CONSUMER ATTORNEY MARKETING GROUP

How Mobility Data Can Guide Your Advertising Strategy in Times of Crisis

By Steve Nober

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been a defining moment in our history that is still unfolding. As the restrictions began in March, all organizations, including law firms, had to look at the way they did business, and significantly, how they spoke to their markets.

At first, the reaction of some was to pull their advertising altogether. Others looked at their strategies and shifted their messaging and tactics accordingly and made the best of a difficult situation.

We've dealt with disasters before. Blizzards, hurricanes and other natural events happen regularly and, despite their devastating impact, are predictable and temporary occurrences. However, COVID-19 has far-reaching effects that will likely change the way our industry does business for years to come.

One bright spot for many has been the ability to stay connected via technology. Advancements like smart phones, video conferencing, social media, artificial intelligence, and more have all made the pandemic and shutdown much more manageable in many ways.

In looking at ways to help law firms better strategize their marketing campaigns during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, we discovered a resource that could provide significant benefits for our business: **mobility tracking.**

Both Apple and Google continually monitor how far the users of its devices travel each day and publish the data based on regions. The United States Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) uses this data, which has been aggregated and anonymized, in order to create its COVID-19 models. We took this one step further by comparing this data with our own response volume and costs-per efficiency of current marketing campaigns.

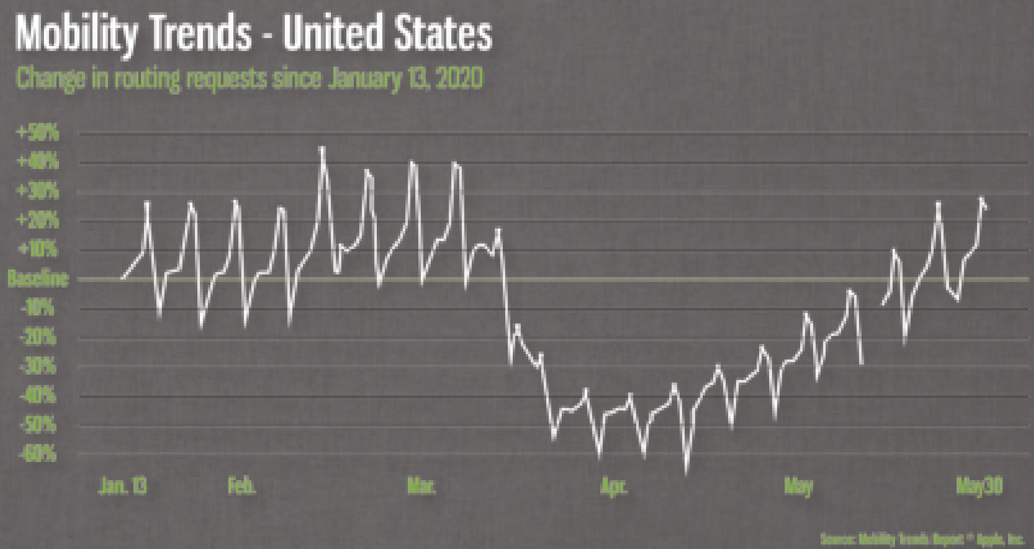
This unique analysis of data helped us gain a better picture of how to best effectively leverage ad campaigns during the height of the crisis and may provide important insight into how to strategize your marketing campaigns as we move forward with reopening the economy—and most importantly, how to plan for future events if they do indeed happen.

About Mobility

Mobility, in this context, is a measure of how far a person travels throughout a day. Both Apple and Google collect this information from their phone, smartwatch, and tablet user bases. IHME uses this aggregated, anonymized device information as part of its COVID-19 models. In our analysis, we used data about Apple devices because it offers daily metrics and geographic granularity. Having that level of detail is essential since each state issued their restrictions on different dates, and are reopening businesses at different rates.

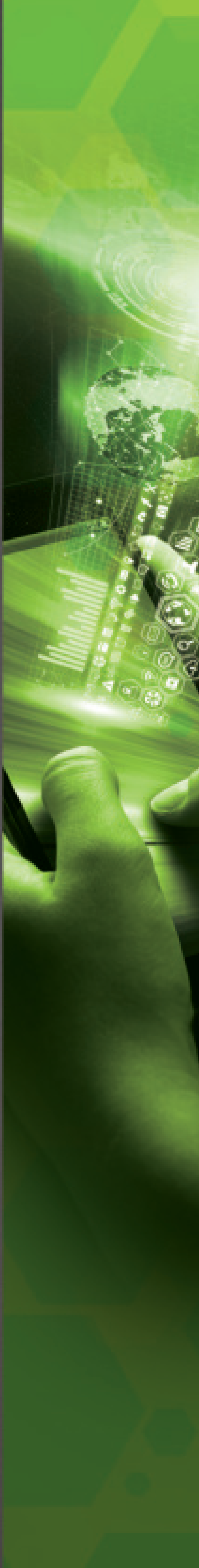
Apple publishes this data as a series of charts that show “a relative volume of directions requests [for Apple Maps] per country/region, sub-region or city compared to a baseline volume on January 13th, 2020.” according to its website. Apple goes on to state that it has no demographic information about its users and that “relative volume has increased since January 13th, consistent with normal, seasonal usage of Apple Maps.”

California was the first state to issue stay-at-home orders on March 19, 2020. Other states followed. But by then, consumers were already limiting their daily travel.



As you can see in the chart above, total U.S. consumer mobility broke from a trailing 7-day moving trendline on March 11. After states started issuing restrictions, the number went sharply downward until April 4, when the average mobility index was 53.1. Apple’s baseline is 100, so this marks a staggering 46.9 index point drop. Even more surprising is that the 7-day average for the week before the restrictions was above the baseline at 117.9 points on March 10—and fell a whopping 65.1 points in less than two weeks.

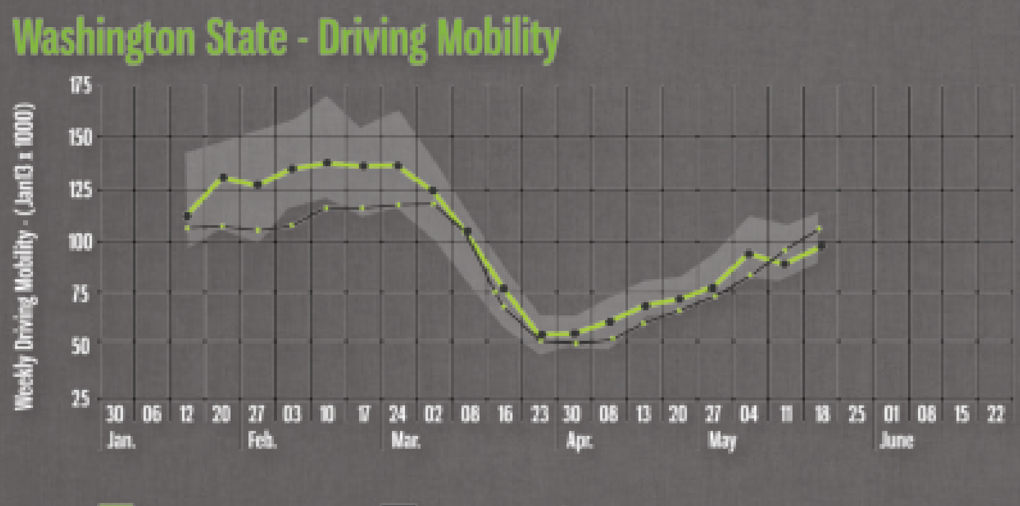
Although this data is alarming, it’s certainly not surprising. COVID-19 hit the United States hard and fast and states had to react quickly to stop its spread.



But what's interesting is when we look more closely by region. For example, Dallas numbers closely resembled the U.S. national average, reaching 50.4 on April 4 and recovering to 75.2 by May 3. On the other hand, New York saw the most significant impact of the COVID-19 restrictions. Mobility there fell to 39.3 on April 1 and climbed back only to 57.1 on May 3. Memphis, however, saw mobility fall to 67.4 on March 27 and by May 4 had nearly returned to the pre-pandemic baseline at 98.1.

As we move past the red stage of the travel restrictions, it's really important to note how different regions within the same state are reacting differently. Let's take a look at Washington state. As many know, Seattle had the first cases of COVID-19 and was one of the epicenters of the national crisis.

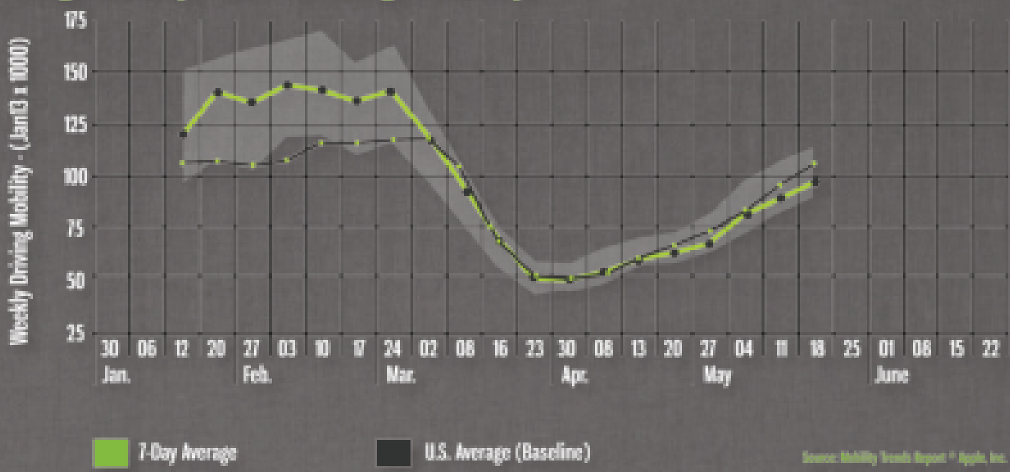
If we look at the overall driving mobility numbers for the state, we'll see that as the crisis hit in mid to late March, there was a huge drop in mobility which bottomed out in early April. As we headed into May, the numbers came back up to the baseline average from January 13.



Source: Mobility Trends Report © Apple, Inc.

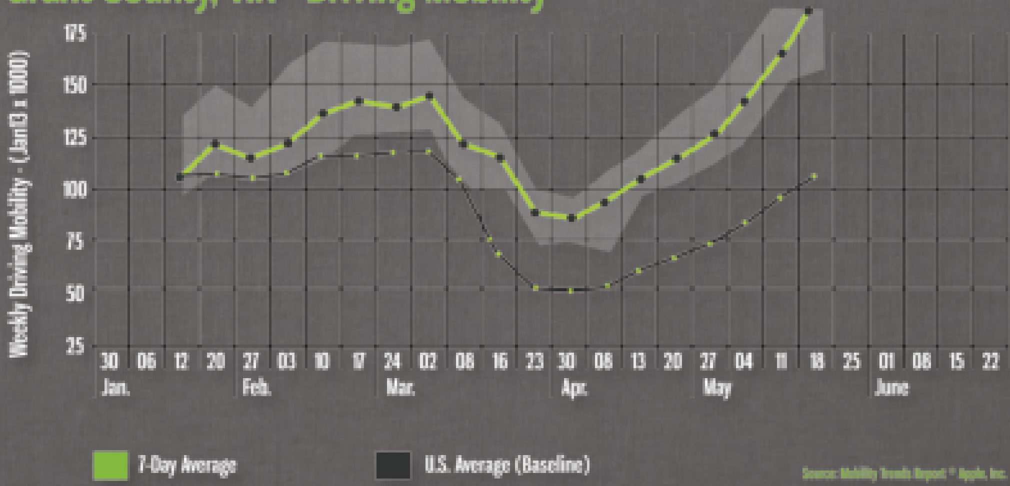
King County, which is primarily made up of the Seattle metro area, had a similar curve to the state's overall numbers. This isn't surprising, as a good percentage of the state population lives there and there were severe travel restrictions in place.

King County, WA - Driving Mobility

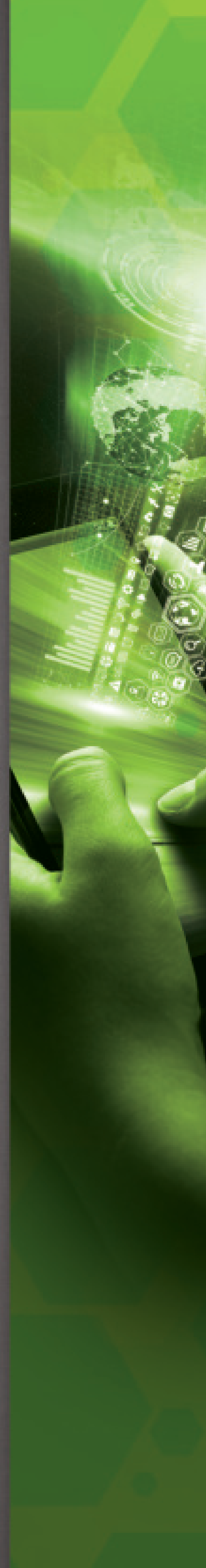


However, if we look at Grant County, which is east of Seattle and west of Spokane and is primarily rural, the numbers are quite different. The driving mobility barely dropped below the baseline during the height of the restrictions and has since well surpassed the numbers from before the COVID-19 crisis began.

Grant County, WA - Driving Mobility



It's important to note that there are other factors at stake, such as the fact that the county is mostly farmland and relies on planting crops, and that weather has been especially good there this spring. However, the fact that we can take this data and analyze these trends at this level of detail is extremely helpful for us as marketers.



Influence on Advertising

CAMG relies on a combination of telephone calls and digital engagement to measure the effectiveness of advertising campaigns. We attribute this information to the media campaign and creative message associated with the response. We then apply analytic tools to the data to isolate statistically meaningful insights and measure campaign successes, and failures.

In our analysis, we adjusted our data to reflect increased media efficiencies [lower ad rates and bonus airings] that CAMG negotiated during the restrictions. We also factored in the different enforcement dates for each market.

We found that the advertising response took longer to bottom out than did consumer mobility, which had an almost immediate drop. Telephone and digital metrics softened at first but did not reach their bottom, on average, until the week of April 27. Then, response volume and “costs-per” reversed and began climbing back to levels consistent with those of late February and early March.

We knew from this data, as well as our own experience, that many people were working at home, or were not working at all. We adjusted our advertising schedules with the thought that more people would be watching in the mornings or afternoons and focused less on early morning news, prime time and late night.

Additionally, we knew that with less people on the road there would be less auto accidents. For our personal injury clients, we adjusted their messaging to more slip and fall or injury cases—or shifted to more brand awareness type messaging.

As stated earlier, no one was quite ready for a global pandemic to strike in 2020. The first reaction of many was to pull ads and plan to retreat until the crisis was over. However, by looking at this data and shifting strategies, our clients were able to retain market share during an otherwise bleak economic time. And the use of the mobility index will help us gauge when individual markets are going back to “business as usual” and instruct us how to advise you in your strategy.

What Does This Tell Us?

The COVID-19 pandemic is like no other event in our lifetimes in terms of its enormous humanitarian and economic effects. However, more so than relatively temporary and isolated occurrences such as hurricanes and blizzards, it offers us a great opportunity to examine how consumers react during a crisis and how it affects their daily lives. Regardless of the tragic events, consumers still need your services and are still making calls to us.

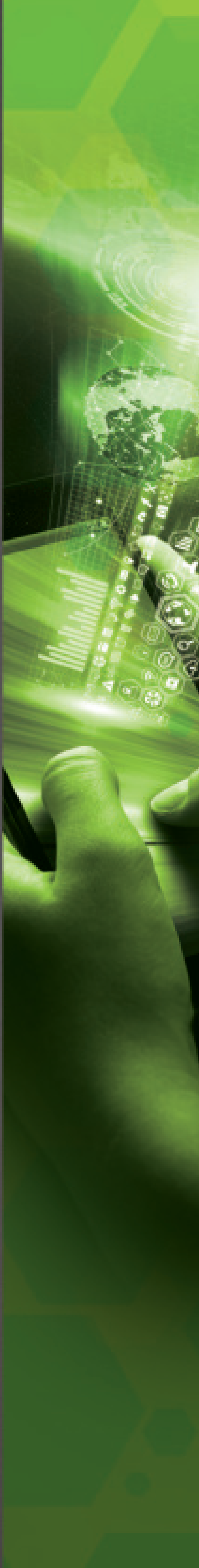
The mobility index is a unique and useful tool that gives us important insight into how consumers in different parts of the country are reacting to the crisis, which as we know, hit certain geographic regions harder at different times. By aggregating this data with the data that we already gather on a regular basis, we can paint a better picture of what messaging, tactics and channels will be the most effective to drive your business. It helped us during the pandemic to help our clients adjust their strategies to turn what could have been a total loss into useful marketing tactics.

Especially now as we look to the future and as states begin their reopening processes, the mobility index helps us see where life is returning to the "new normal" and where things have slowed. Unfortunately, many epidemiologists have predicted that a second wave could happen in the fall and until there is a vaccine or cure for COVID-19, we will not truly be "out of the woods." However, we have learned so much over the past few months about how our country acts in times of national crisis. Mobility tracking is not going away and is a tool we plan to use in our future analysis of market trends.

Although COVID-19 is something we would all love to put behind us, it's important to take what we can from these experiences and put them into what we do—which is to manage the best campaigns possible using the best data and technology possible.

Caveat Emptor

We provide this insight with caution; this is a limited dataset, and underlying data varies by market, media type, and messaging. While our findings are directional, CAMG is confident in the guidance they offer. But no two clients are alike. We continue to respond with strategies that reflect the competitive nature of each market, the media options available in those localities, and now these findings of consumer mobility.



About the Author

Steve Nober, Founder and CEO of Consumer Attorney Marketing Group, has been a major force in the legal industry for over a decade. His expertise covers the full spectrum of legal marketing, from offline, online, and social media marketing to telemarketing, intake and contracting services and medical record retrieval and review.

Employing a staff of over 400, Consumer Attorney Marketing Group operates six service divisions to help law firms with new case acquisition. With CAMG's Legal Marketing Index, Steve makes the agency's proprietary data and marketing trends available to law firms. Recognized as an industry innovator, Steve speaks at over 40 conferences a year on topics including best marketing practices and ethics in advertising.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