

Digital IQ Index: Auto 2021

Published 27 August 2021 - ID G00755387 - 23 min read

By Analyst(s): Rick LaFond, Kyle Rees

Initiatives: [Industry Marketing Execution](#)

Auto CMOs face a challenging sales environment as consumer demand far outpaces supply. As inventory challenges persist, auto leaders will prioritize site experience upgrades that remove barriers to purchase and invest in advertising campaigns across display and search that support brand discovery.

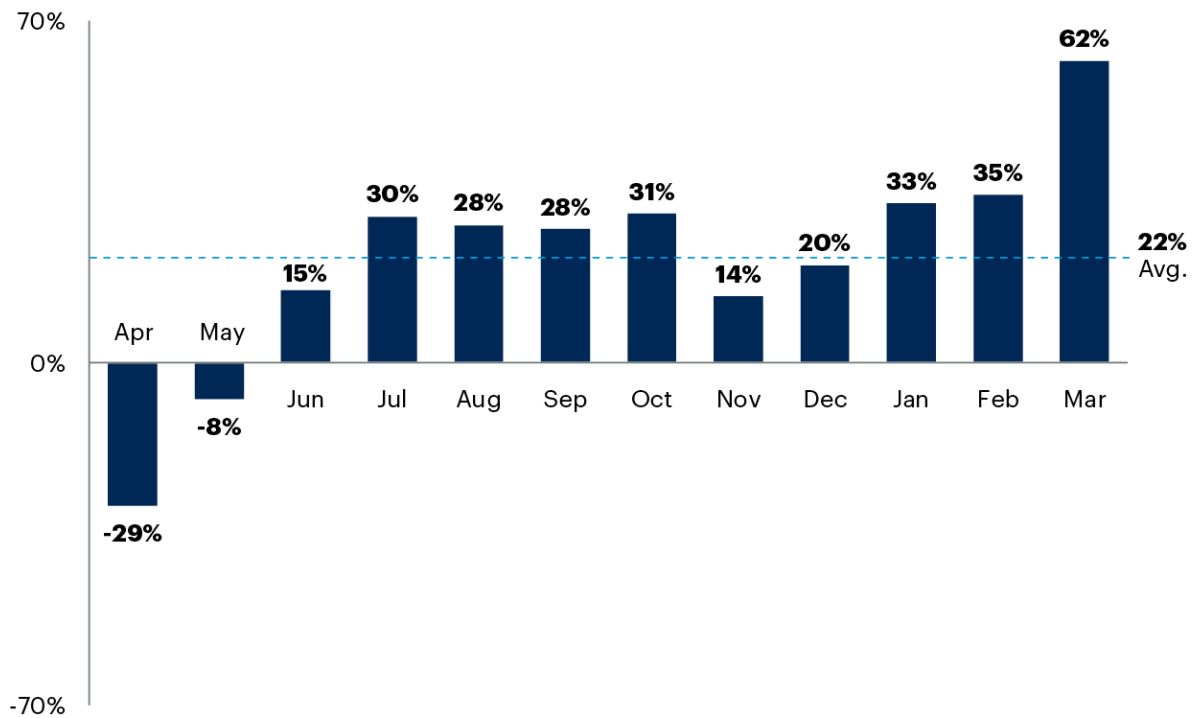
Introduction

A global pandemic. Blocked canals and logistics nightmares. A debilitating microchip shortage hindering production as more drivers hit the road ¹ and traffic to auto brand sites rises (see Figure 1). The rush to resurrect old brands and bring to market new technology that promises drivers a more connected and cleaner future. Plus, a vision that one day soon, your next auto purchase will be 100% online. This is the frenetic backdrop for Gartner's Digital IQ Index: Auto 2021.

Figure 1. Year-Over-Year Change in Average Visits to Brand Sites

Year-Over-Year Change in Average Visits to Brand Sites

April 2020-March 2021



n = 45 auto brands

Source: Gartner analysis of Similarweb data

755387_C

Gartner

In this year's report, we ask and explore answers to a critical question: What's the footprint that auto marketers need to leave across digital marketing and sales channels to sustain brand performance through market turbulence? In addition to showcasing auto category comparisons and top performers, this study will help automotive marketing leaders address major trends in:

- **Brand Site Experience.** Brands are connecting original equipment manufacturer (OEM) and dealer experiences, from site to showroom. This is imperative as online retailers, like Carvana, offer auto shoppers norm-smashing value propositions tied to convenience and ease. How can auto brands optimize their site experience by applying best practices from new-form online retailers and third-party auto comparison sites?

- **Digital Advertising.** With supply chain issues becoming more acute, auto brands are pulling back on digital ads promoting sales and discounts. How should marketers prepare to shift digital advertising strategies to keep the fleet of the future top of mind with auto shoppers?
- **Google Search.** Indexed brands aggressively target one another on paid search. What are auto brands doing to increase click-through rates from campaigns to brand websites?

Key Findings

- **Third-party auto comparison websites set the standard for online buying experiences.** While indexed brands saw a year-over-year increase in website traffic, so did third-party comparison and new-form online dealer websites, like Carvana. Consumers continue to lean heavily on third-party sites for education and direction across the buying journey.
- **Auto marketers are increasingly reliant on direct advertising.** Auto brands made a noticeable shift toward direct impression digital advertising in 2020, as changes to the digital ad landscape loomed over all marketing plans.
- **Auto brands with electric vehicle (EV) offerings pay for consumers' attention.** Seventy percent of surveyed consumers recall Tesla as a "Top EV brand," far outpacing Genius brands like Toyota and Ford. However, heavy paid search activity shows feverish competition for ownership of EV-related keywords.

Recommendations

CMOs responsible for industry marketing execution should:

- **Increase customer control throughout the purchase journey.** Enrich the online vehicle configuration and visualization experience to keep pace with consumers' increasing expectations for end-to-end digital automotive purchasing. Supplement with deeper offer information and tools that boost confidence across the shopper research and buying journey.
- **Build and deploy brand awareness campaigns.** Align messaging to overcome shopper barriers to brand and vehicle discovery, as opposed to purchase intent, until inventory challenges are resolved. Evaluate rising publishing websites for opportunities to build equity with more diverse and younger audiences.

- Develop and deliver EV comparison landing pages to support paid search strategies. Emphasize premium features and positioning to lower brand switching barriers, especially for shoppers learning about the EV category.

What to Do

Table 1: What to Do

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

<i>Recommendation</i> ↓	<i>Table Stakes</i> ↓	<i>Best in Class</i> ↓
Brand Site Experience	Offer content and site features, such as vehicle configuration and visualization tools, to facilitate online browsing and evaluation in the middle stages of the buying journey.	Push beyond basic educational, brand-focused content, and offer information and tools, such as comparisons against competing brands, to enable customers to more confidently navigate their broader research process and buying journey.
Digital Advertising	Align campaigns to the barriers and needs of target personas, as well as customer journeys, to help increase display click-through rates.	Prioritize direct desktop impressions with publishers that reach in-market shoppers and drive low-funnel visitors to brand or dealer sites. Assess media plans for direct spend on these, and similar, sites for premium targeting that can drive lower cost per engagement. Experiment with rising streaming platforms like Hulu and Twitch to build long-term emotional equity with current and future car shoppers.
Google Search	Develop comparison pages for more efficient conquering. Employ ad text strategies that help build awareness on unique selling propositions around premium features.	Consider how Google Ad extensions can be used to collect first-party data, measure market interest in EV concepts and facilitate customer contact as supply chain challenges threaten on-time delivery of new, in-demand vehicles. Direct EV brand searches on owned channels, like brand social media accounts.

Source: Gartner (August 2021)

Evidence

¹ [Arrivalist U.S. Daily Travel Index](#), Arrivalist.

© 2021 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. and its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Gartner research may address legal and financial issues, Gartner does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Your access and use of this publication are governed by [Gartner's Usage Policy](#). Gartner prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party. For further information, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)."