



100M phone calls show how SMBs are adapting in a pandemic

By Bryan Elder

CallRail

What call data reveals about the state of business in a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic shuttered many businesses for months, and some are still closed. While terms like “isolation,” “quarantine” and “unprecedented” have become part of our everyday vocabulary, the need to social distance has actually led to more one-to-one conversations – albeit by phone rather than in person.

As consumers became wary of taking part in many in-person interactions, and businesses scrambled to dramatically change the way they operate, face-to-face transactions have transformed into internet orders, curbside services and phone conversations.

With so much uncertainty around business operations, CallRail’s call data provides insights into how consumer behavior has changed throughout the year, from before COVID-19 to lockdown to the gradual reopening of businesses.

CallRail clients are small-to-medium-sized businesses (SMBs) in healthcare, education, automotive, legal, financial, home services, real estate, software and technology, marketing and advertising, and travel and hospitality—making it easy to see call trends in each industry. This year’s CallRail data reveals call volume, duration, and trends throughout the phases of the pandemic, painting a picture of how businesses have been affected. Here are the key takeaways.

Call volume: customers are ready to talk

When organizations shut down for in-person business, there was a lull in activity while owners scrambled to find ways to continue to keep communication and transactions going.

Total call volume declined 26% between late February and mid-April because customers and companies were doing less business overall. However, states started to permit the reopening of businesses around the middle of May. Since then, call levels have been climbing, even surpassing their pre-COVID-19 levels.

To reopen safely, SMBs have made changes and accommodations, such as new sanitation procedures, touch-free transactions and curbside pickups. But, consumers have also made changes to how they do business – and they’re relying more on calls to get information not only on products and services but about the latest and safest ways to transact. Customers want to know about changes in hours, buying procedures, safety precautions and more, and that’s pushed call volume growth beyond normal, pre-COVID levels.

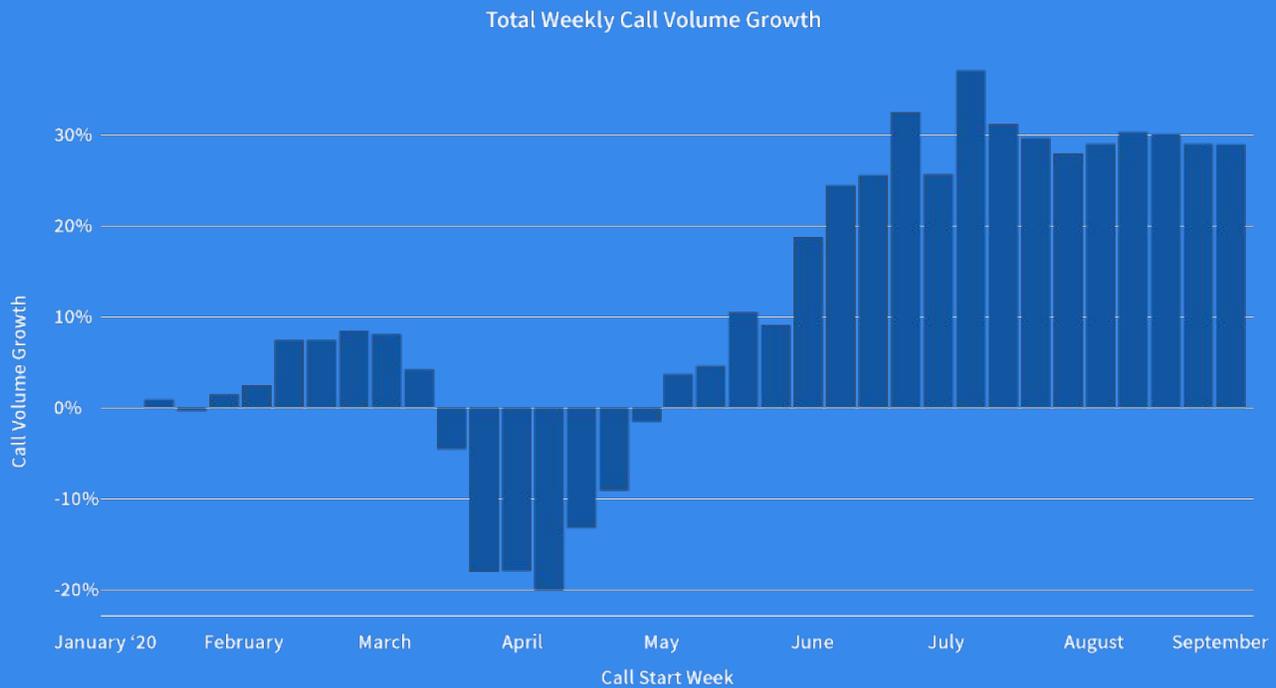
The automotive industry is one in which call volume is even higher than it was in early 2020. As in-person car shopping has gotten more risky, complicated and inconvenient, buyers are trying to get as much information as possible before visiting dealerships in person.

Gayle Rogers, Founder and CEO of the Atomic Agency, explains that in the past, the auto industry is one where people would do a lot of research online and may even call/email/chat with the dealership, but would then just show up to have a real conversation. He notes that more than 50% of the people that show up to buy a car at a dealership have no appointment and no contact records with the dealership. “Now,” he says, “with ‘shelter in place’-type restrictions and people being fearful of public spaces, I think they moved the conversations to the phone. They are spending more time asking questions over the phone as opposed to just showing up.”

Back in business: call volume patterns

The ebbs and flows of the year's call volumes were similar across most industries, with notable exceptions for healthcare, home services, advertising and marketing. These industries saw steeper declines in call volume during March and April, but they have also seen greater increases since businesses started reopening.

Advertising and marketing faced one of the biggest call volume declines of any industry between mid-March through early May. It has since not only recovered, but is seeing higher call volume than before the pandemic. By July, call volume growth for advertising and marketing had risen by 79% since April.



Call volume trends

- 35% growth in call volume between June 2019 and June 2020.
- 27% higher than peak pre-pandemic levels.
- Call volume has, for the most part, plateaued at this higher level of call volume.

What caused the lockdown call volume decline?

When businesses closed, phone activity slowed significantly as customers assessed risks and executives determined next steps. Essential businesses had to find their stride, while non-essential businesses devised their plan Bs—like adding or increasing online options.

Customers and businesses alike were in unfamiliar territory, so it took time to adjust. However, as businesses gradually reopened, customers were still hunkered down at home but ready to seek information via phone.

Marketing is often one of the first industries to face cuts in economic downturns, so it wasn't surprising to see a drop in calls there. More than three-fourths of marketing leaders expected the COVID-19 pandemic to cause marketing budget cuts, according to [Gartner](#). In fact, industry experts predicted that Google's U.S. digital ad revenues would drop more than 5% by the end of 2020.

Marketing has suffered spending cuts and freezes during the lockdowns, but as businesses reopen, marketing budgets are returning.

What's behind the post lockdown surge?

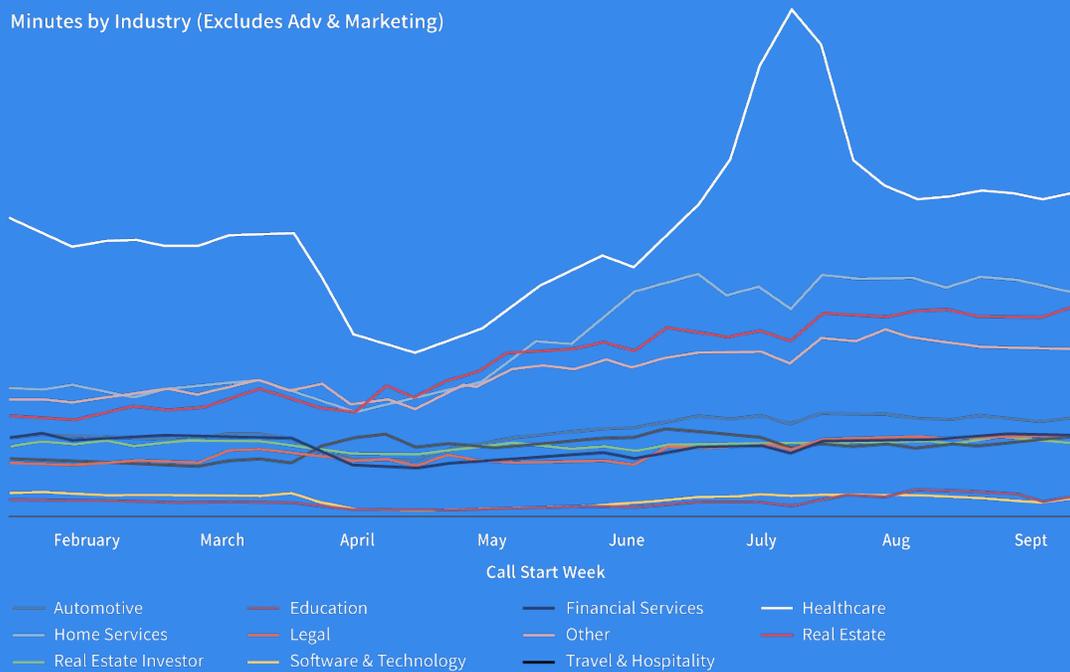
Marketing and advertising call volume are currently almost 30% higher than it was pre-COVID. Allison Reinert, Senior Marketing Partner at Cardinal, attributes this increase in call volume to businesses trying to “survive and rebound,” as well as to engage customers and inform them of the ways their businesses have adapted.

“Marketing and advertising are used as communication tools. Companies need to convey changes in safety procedures and practices so consumers are comfortable. So, whether it’s announcing new health processes such as temperature checks or announcing shifts in services like telehealth, marketing is a great way to get the message out,” says Reinert.

Marketing wasn’t the only industry that saw disruptions in normal call patterns. Healthcare faced unusual call volumes—dipping during lockdowns and rising as businesses reopened. Like other industries, healthcare saw a dramatic rise in call volume from late May to mid-June. However, unlike most that rose then plateaued by early July, healthcare then saw a steep rise in call volume.

While patients postponed wellness checks and elective procedures, data shows that calls to urgent centers drove the spike. The increase in calls to urgent care facilities is correlated with the number of COVID-19 cases in the communities where these urgent care facilities are located.

Minutes by Industry (Excludes Adv & Marketing)



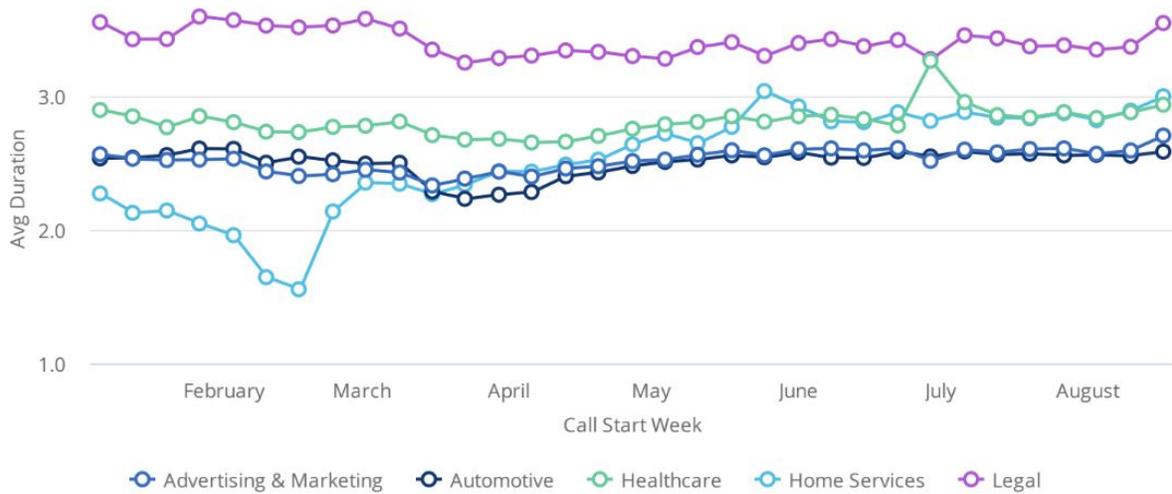
Healthcare: call volume increased 90% between pre-COVID-19 levels and call volume in early July

The majority of CallRail's healthcare customers are dentists and providers of home care, elder care and substance abuse care—rather than hospitals, health systems, or primary and urgent care facilities. So if you look at healthcare without including urgent care calls, you can see that the other types of providers saw a steep decrease in calls during the initial lockdown, starting mid-March when officials asked many healthcare providers to close in order to preserve PPE. As they began reopening, calls started to rise.

“I would attribute the initial decline in calls in the healthcare industry to patients delaying general, non-emergency healthcare. For example, people weren’t booking their routine dental cleanings, and many dentists weren’t even offering them during the lockdown,” explains Reinert. As for after lockdown, she adds, “This again gets back to demand. Since so many people delayed care, there is now a surge in people trying to book health appointments they had held off on booking earlier in the year. Additionally, with schools resuming (either in person or virtually), there is a demand for required vaccines, sports physicals, etc.”

Similarly, home services also saw call volume drop to single digits during March. It has since rebounded with call increases of as much as 49% higher than in February. Again, postponed demand likely caused the upswing, with customers feeling more comfortable about having service professionals in their homes to take care of non-emergency repair issues.

Average Call Duration By Industry



Call duration: customers take time to get answers

Call duration at the beginning of the pandemic was shorter compared with later in the pandemic. When businesses shut down, many customers just needed to cancel visits or services. Duration then went up as businesses reopened because customers needed not only the standard information about products or services, but also new information about changes like curbside or delivery options, new safety precautions for pickup, product delays, and more. By the end of June, call duration plateaued at a slightly higher length than the average before the pandemic.

Customers seeking home services pushed call duration up after a steep drop. They're likely trying to resolve the issues they can before having a service agent come out to their homes. Many homeowners are also trying to improve their homes now that they're spending more time there, and they likely have questions or concerns about the safety practices of home service professionals who will make house calls.

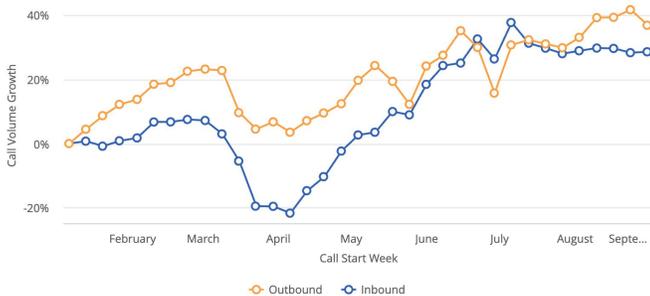
Highlights of Average Call Duration by Industry

	Beginning of the year	Lowest point in pandemic	Aug 31, 2020
Advertising & Marketing	2.6	2.3	2.9
Automotive	2.5	2.2	2.7
Healthcare	2.9	2.7	3.1
Home Services	2.3	1.6	2.9
Legal	3.5	3.2	3.6

Customers are taking the initiative and calling in

Outbound calls have stayed relatively stable while inbound calls declined in late March through late April. However, inbound calls now exceed pre-COVID-19 rates.

Inbound Vs. Outbound Call Volume Growth



In March and April, many businesses were closed, so inbound calls declined. However, as states and businesses began reopening, consumers were ready to do more business. Inbound calls increased as consumers sought help and information. CallRail data shows that inbound calls were at their lowest point in early April but rose 76% by July, surpassing even pre-pandemic levels. Similarly, outbound calls have also increased by 26% as SMBs focus on more marketing and advertising and other outreach efforts to bring customers back.

First and repeat calls are up

As consumers rely more heavily on conducting business through contact-free means, both first and repeat calls are up. All types of calls had declined during the early stages of COVID-19, but they began to rise in late April and have now surpassed pre-pandemic rates.

First Call Vs. Repeat Callers



Car dealerships are one industry that previously involved considerable face time during negotiations, purchasing and financing. Now buyers don gloves and make appointments for solo test drives, so many want to get as much information as they can before meeting a sales professional in person.

“Buying a vehicle isn’t like buying a pair of socks,” says Rogers. “Now people are asking questions, calling multiple dealers and scheduling test drives and deliveries at their homes. It only makes sense that there are more calls, happening more often, and lasting longer.”

The increase in first and repeat calls also makes sense for other industries, like healthcare. More patients are calling to [seek and use telehealth options](#). People may also be concerned about COVID-19 risk, symptoms or wellness checks they delayed earlier in the pandemic.



Google My Business calls climbed

As businesses reopened in May, consumers were eager to start visiting businesses. However, many businesses changed their hours when they reopened, while some closed permanently. To find out what's open and whether establishments have changed their operating hours, consumers are increasingly turning to Google My Business.

61% increase in calls from Google My Business between January 2020 and July 2020

Google My Business allows you to integrate with solutions like CallRail so that you can use a call tracking number as your main number. You're able to keep your business line as a secondary number for NAP (name, address, phone) consistency to provide a better customer experience and to be more easily found in search results. Google My Business is also providing organizations with guidance on what kinds of information they should provide for customers on their business profiles during the pandemic. For example, it's important to keep hours of operation, online offerings, safety procedures, and information about temporary closures up to date.

Where to go from here

With all the uncertainty in the world, it's hard to make predictions about the future. However, data can help businesses get on the right track. Based on CallRail data from this year so far, there's reason to believe that if businesses can reopen and stay open, they can regain their footing to welcome back and even grow their customer base.

“For marketing, we have seen better revenue numbers now than early 2020, pre-COVID. Once companies got their PPP money or resumed operations, many have turned to marketing to generate leads and customer volume.” Reinert says. “If you're running a business that relies on in-person customers to survive it's essential consumers choose you over the competition. This is where marketing and advertising can help.” While some industries have yet to rebound, it's important to remember that providing a quality customer experience is still critical to keeping customers engaged—whether that be in person, virtually or by phone.

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