



Revising Addiction Treatment Digital Marketing in Real Time

The newest tech tool in addiction treatment target marketing may be the last one you'll ever need



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The year 2021 must rank as one of the most uncertain years on record. It began in the shadow of 2020, still heavily stricken by a worldwide pandemic. Yet, as we approach mid-2021, the picture looks very different. As a result, there will be numerous implications for behavioral healthcare digital marketing.

The chaotic scene of 2020 had dramatic and unsettling effects on not only substance use patterns but also how treatment could be delivered. Relapse and instances of recidivism not seen since the Great Recession of 2008. Dreamscape Marketing observed a 15–25% increase in demand for treatment among our clients during that time. Sadly, that percentage is unlikely to decline in a post-COVID environment.

Trends & Their Impacts On Addiction Treatment Spending

When the pandemic took hold, consumer habits and data shifts changed the landscape of addiction and addiction treatment. To better understand how it affects us in 2021, we need to revisit what happened when COVID-19 became a defining factor of 2020.

Overdose Deaths Rose to Record Levels

As most people in the addiction treatment space could have predicted, the pandemic directly impacted the rising trend of overdose deaths throughout 2020. More than 81,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in the 12 months ending in May of 2020. That's the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period.¹ It's not hard to guess why this happened... anxiety, uncertainty, social isolation... these are all flash points for increased substance use. We were looking at record levels of addiction as an epidemic within the pandemic.

The rise in relapse rates was also alarming. Experts in the addiction treatment field have seen a pronounced surge in relapses during the pandemic, even among patients who had been sober for more than five years. Dreamscape Marketing's client-reported averages at residential levels of care indicated 8-30% more alumni re-admissions and referrals in 2020 as compared to the year before. During that time, outpatient slightly outpaced inpatient levels of care while telehealth and mobile alumni app usage both increased.

Treatment Needs Went Up in 2020 While Treatment Availability Went Down

During the pandemic, demand for behavioral health services increased, while supply decreased. A National Council for Behavioral Health survey indicates that 52% (of more than 300 institutions polled) saw a rise in the need for services. At the same time, 54% of institutions had to close programs. Of those remaining open, nearly 65% had to cancel, reschedule, or decline patients in need. Consequently, these facilities lost 22.6% of their revenue during the pandemic.²

To deal with the situation, nearly 80% of treatment providers began to offer virtual or telehealth services, which was a massive increase from the percentage of providers offering it in 2019. This technology adoption is unlikely to be temporary. A full 64% of providers say that they plan to continue offering it post-COVID.³

Substances Used During the Pandemic

In hindsight, increased substance use during a pandemic featuring long-term quarantine and social distancing was basically inevitable. The question became, what form did the use take?

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p1218-overdose-deaths-covid-19.html>

² https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200903_NCBH_SCR.png

³ <https://www.naatp.org/resources/blog/impact-covid-19-addiction-treatment>

Near the beginning of the pandemic, cocaine was reported to be up 10%, heroin was up 13%, methamphetamine was up 20%, and non-prescribed fentanyl use was 32% higher.⁴ This pattern was reflected in our clients' admissions trends throughout 2020 and into 2021.

Even as vaccinations return us to something closer to "normal" throughout the rest of 2021, this increased market demand for substances is likely to continue. As an industry, it will be necessary to accurately communicate with those in need at this level of demand in the places they are turning for help.

What 2020 Tells Us About the Challenges of Digital Marketing In a Post-COVID Environment

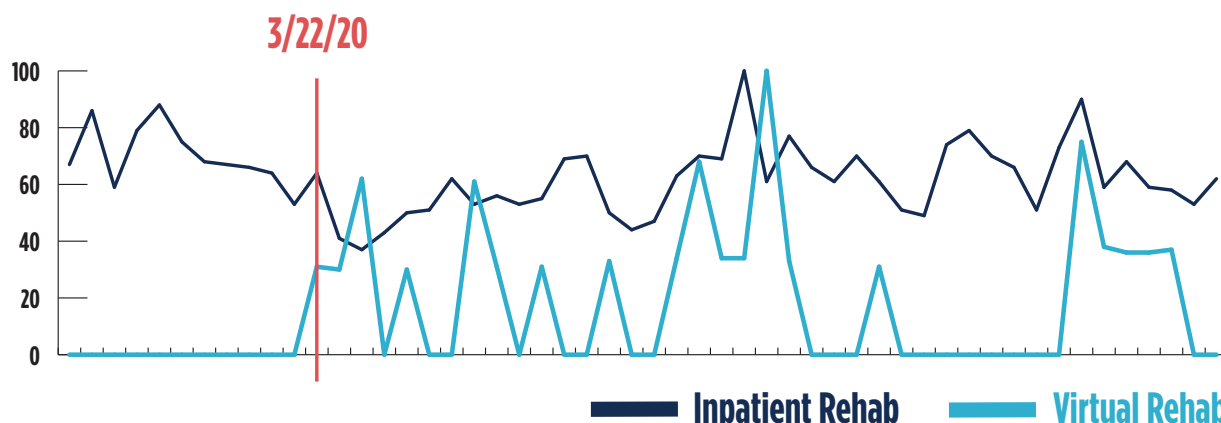
Most addiction treatment centers (including residential) remained open even during the most dire stages of the pandemic as a frontline health resource and critical lifeline. Many, however, saw reduced patient caseloads. We observed that facilities experienced as much as 30% to 50% lower-than-normal revenues in 2020, depending on their particular model and physical location. This coincided with a major shift away from inpatient to more outpatient treatment, primarily due to desire for local care because patients weren't interested in traveling for treatment. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that "Addiction Treatment Near Me"-related hyperlocal searches on Google increased more than 200% in 2020.

The increased focus on local search inquiries has been unmistakable. Based on 2020 client data, we have revised client targeting strategies for organic and paid search efforts for many of our clients to be within a 150-mile radius. This methodology targets individuals who can easily drive to a center for treatment. As the effects of mass vaccinations become more apparent, the number of patients willing to travel will likely increase over the second half of 2021.

It was the lack of desire to travel for treatment that opened up telehealth as a viable treatment option in the first place. It's worth noting that the shift toward telemedicine/virtual visits resulted in more substance use disorder patients receiving care in total. By the end of 2020, telehealth treatment searches and engagement were up roughly 1,900% from the year before. Even in a post-COVID environment, telehealth visits are likely to remain at elevated volumes due to the fact that the new consumer technology has been widely accepted.

⁴ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/09/addressing-unique-challenges-covid-19-people-in-recovery>

Figure 1. Google Trends 2020 Search Volume: “Inpatient Rehab” vs. “Virtual Rehab”



Another consequence of 2020 is that users' internet searches have grown increasingly less focused. Consequently, it became more challenging to connect with them as care providers.

To overcome this situation, behavioral healthcare websites must strive to deliver quickly and effectively to attract and retain treatment seekers. Without question, websites need to point visitors directly to the content they were searching for. For example, if people are looking for alcohol detox and your ad points them to your web page featuring information about heroin

detox, there's a good chance that they will quickly leave your site because you didn't immediately provide what they wanted. While this action item has always been relevant, it's more important than ever in the post-COVID era.

61% of users will try a different site if they can't find what they're looking for quickly. (Source: Google)

Despite the anxiety and confusion that the pandemic initially caused in the behavioral healthcare community, there is cause for genuine hope as 2021 progresses. With widespread safety precautions and the timely arrival of multiple highly effective vaccines, the industry has generally recovered faster than many operators would have predicted at the outset. In fact, 2021 has been off to a strong start with traffic, phone calls and forms trending upward across all levels of care.

The Advantage of Seeing Substance Trends In Real Time

Throughout this whitepaper, we've been reviewing drug and alcohol abuse trends taking place over a period of 18+ months. Although it's good to be informed of these trends, remember that they've already occurred. As you plan your 2021 marketing adjustments, historical data

isn't enough to effectively target your communities current demographics of need. Emerging data trends offer a greater ability to adapt to regional trends occurring near individual addiction treatment centers.

Think of the situation like you're the coach of a professional sports team. During a game, you don't really want to rely on information from the previous season because it will be of limited value. You may have new players, and the opposing team may have new players. Therefore, last year's stats are irrelevant. Would you as a decision maker be satisfied with that? Certainly not. If you're in the third-quarter of the game, knowing what happened in the second quarter will mean more than what happened in last season's games. Winning the game depends heavily on up-to-date intelligence.

Now, transpose that thought to the substance use landscape. While it's good to know what was happening six months ago, it's even better to know what's happening right now.

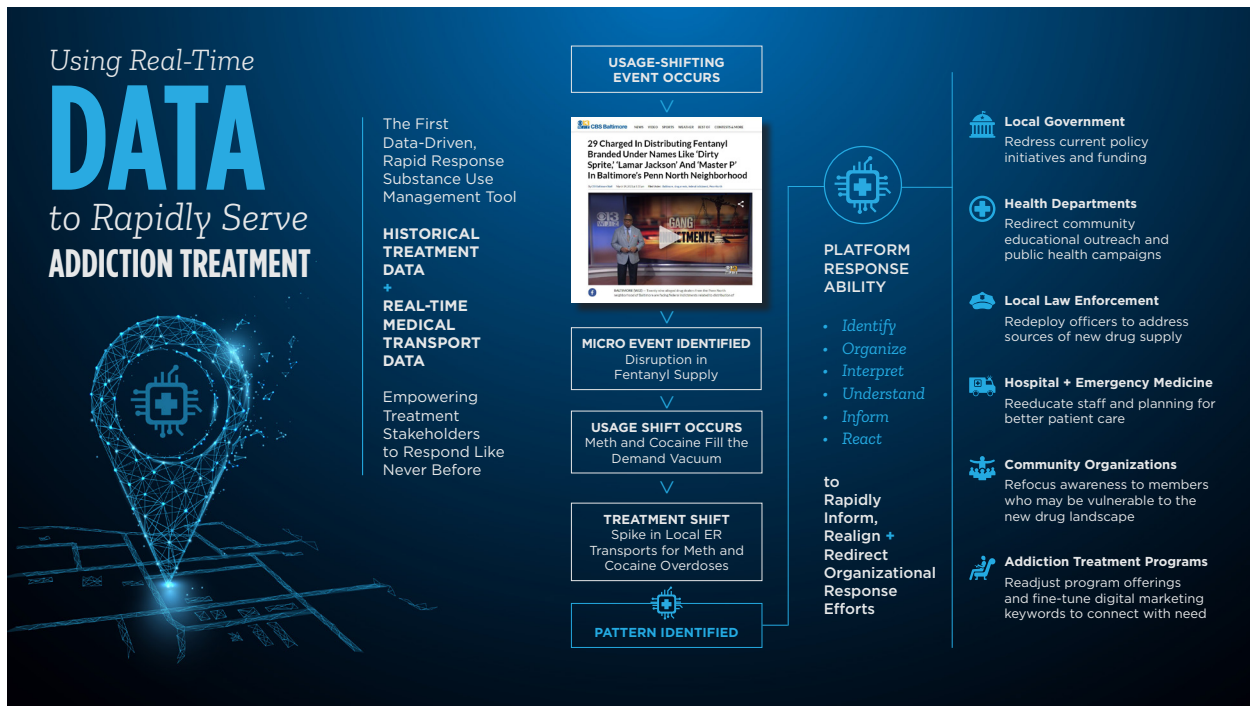
The need to have the most current information is clear. It's a very common occurrence for addiction treatment programs to witness sudden drops in phone calls for a certain kind of treatment, only to be bombarded by prospective patients for totally different treatment. Usually, they're caught off-guard by these events and they struggle to adjust.

Addiction treatment centers would better serve their patients if they could plan for unexpected trends or events. They can't really do this armed only with information six months or a year old. Must they operate this way? In a word, no.

Is The Unpredictable Actually Predictable?

Like the professional sports team's coach, addiction treatment programs can now source up-to-date information to make better tactical decisions. Rather than reacting to the effects of trends, addiction treatment centers can see a trend as it unfolds in real time. If a substance use hotspot heats up, detox or rehab centers can know that. They may even have an immediate understanding of why that hotspot is flaring up.

To better illustrate this phenomenon, let's look at an example. Imagine that a fentanyl bust occurs in Baltimore. A real-time system of tracking information identifies this drug bust. Now imagine this same intelligence-gathering system identifying the beginning of a shift toward meth and cocaine use in the Baltimore area shortly after. The implications are clear: meth and cocaine are being sold at a higher volume to compensate for a reduced availability of fentanyl on Baltimore streets.



Now imagine that you're an addiction treatment program serving Baltimore with access to all of this information. Imagine knowing what's going to happen in the next months rather than being forced to simply guess.

In the past, this hypothetical treatment facility in Baltimore wouldn't know what was happening until after it had already been swamped with patients presenting for meth and cocaine abuse. Obviously, that situation would decrease its ability to serve the community.

The Benefits of Real-Time Intelligence to Your Digital Marketing

Dreamscape Marketing recently signed an agreement with big-data processing partner BioSpatial to provide an effective way for addiction treatment centers to take advantage of access to real-time data. BioSpatial initially developed its real-time intelligence gathering capability to identify health-related data sources that could provide early warning of biological weapons and infectious disease outbreaks such as Covid-19. Now, their data-gathering capabilities are being used to inform the healthcare field and specifically substance abuse and mental health admissions trends nationwide.

Largely untapped in behavioral healthcare, proprietary artificial intelligence data can be a game changer when used correctly. Our clients now have the opportunity to clearly identify their area's most likely treatment requirement in the immediate future.

Essentially, this data is a crystal ball that features:

- + Nearly real-time access to patient prevalence
- + Indicators that provide insight into demand for specific treatment services
- + The ability to view prevalence and trends according to specific parameters, including geography, time, patient demographics and destination facility
- + Fully interactive and customized search, visualization and download capabilities

All of the above benefits mean that addiction treatment programs can offer more relevant marketing messaging with more rapidly delivered messaging. There's nothing worse than a marketing message that was more relevant six or eight months ago than it is now. Being able to fine-tune marketing messages according to what's happening now means your content can be more relevant and effective. This means capturing more search engine inquiries because you're writing about what people are currently interested in. For example, if meth use is going up in your area and you're publishing blogs about that very subject, you will likely get increased views.

Another vital benefit of this intelligence is the ability to increase budgeting efficiency. Decisions about where to put budgeting dollars can be informed by real-time data. No longer does a budget need to allocate money in areas where it may not actually be needed. The goal should always be to put money where it will do the most good. Budgeting efficiency was important before the pandemic, and it will be important when it's over as well.

Although we are primarily concerned with real-time data as it affects marketing, the benefits extend into organizational areas as well. These data can be used to operationalize knowledge across all departments. In turn, this could assist in determining some administrative policies.

As we look at ways to revise digital marketing for the second half of 2021 and beyond, the benefits of this intelligence could not be any more clear: no addiction treatment center has to ever operate blindly again. It's no longer necessary to simply react to trends. Instead, healthcare facilities can now actually see them forming. Having this real-time data means being able to pivot resources and marketing messaging to where they're the most needed.

The pandemic was an unprecedented and unexpected event. However, its rippling after-effects can be better understood (and planned for) through the analysis of real-time data.

Specializing in the digital marketing needs of elective healthcare organizations since 2005, our mission is to be your business partner in building a modern marketing vehicle, to serve as your guide to digital marketing, and deliver a complete digital presence that delivers highly qualified new resident leads.

Fueled by an in-house team of strategists, developers, designers, writers, organic SEO and paid search experts, data analysts, and account managers, our ROI-focused “healthcare meets hospitality” strategies, deliver consistent growth through a pipeline of qualified new resident leads, obtained through complete connected ethical and modern marketing systems, fueled by efficient budget spend, and continually guided by rapid data-backed adjustments.



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