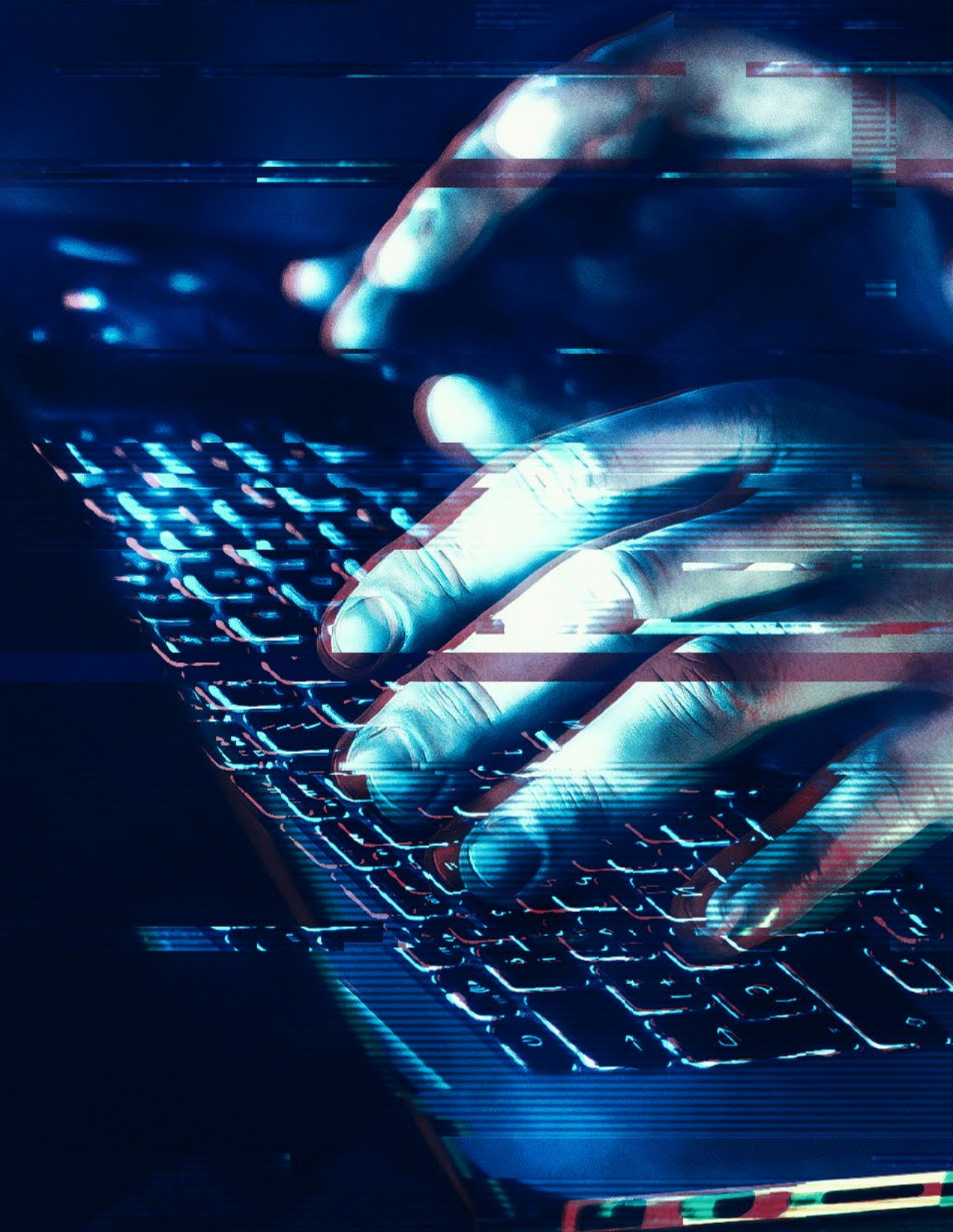




DISRUPTION

HOW THE 2020 PANDEMIC CHANGED EMAIL

STATE OF EMAIL
SPECIAL REPORT



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In marketing, we often talk about disruptions and going viral. In 2020, it was a real virus that turned marketing temporarily upside down. Here's what we learned from an in-depth examination of 2020 email data. We'll talk about what happened, and how we can apply these lessons to improve future campaign performance and win the looming battle for share of inbox.



AN UNPREDICTABLE ONSET

On January 21, 2020, the Center for Disease Control confirmed the first case of the 2019 novel coronavirus in the United States. By March 11, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Within a few short months, the deadly disease would impact businesses across the country and around the world, causing disruptions in services, shortages of goods, and shut-downs.

Companies adapted quickly, scrambling to adjust to disruption, rapidly changing information, and emerging safety guidelines—and moving both their services and workforces virtual wherever they could.

With the public in a heightened state, looking for more information and reassurance around the pandemic, brands switched their communications into high gear. At Validity, we began to observe some major shifts as email subscribers, now quarantined at home, dramatically changed how they consumed information.

Companies poured resources into reaching them by email—even companies who had not traditionally invested in an email strategy began to pivot—using inboxes to communicate new hours and shopping guidelines, share safety precautions, and offer customers and prospects expressions of empathy, support, and solidarity.

By April, overall email volumes were skyrocketing—particularly, emails related to the pandemic. At the end of May, the number of emails with coronavirus keywords in the subject line peaked around 7%, with 1 in every 15 emails featuring a COVID keyword. COVID communications were dramatically impacting email programs and creating lasting changes to the way we communicate during a crisis.

UNDERSTANDING DISRUPTION THROUGH DATA

Since the start, our team has kept a close eye on these trends. Drawing from data in our Validity for Email solution, which helps senders monitor and analyze their email data and identify action plans to build best-in-class programs and drive conversions, we began to unpack data trends in our bi-weekly webinar series.

Observing these patterns gave us valuable insights into how companies use, and people consume, emails during times of disruption. It also shows us some clear signs of a brewing battle for inbox dominance. This paper is our attempt to pull those observations into a cohesive whole— isolating patterns and learnings that might help us in the event of future disruptions and offering email marketers a kind of blueprint for winning more share of inbox in the coming months.



THE FIRST WAVE:

HOW SHORT-TERM DISRUPTION IMPACTED EMAIL STRATEGY



HOW COMPANIES REACTED TO DISRUPTION

When the effects of the coronavirus pandemic began to be felt in the spring of 2020, the first data changes we saw had to do with how companies were reacting to the disruption and how they had pivoted their email strategies in the short term to adapt to the changing environment.

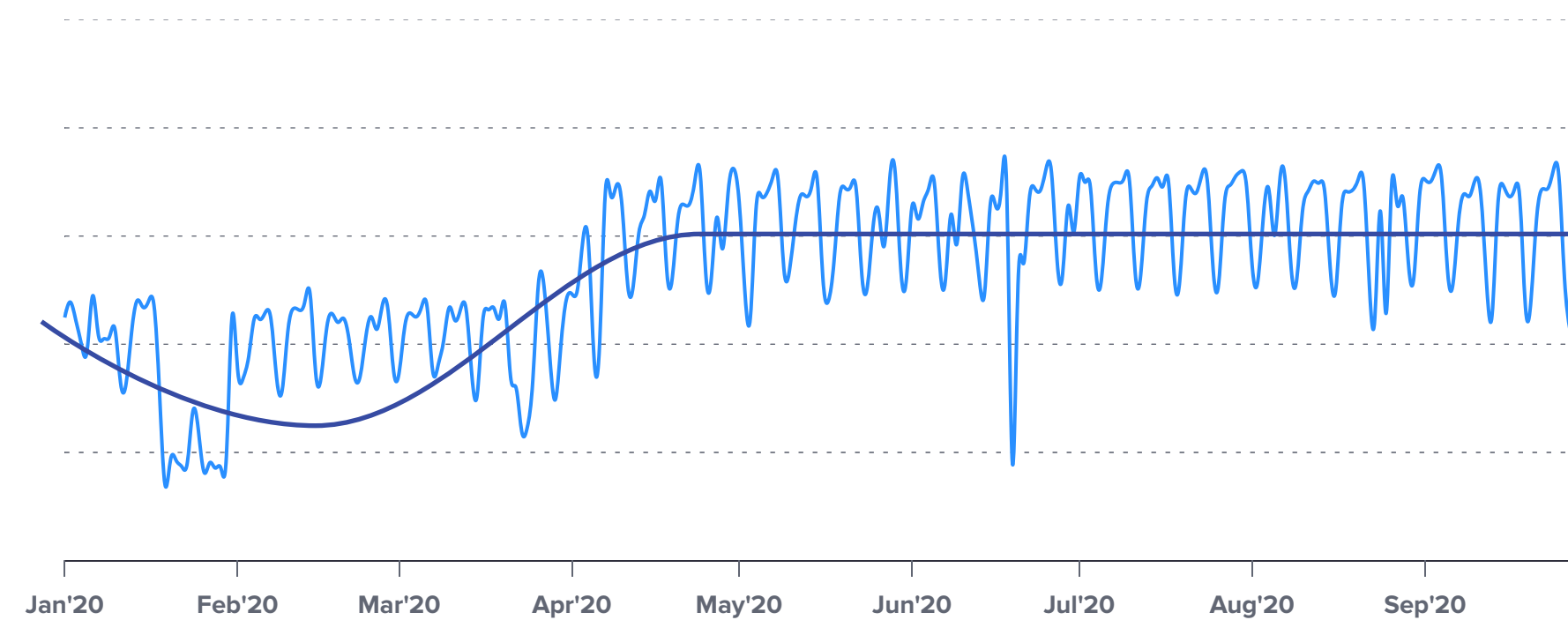
We can break down reactions into four response patterns. Some companies used one of these strategies. Many used all four.



2. COMPANIES INCREASED SEND VOLUMES.

As stay-at-home orders proliferated and people began to quarantine at home, marketers made a bet subscribers would also begin to consume more email. Send volumes skyrocketed during the early weeks of the pandemic and have stayed high ever since. [Figure 3]

Figure 3: Email delivered volume



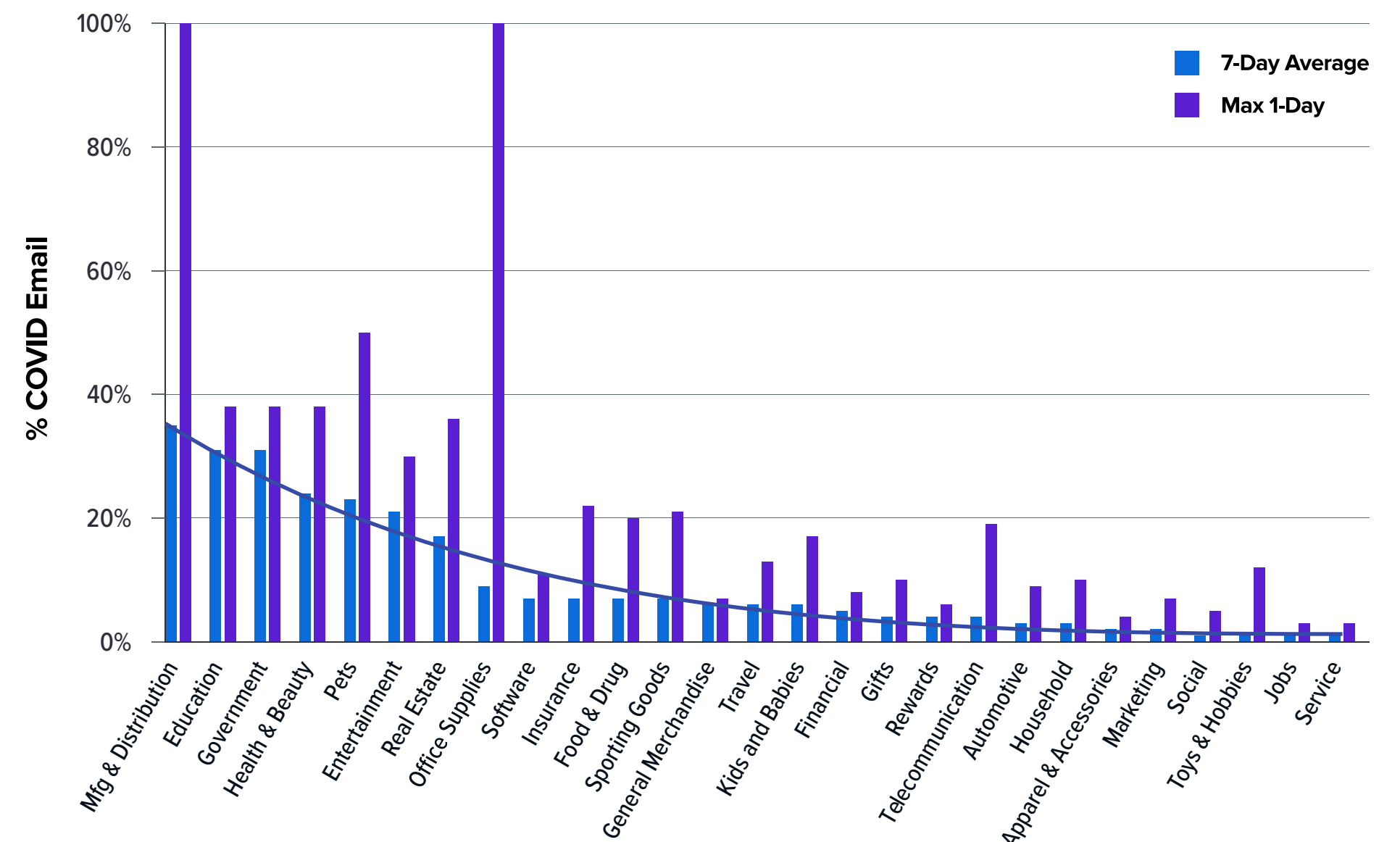
3. COMPANIES BECAME LESS DISCRIMINATING ABOUT MAILING LISTS.

As the volume of email increased, governance faltered. Companies new to email were trying untested or dormant mailing lists. Experienced companies were less likely to segment lists as carefully as they normally would, instead blasting crisis communications to their entire subscriber base, regardless of past subscriber engagement. Both types of lists tended to be less scrubbed and more likely to encounter delivery errors, spam filters, and complaints from recipients.

4. COMPANIES INCREASED THEIR PROPORTION OF COVID-RELATED COMMUNICATIONS.

For many industries, emails were preoccupied with the pandemic, superseding or derailing previously scheduled promotions or campaigns. Some industries had a predictably high proportion of emails focused on the pandemic—such as government, healthcare, education, and manufacturing. However, we noted some surprising industry-specific differences, as seen in Figure 4, such as a lower proportion of pandemic-related emails from the travel, gifts, marketing, and social categories.

Figure 4: Proportion of pandemic-related emails by industry



HOW EMAIL PROVIDERS REACTED TO DISRUPTION

In the previous section, we noted marketing lists became more liberal and less discriminating during the first wave of the pandemic. When senders don't follow careful email practices, they usually pay the price. Email providers and ISPs will routinely filter, mark, and block domains with a reputation for spamming, making it difficult or impossible to get placement in subscriber inboxes.

Most senders are well-intentioned, but when they dig deep into an untested database of contacts or “wake the dead” on dormant lists, they also tend to resurface a lot of recycled, pristine, or typo spam traps—which can lead to bounce-backs and negative feedback affecting a sender's reputation.

With so many new emails churning, how did email providers react to the spike in email sends and dramatically lower governance? Did businesses see their reputations tank as a result of pandemic communications?

Here are some of the ways email providers responded—and continue to respond—to the pandemic crisis:



HOW EMAIL PROVIDERS REACTED TO DISRUPTION

1. MAILBOX PROVIDERS EASED THEIR LOGIC.

Typically, sending more email to a less discriminate list will result in more filtering, spam traps, and a major hit to reputation. But because of the exceptional nature of the crisis, that's not exactly what happened in 2020.

We did see a dramatic escalation in trap hits during the early weeks of the pandemic, as seen in Figure 5 below. Traps flared in mid-March, but stabilized by mid-April, and senders did not see a major hit in their ability to deliver mail. That's because mailbox providers, who have been steadily tightening their reject logic over the past two years, seem to have loosened that logic somewhat in recent months, letting more mail flow through.

[Figure 6]

This may be in part because mailbox providers seem to have been more reluctant to mark email related to the pandemic as spam. In fact, COVID-19-related emails were about 2% more likely to make it into subscriber email inboxes in March, when compared with non-COVID email. [Figure 7]

Figure 5: Traps/rejected email rates in March and April

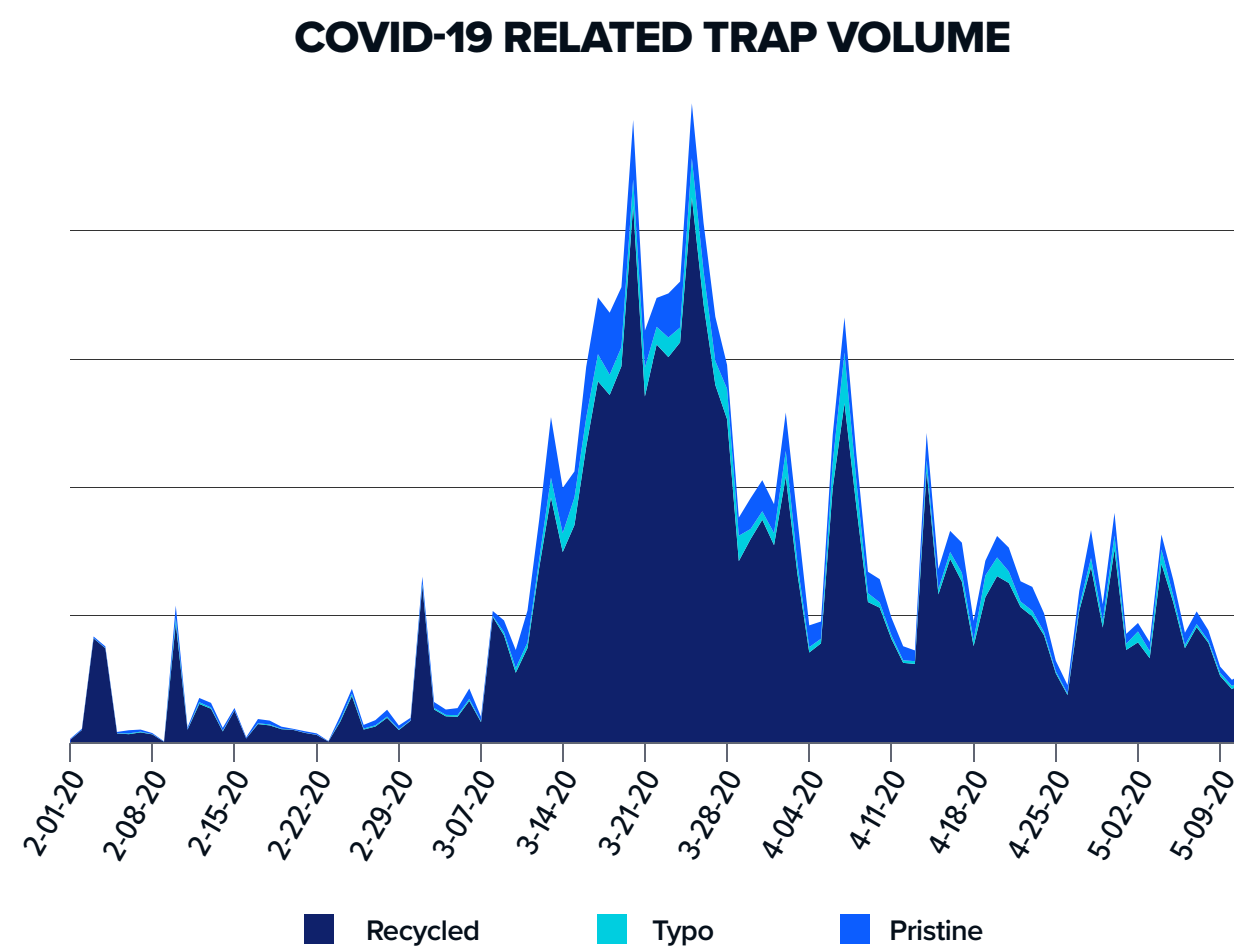


Figure 6: Delivery volumes, which had been steadily tightening since 2018, loosened at the start of the pandemic.

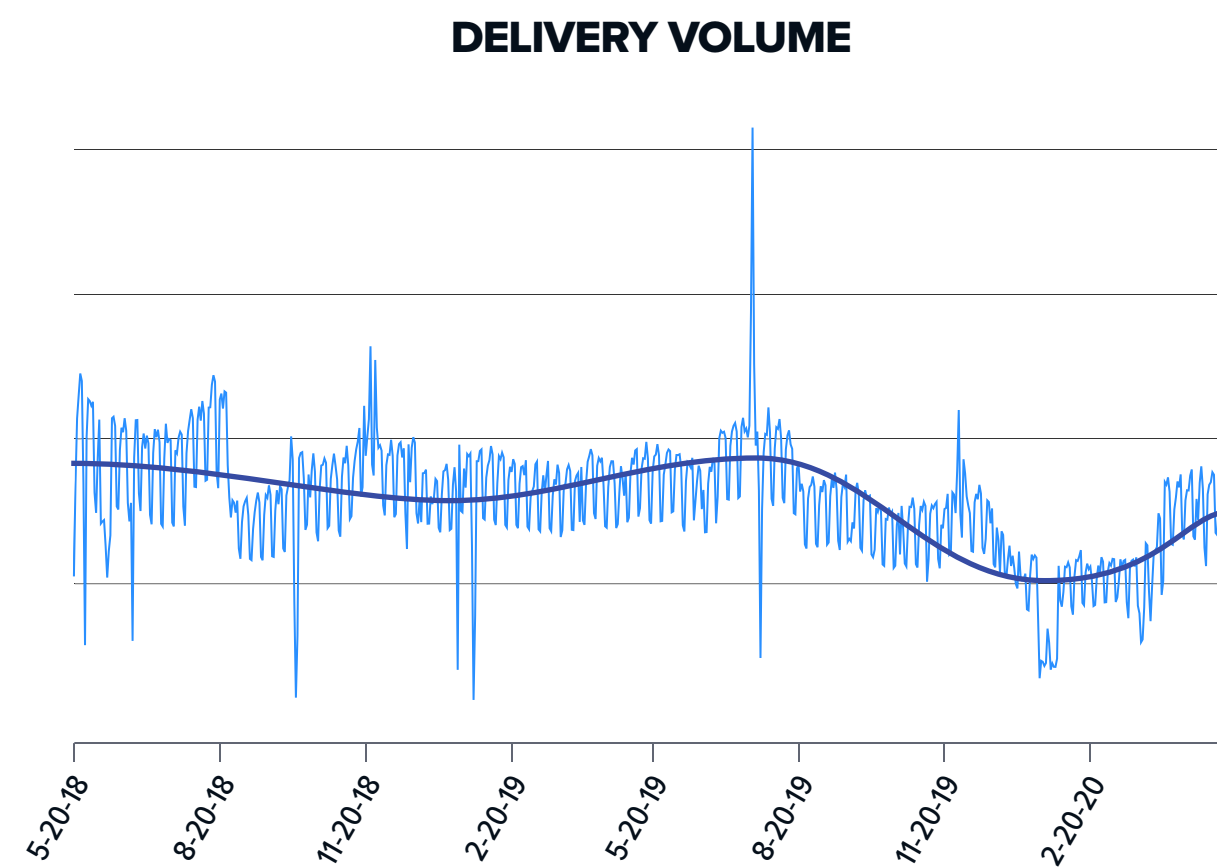
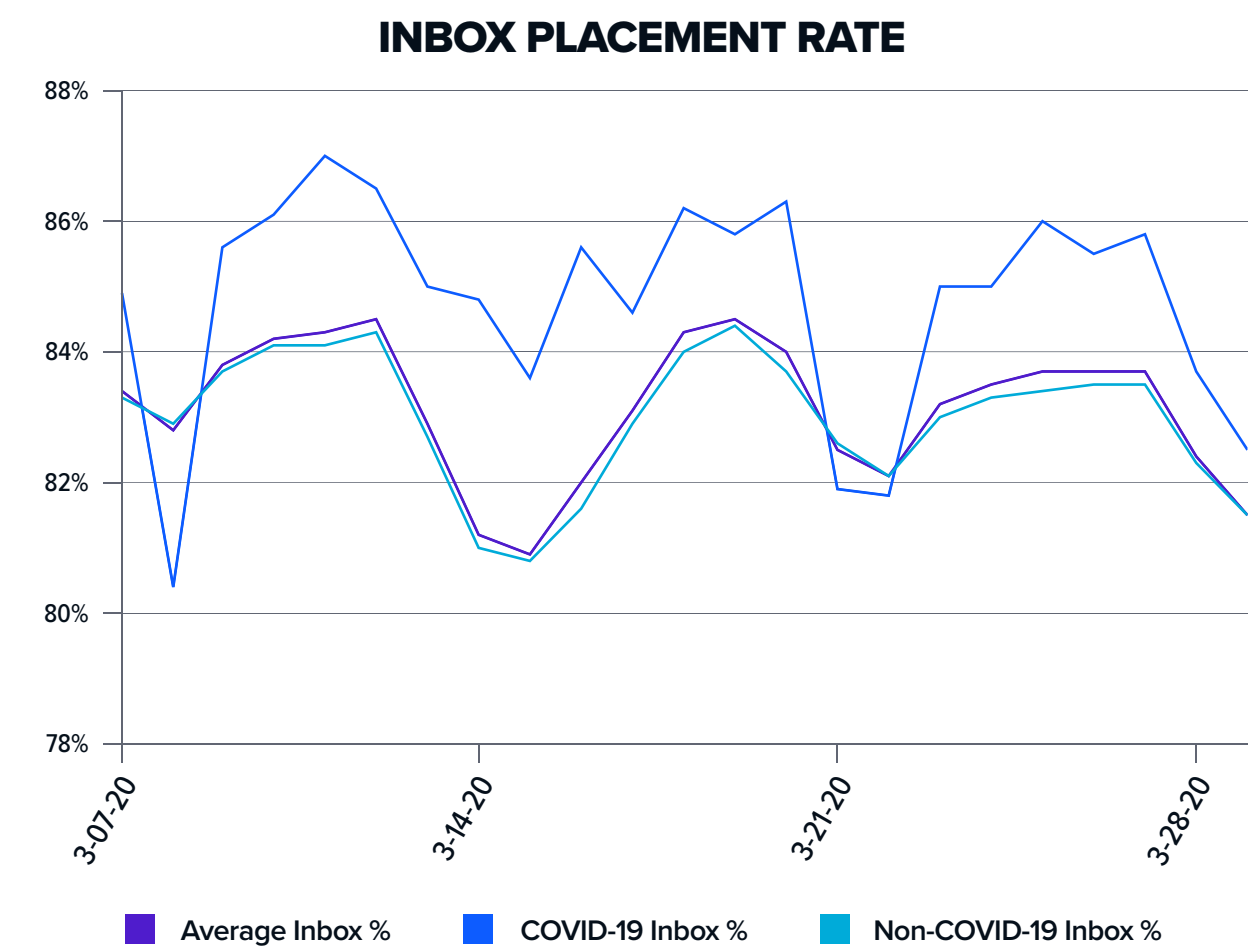


Figure 7: IPR on COVID-19 messages is ~2% better than others



HOW EMAIL SUBSCRIBERS REACTED TO DISRUPTION

Of course, the most important variable for email marketers is always audience engagement. How did email subscribers change their habits around consumption of emails during the first wave of the pandemic?

Here again we saw three trends that illustrated how the public's attention was laser-focused early in the crisis.



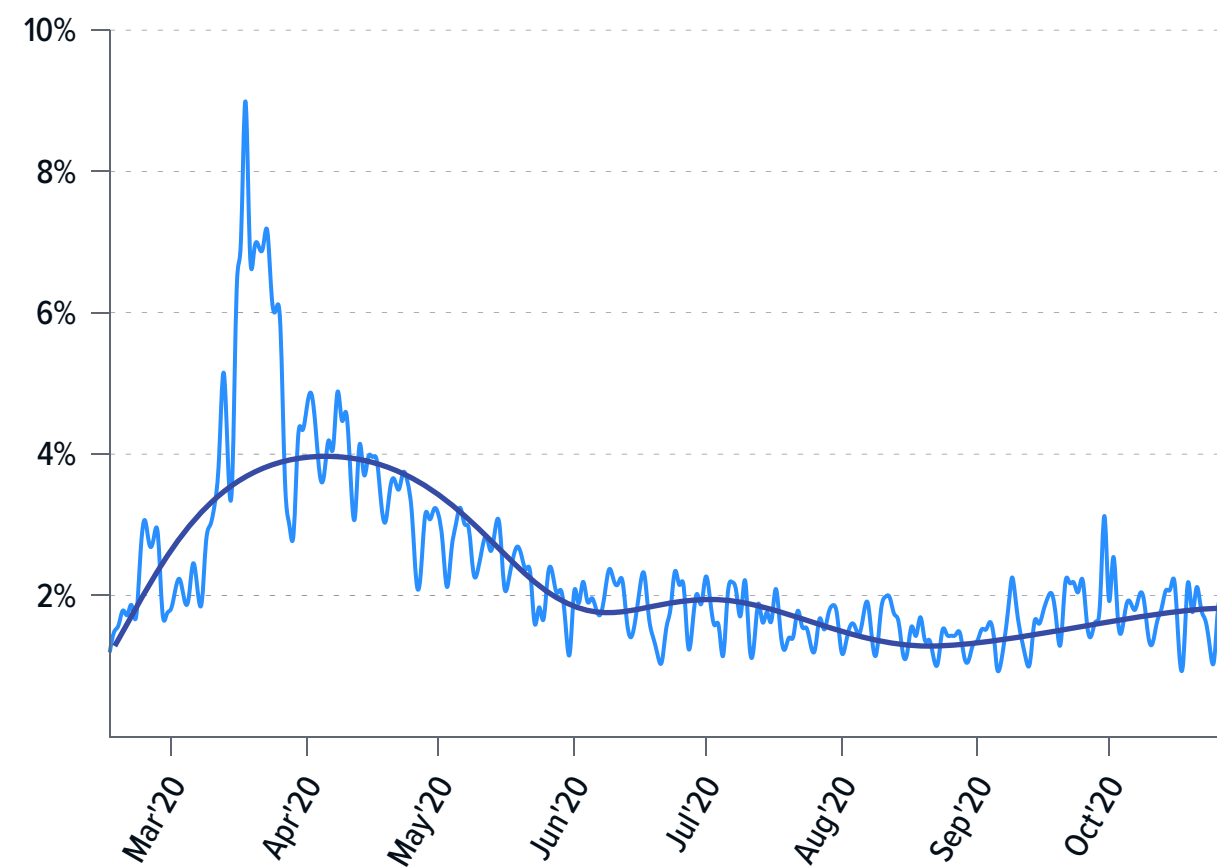
HOW EMAIL SUBSCRIBERS REACTED TO DISRUPTION

1. PEOPLE WERE MORE LIKELY TO OPEN EMAILS RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC.

Early on, people were especially engaged with emails about the pandemic. Open and click rates rose noticeably in March for emails whose subjects included any keywords related to COVID-19. Overall, email subscribers were 30% more likely to open a pandemic-related email during the first weeks of the disruption when it was top-of-mind. [Figure 8]

Figure 8: Open rates on COVID-19 messages were 30% higher during the first wave

COVID-19 EMAIL AS A PERCENT OF TOTAL

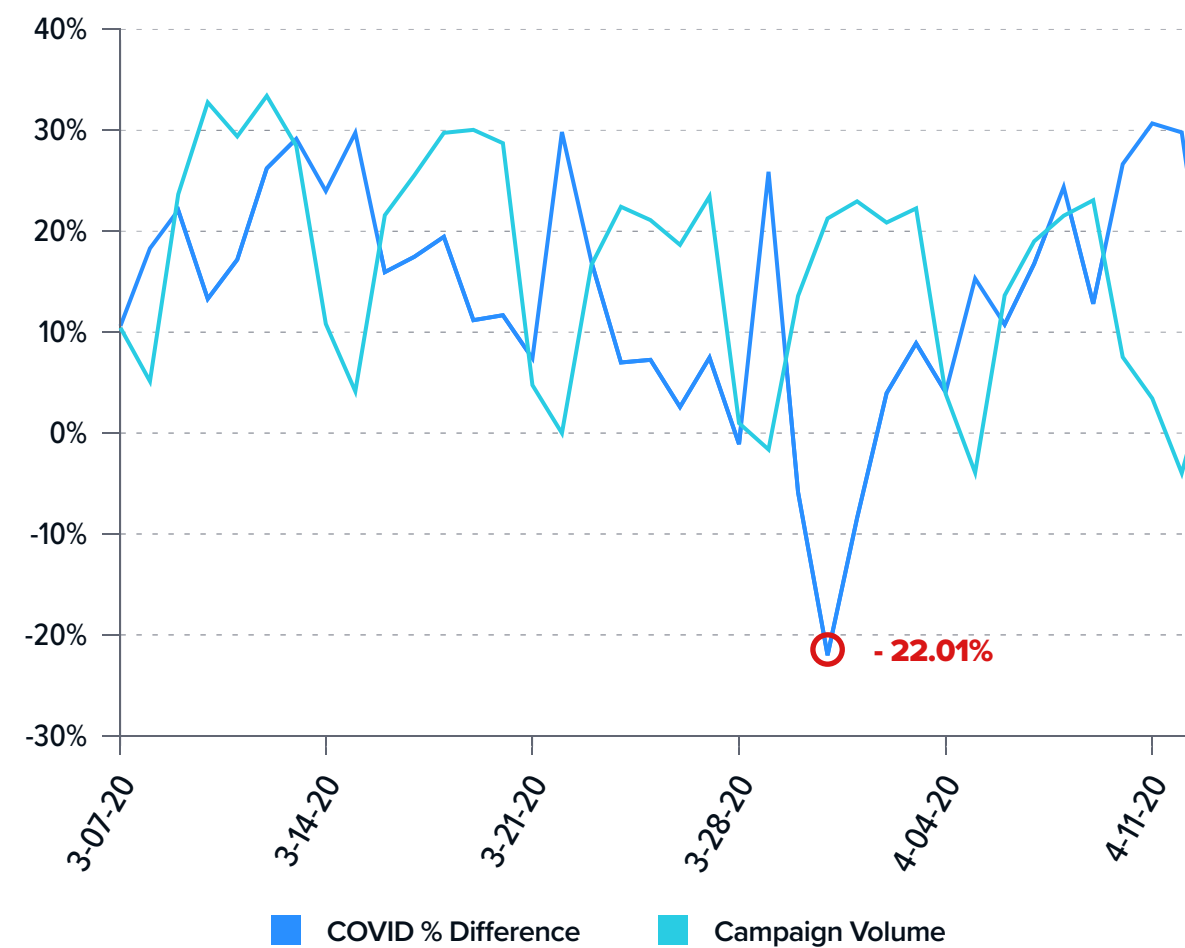


2. PEOPLE READ THE MOST COVID-RELATED EMAIL ON WEEKENDS.

Open rates on COVID-19 messages tended to spike during the weekends, when it appears people were catching up on email—and reading information about the pandemic. [Figure 9]

Figure 9: Open rates on COVID-19 messages are noticeably higher—particularly on the weekends

INCREASED LIKELIHOOD TO OPEN EMAILS WITH COVID-19 CONTENT

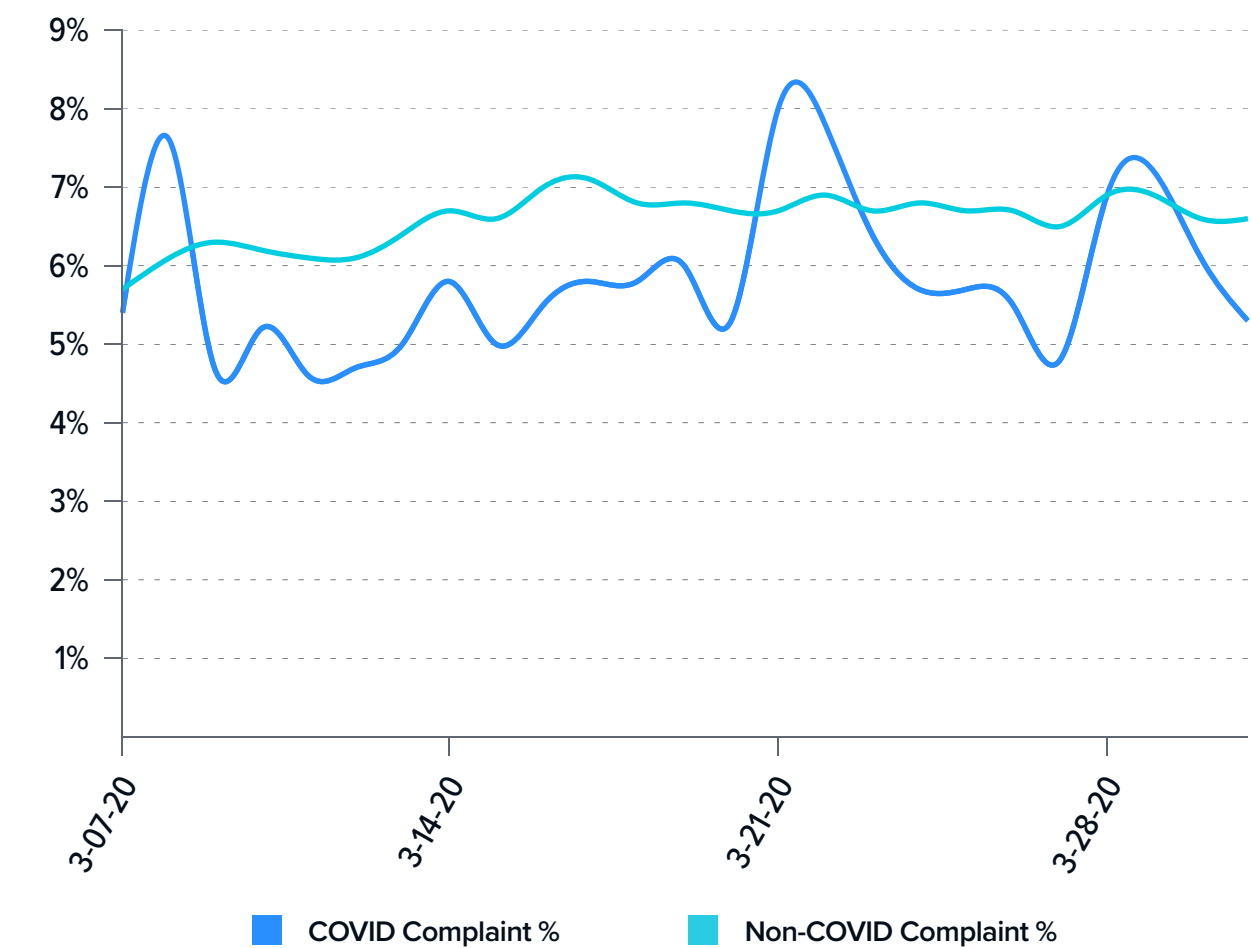


3. INCREASED OPENS COME WITH INCREASED COMPLAINTS.

Tolerance was higher for pandemic-related emails, which were 11% less likely to be marked as spam—but that patience did not extend to the rest of the inbox. An increased volume of email led to overall increased levels of complaints from email subscribers. Complaints about COVID-19 emails also tended to spike on weekends—the time period when people were most likely to be opening them. [Figure 10]

Figure 10: Complaints spike on weekends

COVID VS. NON-COVID EMAIL COMPLAINT RATES



THE LONG HAUL

HOW BEHAVIOR HAS STABILIZED OVER TIME



HOW COMPANIES HAVE ADAPTED

As the coronavirus crisis continued on—for first weeks, then months—responses to it also began to settle into more predictable patterns.

Companies dialed back on COVID-centric messaging, but they have not returned entirely to their pre-COVID email volume or strategies. Instead, they adapted their marketing and email campaigns to meet the new realities of a public still living under the constraints of a global pandemic.

Despite the virus surge in July, we have seen companies employing fairly consistent practices since roughly May of 2020 (carried through to at least November, when this analysis went to press).

We see four persistent trends prevailing in this data:

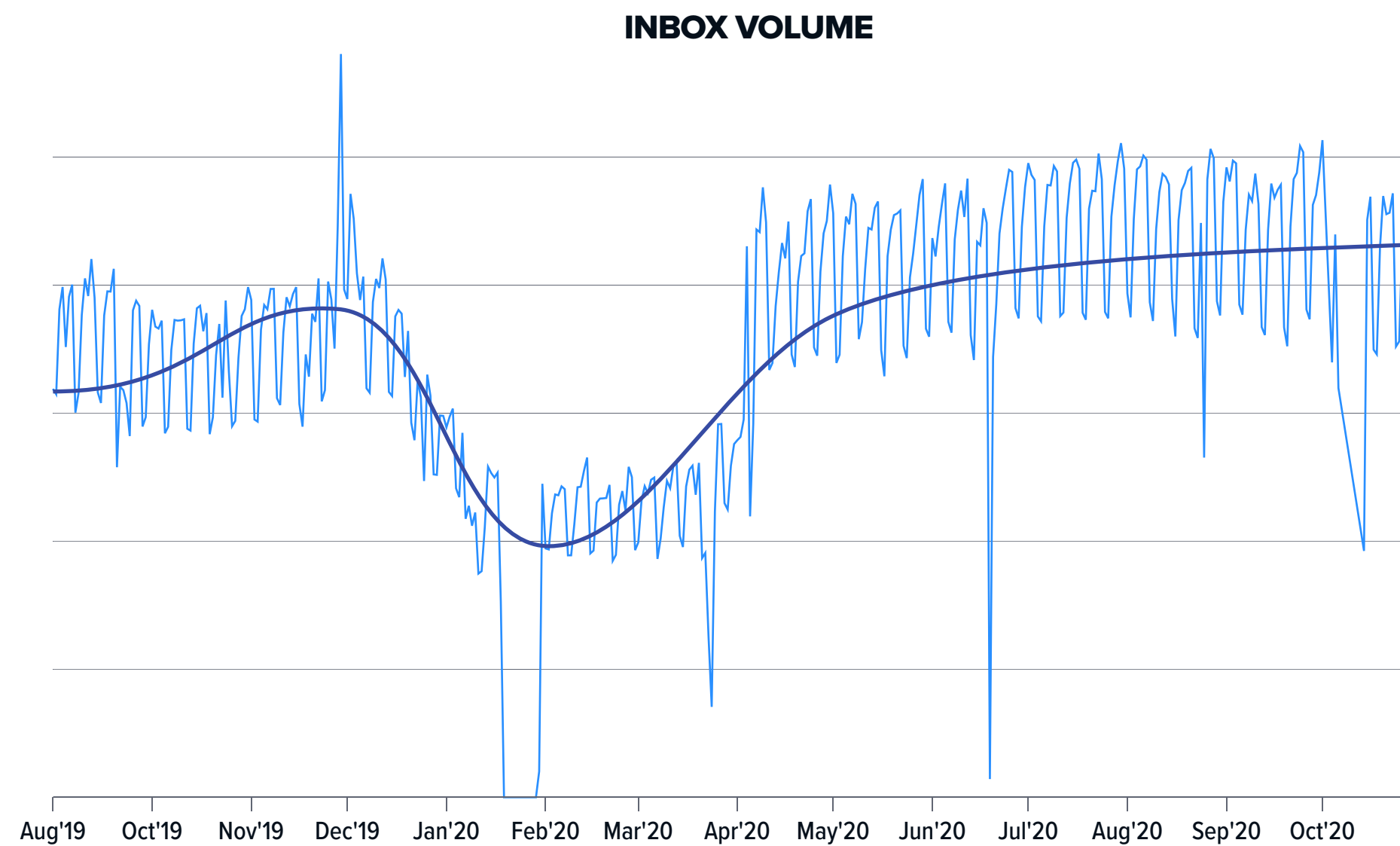


HOW COMPANIES HAVE ADAPTED

1. EMAIL VOLUMES REMAIN HIGH AND ARE EXPECTED TO GROW.

Global inbox volumes have reached and maintained a consistent, all-time high during the 2020 pandemic. In fact, we're in one of the longest stretches of sustained highs for global inbox volume and are still trending upward. In part, this is likely related to people's increased time at home, complying with safety guidelines and stay-at-home orders, and the pivot some marketers have made toward email in order to reach them. Forecasting beyond this chart indicates this coming holiday season will smash just about every record out there. [Figure 11]

Figure 11: Inbox volumes remain high and are slowly trending up

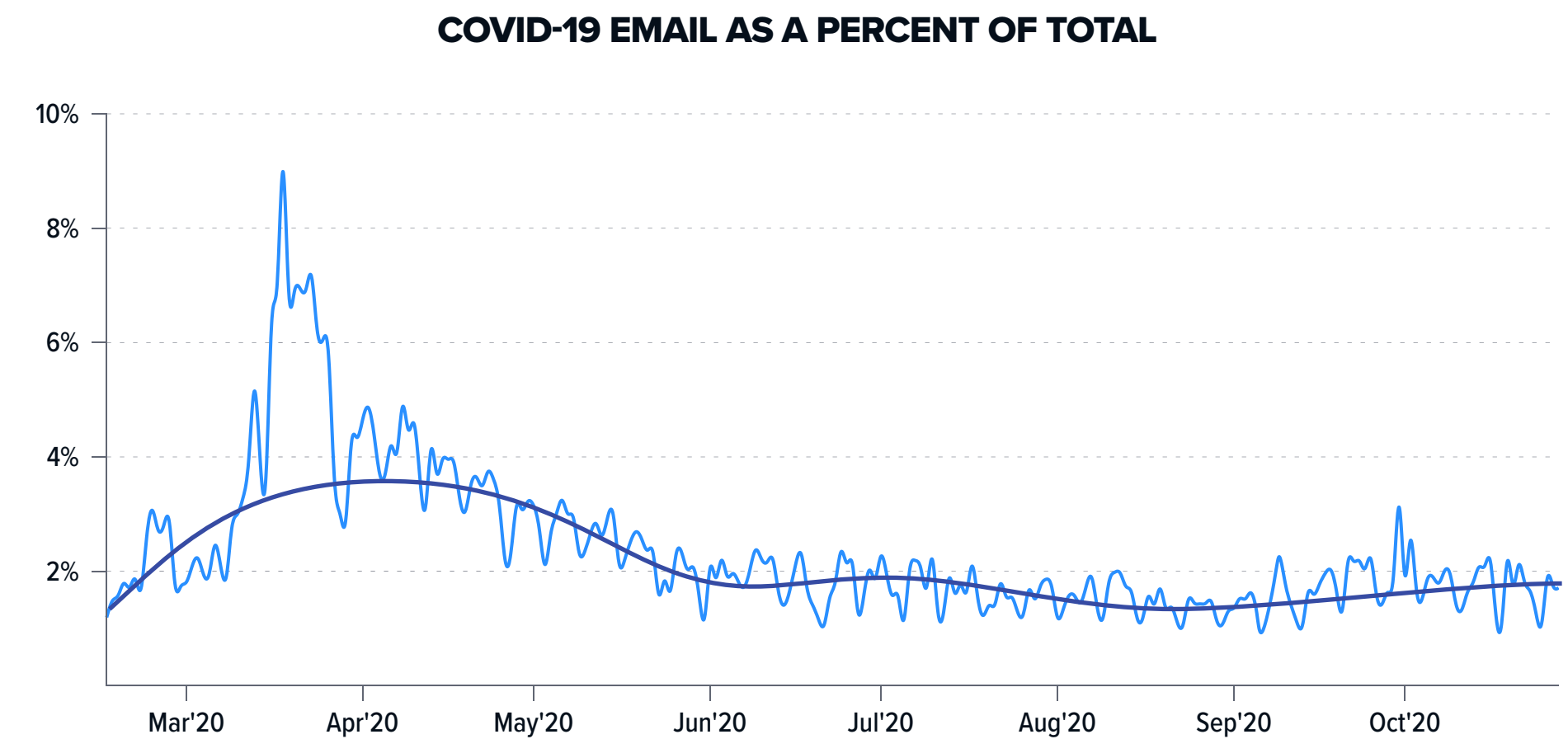


2. VIRUS-RELATED EMAILS HOLD STEADY BETWEEN 1-3% OF TOTAL EMAILS.

Despite initial spikes, the proportion of emails using COVID-related keywords in their subject lines spent most of the summer leveled off at about 1.5% of all emails. Coming into the fall, we are seeing that number creep up. This could be seasonal, with the end of the summer holidays. It may also be influenced by the rise in infection levels with a third spike—though we did not see a corresponding peak during the second wave of infections in midsummer. [Figure 12]

In general, most marketers are returning to simple, traditional calls to action like “new” and “now.” Those that use keywords such as “sale” or focus on ephemeral time-series words like “today,” “day,” “daily,” or using the current year or month are showing better placement and engagement than average, overall.

Figure 12: After an initial spike, emails related to the pandemic leveled off to an average 1-3% of total

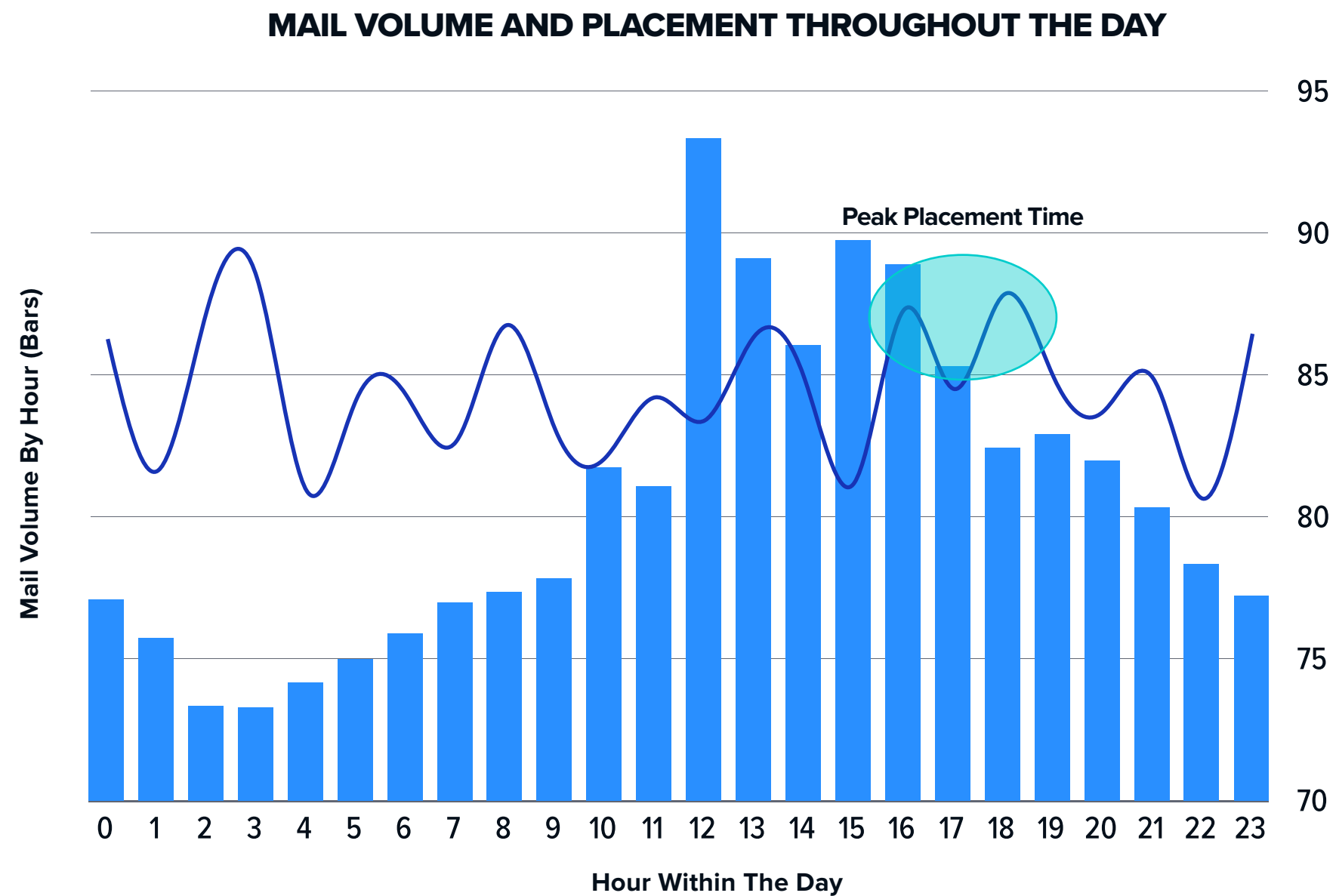


HOW COMPANIES HAVE ADAPTED

3. SEND VOLUMES AND TIMES SHIFTED.

The way we work and consume information has also changed, as large portions of the population moved to work or learn from home. Marketers are seeing resulting shifts in which send days and times are most effective during the pandemic. Where mornings used to be the most effective time to send, during the pandemic sending in the afternoon yielded higher placement and engagement. Marketers also traditionally avoided sending email at the top of the hour, but in this unusual time, when many workers are between meetings, sitting on the computer at the top of the hour, waiting for video calls to start, we see higher engagement with email at that time. [Figure 13]

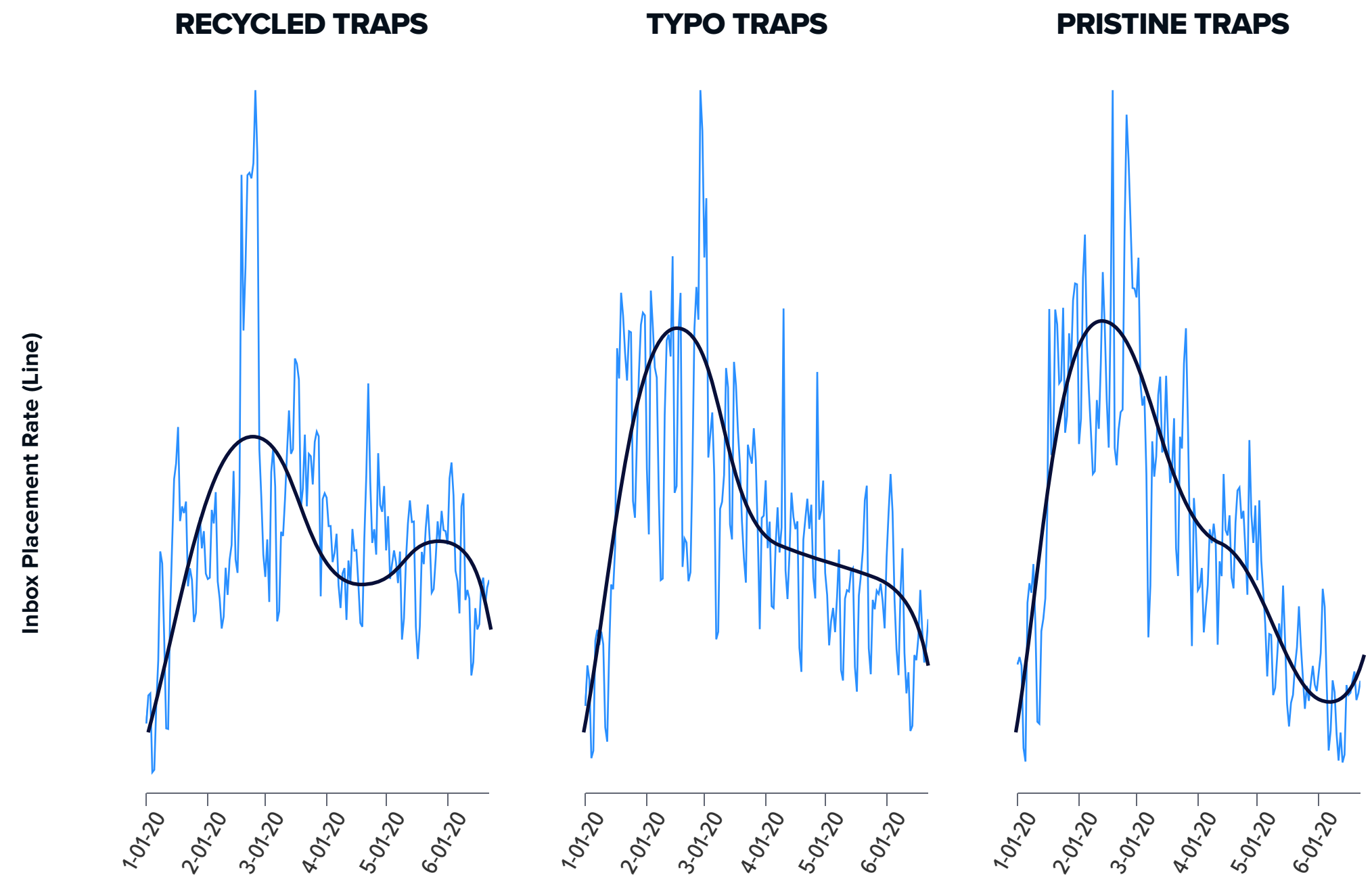
Figure 13: Afternoon send times are better matched to new work-from-home schedules



4. TRAP HITS PEAKED EARLY, BUT HAVE NORMALIZED.

Trap hits peaked early on in the pandemic as newer marketers entered the world of email, using new lists. Many veteran email marketers also revived broad or dormant lists to send critical communications. However, trap hits have tapered off ever since, and as of June, normalized to pre-pandemic levels. [Figure 14]

Figure 14: Trap hits by category



HOW AUDIENCES HAVE STABILIZED OVER TIME

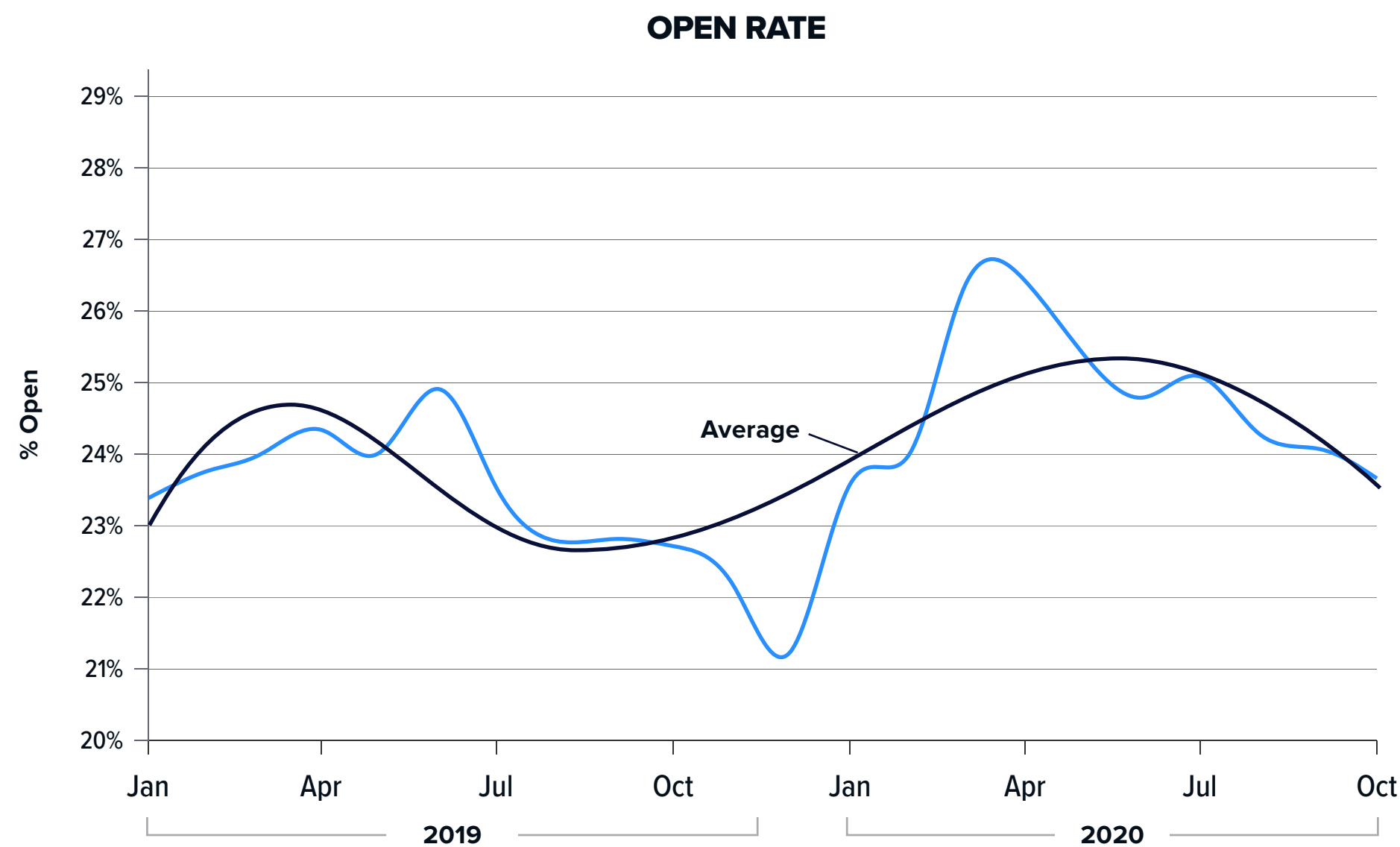
As the pandemic shifted from an acute crisis to a more persistent state over its first six months, email subscriber behavior also settled into a “new normal.” Here are the four trends we’ve noted as hallmarks of this longer-term disruption.



1. EMAIL ENGAGEMENT INCREASED INITIALLY BUT HAS RETURNED TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS.

Engagement with email during this crisis was initially high, with engagement rates peaking at 27%. [Figure 15] This may reflect increased use and consumption of digital communication channels as people worked from or remained at home early in the pandemic, and an increased reliance on email. However, open rates have largely returned to pre-pandemic levels. Open rates today are still well within normal range—about the same as a year ago—but with historically high volumes of email being sent, we do expect open rates to continue sliding slightly throughout the rest of the year.

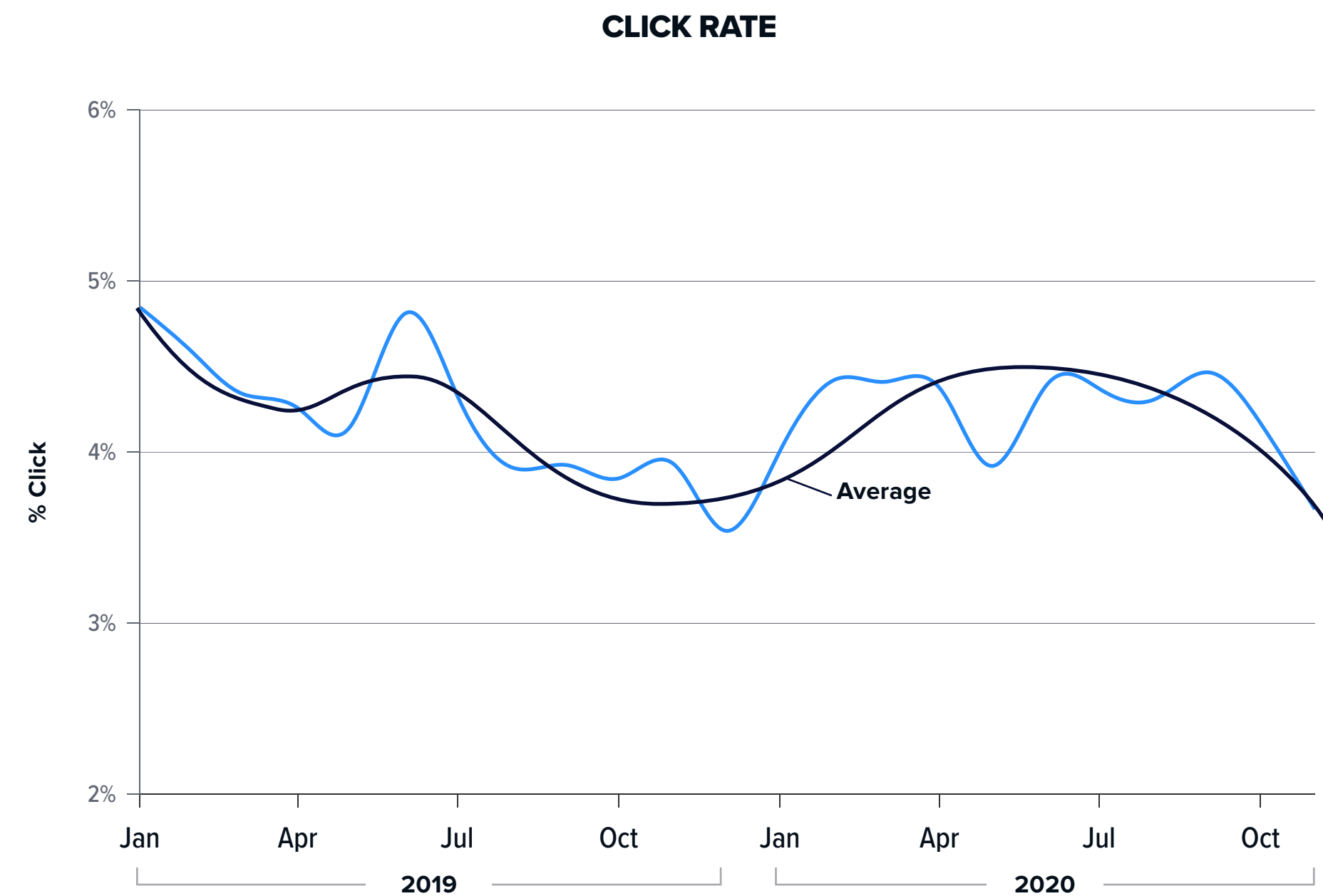
Figure 15: Open rates stabilized within a few months



2. CLICK RATES WERE MOSTLY UNAFFECTED BY THE CRISIS.

Interestingly, click-through rates never followed suit with open rates, remaining at mostly constant rates before and during the pandemic. [Figure 16]

Figure 16: Click rates were virtually unaffected by the pandemic



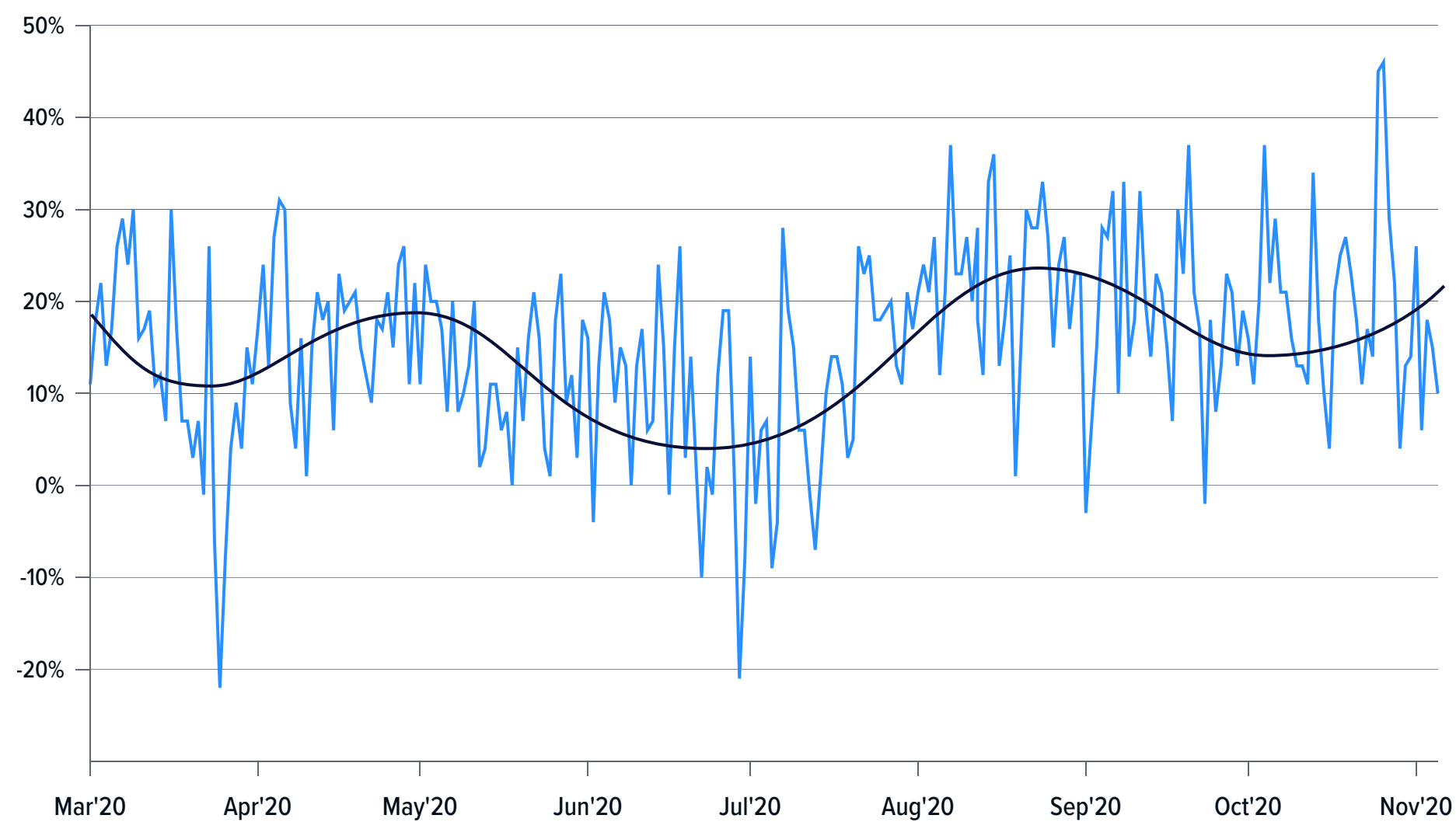
3. CRISIS-RELATED EMAILS PEAKED, PLUMMETED, AND LEVELED OFF.

Emails related directly to the crisis show an interesting pattern of initial interest and subsequent fatigue. Open rates were initially high. They tanked at the end of March, when COVID-related emails hit a low of 22% worse than non-COVID-19 emails—possibly reflecting recipient weariness.

However, that number has since rebounded, and currently COVID-19 emails are seeing 20% higher engagement than other emails. [Figure 17]

Figure 17: Pandemic emails are currently maintaining 20% higher engagement

LIKELIHOOD TO OPEN COVID-19 VS. NON-COVID-19 CONTENT

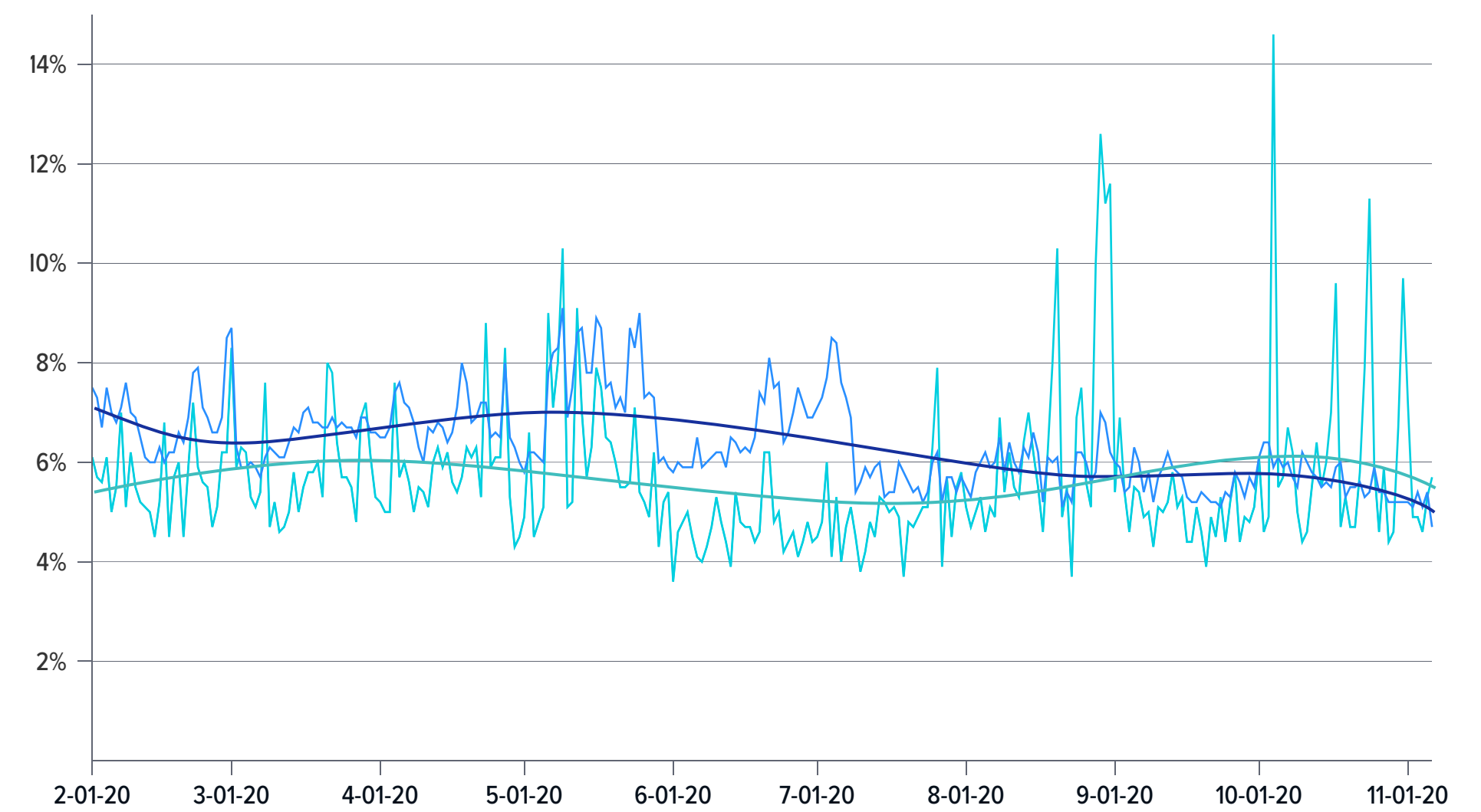


4. TOLERANCE IS HIGHER FOR CRISIS-RELATED EMAILS, BUT COMPLAINTS ARE INCREASING.

As subscribers began seeing a lot more mail in their inbox, they recalibrated their preferences. They are much more discerning when it comes to sifting valuable content from noise. Spam complaints are steadily on the rise and are expected to increase with inbox volumes as we move into the holidays. Senders will need to be more vigilant and clever to break through the noise and avoid being tagged as junk mail. [Figure 18]

Figure 18: Complaints on pandemic emails are lower, but rising

COVID-19 VS. NON-COVID-19 COMPLAINTS



DISRUPTION:

UNPACKING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

The sum of these observations is clear: How we send and interact with emails has been significantly impacted by the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's reasonable to think that future disruptions, whether short- or long-term, will follow similar patterns. So, what did email marketers learn from 2020 that they might be able to apply in the future?

Here are four observations we think are worth taking from this data for use in future disruptions:

Disruption leads to higher email engagement

The immediate crisis of the pandemic led to a short-term but intense peak in email engagement. Subscribers preoccupied with the event sought information through their inboxes and singled out emails that seemed relevant to the disruption. Though there was a brief backlash, where those email subscribers experienced some crisis fatigue, the long-term trend shows overall growth in engagement.

More companies are investing in email, making it harder to break through

Though email subscribers are consuming more, an influx of email during a crisis may make it more challenging to break through noise, and decrease subscriber tolerance for email perceived as spam. On one hand, high inbox volume means subscribers are very engaged with their inboxes, otherwise attempted mail would be filtered by providers more frequently. On the other hand, it also means marketers can expect to face a busier and competitive inbox during a disruption.

Companies should invest in content and messaging

Emails and subject lines should always be written in a way that will be topical, capturing the attention of target audiences and tempting them to open. Because audience attention early on was so laser-focused on the pandemic, it was low-hanging fruit for subject line writers. This effect, though fleeting, was an effective early technique. However, there is a quickly diminishing return on this strategy, and truly substantial content will always perform better. In a crowded inbox, a snappy subject line alone will not help marketers break through the crowd, so a more content-driven, less opportunistic, strategy should be considered.

Best practices are as—maybe more—important during a disruption

Best practices became best practices for a reason, and nothing we observed during the pandemic was significant enough to warrant not following them. We're seeing the impact of senders flooding traps and setting up opportunistic practices; our recommendation is to be careful and intentional when digging deeper into your audience database and in setting up your campaigns. Straying from best practices will hurt more than it helps in the long run.



MOVING FORWARD:
**ESTABLISHING
ANALYTICS
TO SURVIVE
THE NEXT
DISRUPTION**

The data we examined over the course of the 2020 pandemic was mostly aggregated. It tells us a lot about how email marketing as a whole was impacted, but every industry is different, so it is important you find ways to get oversight on—and insight from—your own data and email activity.

To understand what is happening in your business, and with your email subscribers, it is critical to put systems into place to establish baselines, better track normal patterns, spot anomalies, and pivot more quickly during disruptions.

With access to a tool like Validity's Everest, email marketers have unparalleled insight into all the metrics mattering most to your campaigns, including IPR, trap hits, and engagement data, plus support

in other functions critical to maintaining your deliverability, like list validation, design and creative testing, and expert guidance.

Whether you're in a disruption or not, Validity can help you to optimize the performance of your email marketing, data management and sales functions. We are your trusted partner to ensure you're reaching the audience you need to reach. Connect with us today to learn more about how to set your email strategy up for success.



GLOSSARY OF EMAIL METRICS

CLICK-THROUGH RATE:

Click-through rate is calculated by dividing clicks by the volume of email delivered.

CLICK-TO-OPEN RATE:

This rate is measured by calculating the ratio of total clicks to total opens. Click-to-open provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of your email content and design.

COMPLAINT RATE:

Complaint rate is calculated by dividing the number of spam complaints by the number of emails delivered. Complaints are a strong indicator of negative engagement and this metric is useful for identifying patterns and sources of complaints.

CONVERSION RATE:

Conversion rate is calculated by dividing the number of conversions by the number of visits. Although a strong indicator of subscriber engagement, this metric typically speaks more to the quality of landing page or website content than email content.

INBOX PLACEMENT RATE (IPR):

Inbox placement rate (IPR) is the rate of emails that were delivered to the inbox rather than the spam or junk folder. IPR is calculated by dividing the number of emails delivered to the inbox by the total number of emails sent.

OPEN RATE:

Open rate is calculated by dividing the number of emails opened by the number of emails delivered.

SPAM TRAP RATE:

A spam trap is an email address or server specifically designed, maintained, and monitored to catch abusive email traffic. A high spam trap hit rate will result in a low sender reputation.

UNSUBSCRIBE RATE:

Unsubscribe rate is calculated by dividing the number of unsubscribes by the number of emails delivered.



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Greg Kimball is the Director of Product Management at Validity in charge of the business's email deliverability, optimization, creative, and API solutions. His years of experience working directly with customers, mailbox providers, security vendors, and email service providers gives him a comprehensive understanding of the email marketing ecosystem.

Greg's past experiences managing data ingestion, processing, and enhancement provide him a deep knowledge of the power, opportunity, and accessibility of Validity's unique data that unlock answers critical to our customers.

He is a passionate believer in the value of cross-functional teams to build inspiring, impactful products.





Businesses run better and grow faster with trustworthy data. Tens of thousands of organizations rely on Validity solutions – including Everest, DemandTools, BriteVerify, Trust Assessments, and GridBuddy Cloud – to target, contact, engage, and retain customers effectively. Marketing, sales, and customer success teams worldwide trust Validity solutions to help them create smarter campaigns, generate leads, drive response, and increase revenue. For more information visit validity.com and connect with us on LinkedIn and Twitter.



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