. Trust is almost as important to consumers in their buying decisions as quality and value.⁵

Giving customers the essential information they need, everywhere they search, is key to winning and keeping consumer trust. And delivering official answers is mission critical. In this paper, you'll learn why – and how your brand can deliver on that promise while also maximizing ROI.

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4. 2019 Edelman Trust Study

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If you're not delivering answers on your website, your customers will look elsewhere.

In recent weeks, every business in the world has worked on their COVID-19 customer communications. They've scrambled to provide reassurance, as well as to issue important fact-based updates on changing hours of operation, rescheduled events, and inventory restocks – among innumerable other details regarding business and safety. COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of how businesses operate, and there's no end to the number of specific questions consumers are seeking answers to across different industries.

Even if you never thought of fielding customer questions as a pillar of your brand's customer service strategy (and chances are, it should've always been), answering their questions is critical right now. This task is made all the more complex by the fact that customers are asking extremely unique questions that brands aren't always prepared to answer on their websites. Yext research has already seen on-site searches for topics like the efficacy of Lysol, how hotels clean their rooms, whether flying is safe, and so much more.

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Customers are asking more questions like:

- Are you seeing patients?
- Should patients call ahead or walk in if they feel ill?
- Do you offer testing? If so, where?
- How do I protect myself?
- What are your urgent care hours? Will these be extended?

This shows us something important. Despite your brand's best efforts to proactively communicate what you believe is top-of-mind for your customers, they'll inevitably have new questions that you didn't necessarily see coming – or they'll ask questions in ways you didn't anticipate. Those questions might come as the result of a crisis, such as a natural disaster, health crisis, market crash, or instance of prolonged political instability – but as consumers continue to search for more things, more often,⁶ it's an increasingly common issue. You simply cannot predict every single question a customer might have, or how they might frame that question in a conversational search.

This is a moment when your website becomes your most valuable asset. It's your primary tool for reflecting your customers' interests and concerns, and surfacing the information they're looking for about your business. But you won't know what your customers want and need if you don't have sophisticated ways to *listen* to what they're asking online. And if you don't use this feedback to provide the right answers, you won't keep their attention. The average person stays on a webpage for less than 15 seconds. Additionally, 68% of people say they would not return to a site that provided a poor search experience.⁷ Neglecting to cultivate an exceptional search experience for customers leaves you open to a significant risk that they will turn away from your brand – which likely means turning towards a competitor.

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Quickly delivering the accurate, intuitive answers your customers are looking for both builds brand trust and keeps them on your site, making them more likely to transact. Reliably providing answers isn't just about creating a positive customer experience for the sake of brand perception – it's directly tied to conversion. Given that search is critical for customer acquisition and retention, let's dive into how your brand can succeed in this area.

6. [SEO Tribunal, 2018](#)

7. [Forrester, 2015](#)

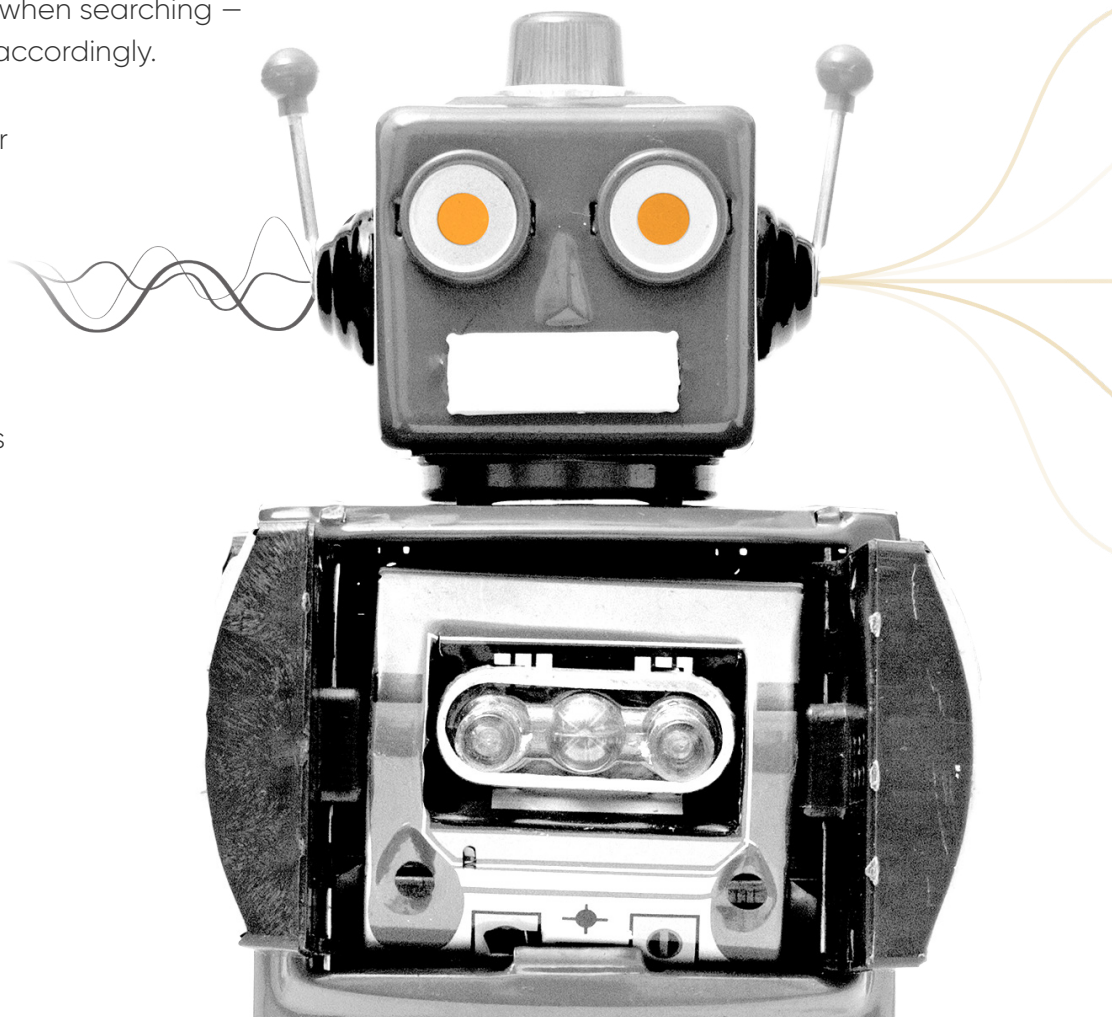
Your ability to deliver answers depends on understanding precisely how your customers are asking questions, and what they ultimately want to know when they ask them.

The first step to creating an elevated search experience is understanding what people are asking about your brand. The results may surprise you, both in the context of this present crisis and in general. But accessing this data is critical. It plays an important role in informing the custom content you develop, and how you provide relevant answers that cause customers to convert.

Beyond assessing what information about your brand people are commonly pursuing, the key is understanding what exactly a customer wants to know, or what action they are ultimately looking to perform.

To do this, you must make sure your website's search functionality is optimized for discerning a customer's true intent when searching – and delivering answers accordingly.

Understanding customer search intent is key to providing answers that drive conversions. To achieve this, your site search architecture needs to be able to understand and process natural language.



As advances in natural language processing (NLP) have made search engines able to process and answer longer, more detailed queries, users have learned that they can simply ask for something – whether by typing into a search box, or speaking aloud to Alexa, Siri, or Cortana – and the search engine will understand the intent behind their query and give them exactly what they want. With this important advancement, the search paradigm has fundamentally changed from being based on using keywords to produce a list of links, to “hearing” complete questions and providing relevant, contextual answers. People now expect these answers to natural language questions wherever they search, including on your website.

Here's an example:

If you're a haircare brand, your customer probably isn't searching just for the keyword “shampoo.” He or she is searching for “Best shampoo and conditioner combination for dry hair.” This longer, conversational search isn't aimed at learning about shampoo; it's showcasing a clear intent to find and purchase products for a certain hair type. Surfacing a series of links that mention the keyword “shampoo” isn't a sufficient response because it isn't serving your customer's intent, which makes it less likely that they will convert and act on their intent to buy a product. On the other hand, a great answer to that on-site search would be a product page for a shampoo and conditioner set specifically made for dry hair with a built-in purchase button.

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The path to a search experience that meets consumers' increasingly high standards is also greatly bolstered by having a knowledge graph. Your knowledge graph feeds into a system that delivers on-site answers, bringing everything a customer might want to know to the surface. Today, that might be questions about a business' preparation and operations related to coronavirus; it could be guidance on what health actions customers should take to stay safe. In the long term, it could be anything. But here's what is always true: Failure to produce these answers will likely result in a customer turning to a location or brand they feel is doing more to help and support them. This clear cause-and-effect relationship is true on any given day, but in times of crisis, emotional responses will be even more pronounced. If you fail to deliver answers to a customer right now, their sense of having been failed will feel bigger and weigh more negatively against your brand than during other moments.

In other words, it's always essential for a brand to dependably perform well around search, but the stakes are considerably higher during high-stress times and periods of uncertainty, like the one we're collectively experiencing as a result of COVID-19.

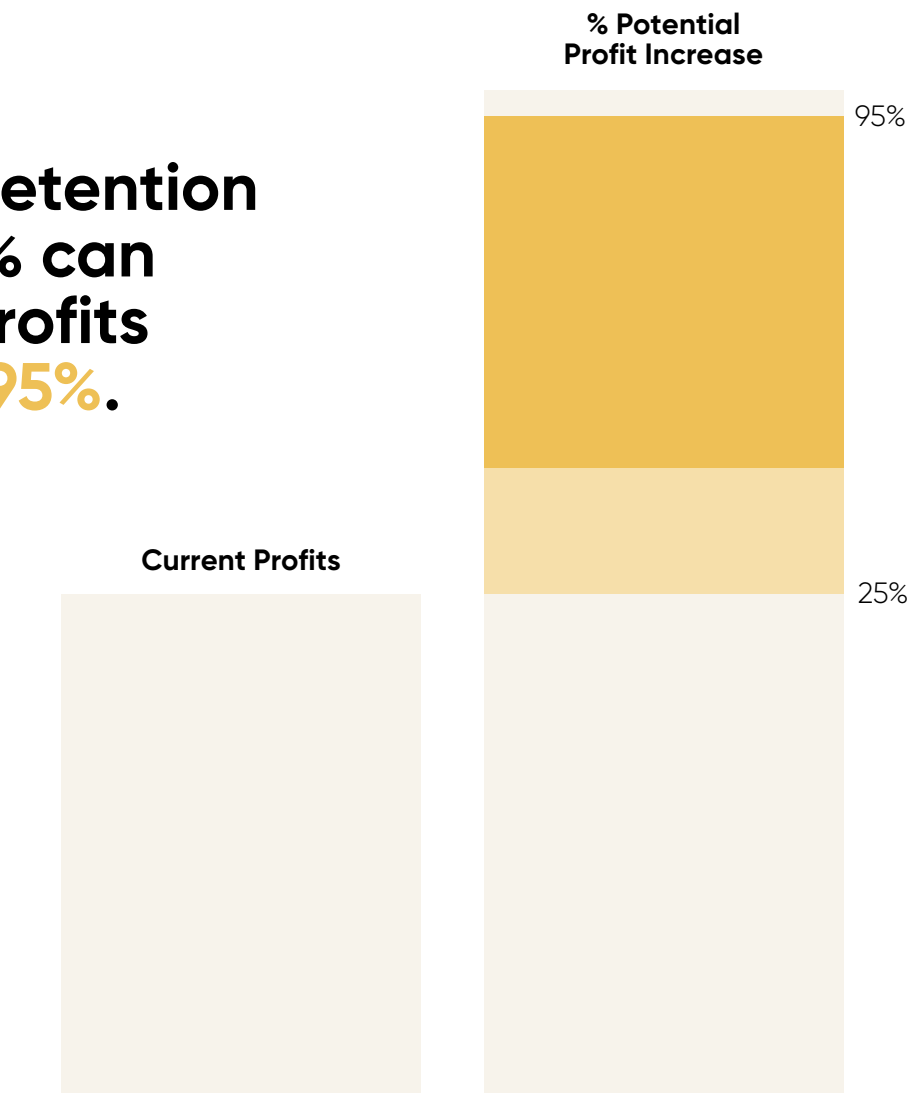


Cleaning protocols during coronavirus



More than anything else, the way you respond to customers in times of high need will make or break their trust in your brand, and trust is what creates loyalty and advocacy. Driving loyalty like this doesn't just feel good for you and your customers who love you – it literally pays. It can cost five times more to attract a new customer than to retain an existing one,⁸ and increasing customer retention rates by 5% can increase profits by 25% to 95%, according to research done by Frederick Reichheld of Bain & Company.⁹

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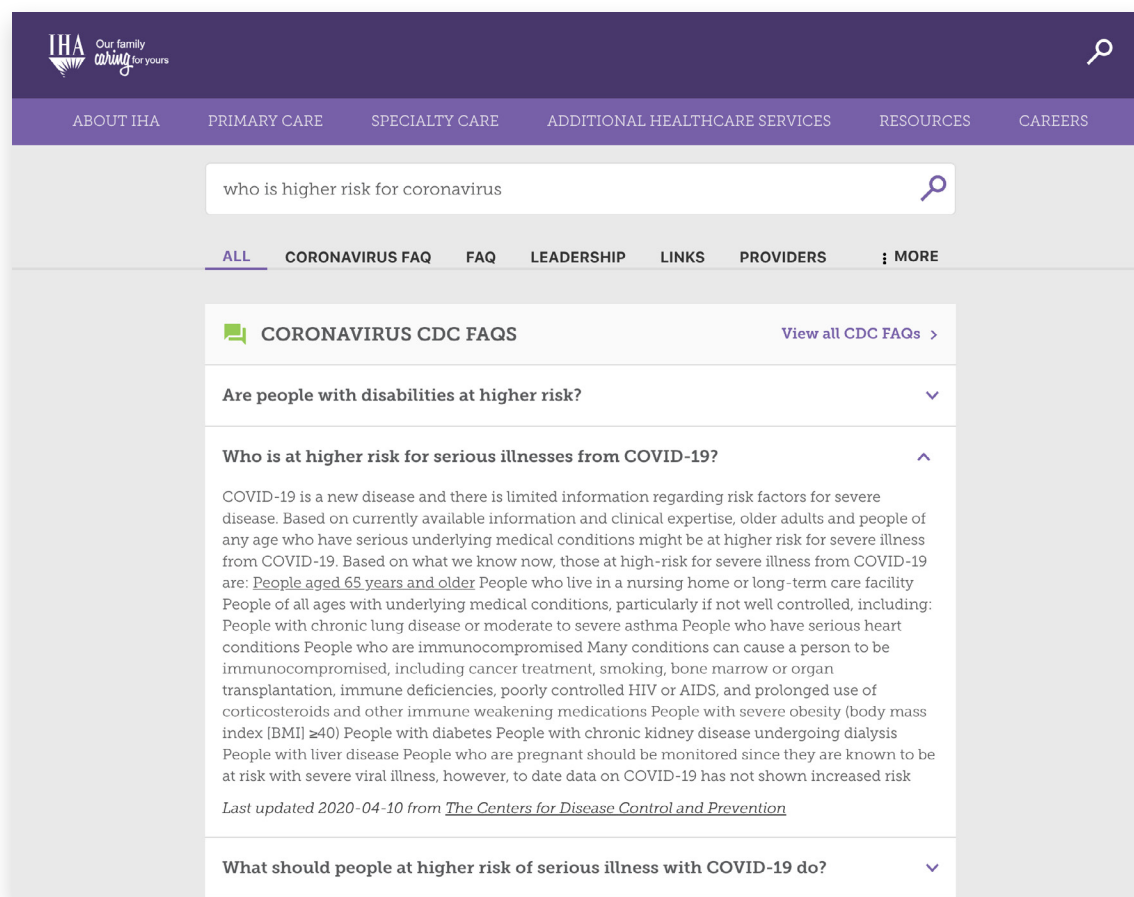


8. [Invesp, 2018](#)

9. [Bain & Company, 2018](#)

What does this look like in practice?

Let's look at how IHA systems has incorporated the most recent CDC information into its website to deliver customers the answers they need.



As a health system, providing CDC-verified information in a direct answer – no clicking through links required – disseminates critical facts more easily. Official answers surfaced without effort cannot be overvalued in a digital economy defined by a high bar for performance from brands and a very fleeting window within which to succeed or fail. And what's at stake is the very livelihood of a brand's business. In every industry, businesses need to invest their efforts around search with a seriousness and diligence befitting the possible returns and losses that are on the line.

To be in control of the information consumers are finding about your brand, **you must extend your search experience endeavor beyond your own website.**

Research shows that people search 3–4x per day¹⁰ (and that figure is now likely higher due to the present crisis). But your customers aren't just turning to your website to search for answers – they're asking them via third-party search experiences like Google, Alexa, Bing, and other services. Optimizing for organic search is key to a great customer experience, and to driving higher ROI.

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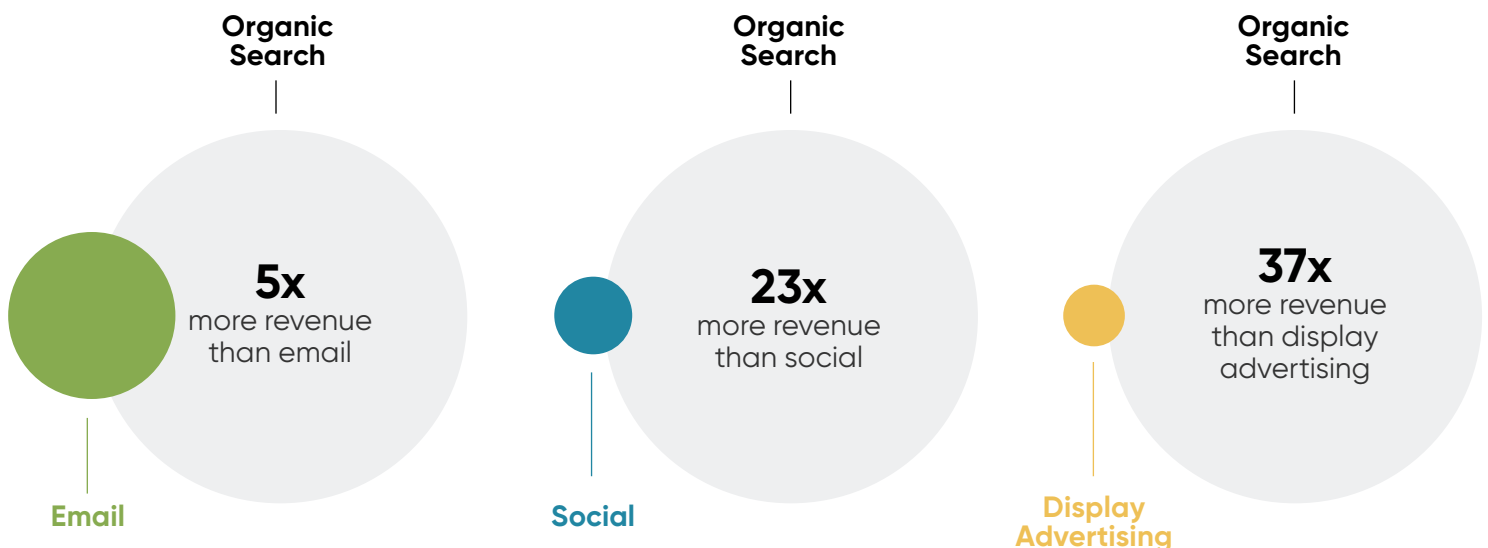
Yext data shows that clicks to initiate phone calls and to populate directions to a business originating from search results have surged in recent weeks for industries like grocery, pharmacy, and healthcare. The businesses consumers end up patronizing are the ones that show up in search results with clear, correct answers. People need to know who is open and when and where they are located, and in this time of uncertainty, ready access to that kind of accurate, up-to-date information is the only brand moment that wins the day over all the other options. This isn't a situational anomaly – this is an extreme case study that should inform every company's all-the-time strategy.

10. [SEO Tribunal, 2019](#)

It's easy to see why more people are asking questions of these essential services as a result of COVID-19. But it showcases a wider trend. People rely on businesses to provide them information via search. More than 80% of U.S. internet users say a search engine is their top choice to find local products or services.¹¹ Online search is how people find new businesses, decide to contact them, and come to rely on them. Ranking for high-intent searches via third-party discovery services is mission critical for brands.

Putting your best foot forward in search is critical, and it's also cost-effective. Recent Yext research related to revenue derived from organic search versus other channels finds that organic search contributes, on average, to a more significant portion of online revenue than other channels – 5x more than email, 23x more than social, and 37x more than display advertising.

Revenue derived from organic search versus other channels



11. [eMarketer, 2017](#)

Brands are always looking to maximize ROI. But during times of macro economic uncertainty, marketing budgets are often slashed first,¹² frequently by as much as 10–30%. As we begin to see the economic ripple effects of COVID-19, marketers will likely look to move ad spend from low-ROI sources like display or TV to *high*-ROI sources like organic search. This reallocation and focusing of marketing spend can help brands weather the financial crisis in the short term, but it will also set them up for future success. It's also a telling exercise in understanding which channels are most essential to a business's core KPIs. Prioritizing your search experience helps you meet your customers at the moments where they already need you, and optimizing search performance during times of crisis will illuminate what strategy you should be employing all the time.

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If a customer has an urgent need and conducts a search, that's a pivotal moment. It could be something as simple as asking if your store is still open for a late-night grocery run, or it could be as dire as a parent who needs to find out if one of your physicians can see their sick child right away. Either way, they're looking for answers – and they'll trust a brand that can deliver them quickly, seamlessly, and accurately.

11. [eMarketer, 2017](#)

The data backs up the idea that the majority of people say they trust brands for reasons related to how they're treated when searching for help.¹³ The fact is, immediacy often trumps pre-existing loyalty. According to Lisa Gevelber, Google's VP of Marketing, "When someone has a want or need, they turn to their smartphone for help. When a need arises, people turn to search and YouTube to look for answers, discover new things, and make decisions. We call these intent-filled moments, micro-moments. And they're the best opportunity marketers have to connect with people at the exact moment they are looking for something."

If you're not delivering answers everywhere customers are searching, you're losing the immediacy battle. Make sure your brand is ready to connect with your customers at these moments of high-intent by investing in your search experience.

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12. [Forbes, 2020](#)

13. Edelman Trust Survey, 2019







The ultimate source for official answers about a business online should be the business itself. However, when consumers ask questions on company websites, too often they are left in the dark with wrong answers. Yext (NYSE: YEXT), the Search Experience Cloud, solves this problem by organizing a business's facts so it can provide official answers to consumer questions – wherever people search. Starting with the company website, then extending across search engines and voice assistants, businesses around the world, like Taco Bell, Marriott, and Jaguar Land Rover—as well as organizations like the U.S. State Department—trust Yext to radically improve the search experience on their websites and across the entire search ecosystem.

Yext's mission is to help businesses and organizations around the world deliver official answers everywhere people search. Yext has been named a Best Place to Work by Fortune and Great Place to Work®, as well as a Best Workplace for Women. Yext is headquartered in New York City with offices in Amsterdam, Berlin, Chicago, Dallas, Geneva, London, Miami, Milan, Paris, San Francisco, Shanghai, Tokyo, and the Washington, D.C. area—and work-from-home offices all around the world.

For more information, visit yext.com.