

DIGITAL MARKETING IN POST-PANDEMIC CONDITIONS

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Abstract

*As the COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire world, companies had to develop new techniques and practices to adapt to digital transformation, there came a need for change, for a restructuring of organizational management policy with reference to marketing and communication processes and strategies, organizational procedures, as well as for an awareness of the new technologies that are the bridge towards the online environment. New innovative technologies are the enablers of efficiency and working time reduction, with a focus on automation and systematization. Our aim is to highlight the **impact of digitalization on business marketing**, the importance of the company's **position and mentality** in relation to the current context, as well as the **changes in consumer behaviour**. The dynamics and fast pace of current trends changes in marketing increase the need to be open about the implementation and adoption of new communication technologies and tools. In this context, organizations must take into account the remodelling of marketing strategies that should be streamlined taking into account intra-organizational and strategic management challenges. Therefore the study aims to outline the implications of digital marketing on the post-pandemic management of companies, and comes up with suggestions related to the allocation of resources in terms of digitalization, that may have a positive impact on improving operational tasks, effectiveness and efficiency through automation.*

Keywords

business, digitalization, company mentality, consumer behavior

JEL Classification

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1. INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS OF MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire world, companies had to develop new techniques and practices to adapt to digital transformation, so they had to restructure organizational management (marketing and communication processes and strategies, organizational policies and strategies) as well as keep up to date with new technologies that are the bridge to the online environment. This paper aims to develop the impact of

digitalization on business marketing, the importance of the market positioning and the mentality of the entire company, given the current context¹.

Furthermore, it aims to outline the digital marketing and management implications during the pandemic and highlight the major significance of resource allocation in terms of digitalization, which carries with it a positive impact on improving operational tasks, effectiveness and efficiency through automation².

Due to financial hardships, many small to medium-sized companies were forced to close business if they were based on a rigid business model that could not easily adapt to crisis situations. Meanwhile large companies that had a budget behind them to support them, managed to remodel their processes and strategies towards the online environment. At the same time, the new dynamics has proven to be a (pragmatic) challenge for businesses from the point of view of assessing intra-organizational cohesion, responsibility to meet set targets and internal communication. Although DigitWise is not a large company, due to its flexible organizational culture, it managed to use this period to expend and reshape itself, taking this period as an opportunity. Companies that have implemented business models based on principles to build a flexible organization able to quickly react to unpredictable changes have made progress in increasing productivity and efficiency in this period. An example in this case is DigitWise.

A key element for success has proven to be the quick answer to change, adapting business models based on technology to function at a remarkable speed to meet customer needs.

Any company is responsible for its own success or lack thereof, depending on its interaction with the external environment, its positioning on the market, the quality of its services and products and the way in which it communicates with potential customers. With this in mind, DigitWise had to conceptualize and deliver a marketing and communication strategy that everyone in the organization understood, based on the demands of customers and external factors. This requires an overview of the interrelationships between all the organization's activities and resources and the assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on organizational performance and the external environment.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the on-going global digitalization practices within organizations, with a focus on marketing and communication strategies, to highlight the importance of designing and implementing solid digital infrastructures within organizations and to highlight the perennial challenges and solutions of the digitization process during the pandemic, using DigitWise as an example.

New digital infrastructures, along with the multitude of information from the online environment, as well as recent technological innovations provide significant progress in terms of the effectiveness of business operations and the increase of employee productivity due to the automation of repetitive tasks with the help of software robots¹. According to a study from 2021 conducted by Deloitte³, 63% of business leaders resorted to automation to answer to the COVID-19 pandemic, while 73% of organizations show interest in process automation technologies, one third higher than the previous year. DigitWise is one of these companies, an early adopted or process automation for raising the efficiency of resources as a response to post-pandemic changes. For example, the accounting processes were automated in 2022 with the help of a software robot. It has the role to replace the work of an accountant, cutting down company costs.

We can see how this pandemic has accelerated the pace of digital transformation, thus pushing DigitWise to adopt the following solutions:

1.1. Robotic automation:

The company cut costs by improving operational efficiency. It implemented software bots that replace repetitive, time-consuming processes, thus giving staff time to focus on creative and important goals. The adoption of software bots has a positive impact on the company considerably reducing its need for labour force and implicitly cutting down the costs associated to it.

Complementing the above, a study conducted in 2021 by Deloitte³ found that robotic automation is the most widespread type of automated technology, with a rate of 78%.

1.2. Adoption of Digital Infrastructure – creation of new internal and external cooperation systems:

The new digital infrastructures adopted by DigitWise such as video conferencing, remote work, e-learning, etc., allowed a renewing of marketing and communication channels, an unique client experience and convenient work methods, allowing an improved customer connectivity.

1.3. Exploration of new business channels - which can be easily scaled by implementing an automated sales framework:

Considering the notion of business scalability, digital marketing has come up with a revolutionary solution for companies. Here we would like to introduce the concept of sales funnel. Although the sales funnel concept is not a new one, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the vast majority of companies to move towards this structure. The ideal for organizations is to adopt a complete and efficient sales funnel that is easy to scale. Moreover, using an automated sales funnel is one of the simplest and most direct methods of generating leads (prospects, i.e. contacts) and doing lead nurturing (the process of creating and cementing a relationship with prospects at each stage of sales the funnel).

Sales funnel, in mot-a-mot translation is: funnel for sales, or automated sales framework. Digital Marketing Institute defines this concept as a buying/acquisition process through which companies lead customers through when purchasing products, solutions or services⁴. A sales funnel is divided into steps, starting at the top with the “awareness” stage and concluding with the purchase. The entire process has the purpose of taking the lead through each step, turning it from prospect to converted client (paying). This way, organizations can create a fully automated system that manages to generate constant sales.

To better understand how a sales funnel is explained, we should also mention marketing automation in general.

The term ‘marketing automation’ was first coined by Little⁵. These systems have been created for organizations that faced a large volume of data that were automatically collected from the online environment. Thus, the main purpose of these automation systems was to react in an adaptive manner to choices made by customers online.

One of the most popular definitions circulated is that of Burga and Kelly⁶ who define marketing automation as the technology that focuses on defining, planning, segmenting and measuring marketing campaigns, allowing marketing and sales functions to cultivate leads with customized content at a high level in order to attract and retain customers.

In the post Covid-19 pandemic scenario, S&MA (Sales & Marketing Automation) is expected to influence and reinvest organizations and relationships management, as companies need to re-assess their marketing and sales strategies, contextualizing it to the new “normal” after the passing of the pandemic.

Baig et al.⁷, iterates that in this period, digital channels will be considered not only for low-value products, but also for new or recurrent purchases in the B2B (Business to Business) area: 70% of organizations are open to managing procurement processes

completely remote (from home) for contracts up to \$50k. The same author emphasizes the key role of S&MA in mapping the customer journey in the online environment with the purpose of benefiting from the new trends that are quickly evolving in the post-pandemic scenario, such as the need for real-time communication. For these reasons, it is expected that one of the effects generated by Covid-19 is the acceleration of automation adoption⁸.

1.4. Risk Management Implementation – prevention measures:

1. To ensure business sustainability it is important to have a plan to anticipate and react to unforeseen situations. Principles implemented and recommended by DigitWise: Establishing a comprehensive plan that addresses challenges that may arise during the pandemic or unforeseen situations, and resolving these situations so that activities and objectives within the organization are not affected. This can be achieved with good coordination, trust and transparency throughout the company.
2. Building brand credibility by prioritizing authentic, compassionate communication with prospects and customized content.
3. The introduction of rigid organizational structures can be problematic for maintaining the company's organizational vitality, since trends change at a rapid pace and there is the need for adaptation and openness to the adoption of new technologies¹.

Building an organizational culture that advances and encourages digital transformation is necessary to maintain a high market position. The advantages obtained from the integration of innovations in in daily work processes are huge.. For this reason, organizations must develop and implement a resilient and adaptable business model oriented towards digitization. DigitWise has adopted from an early stage an organizational culture based on the values mentioned above, thus creating a trustful environment where communication was put on the forefront, thus facilitating a flexible and equal environment for everyone. Due to this approach and the principles presented above, DigiWise managed to adapt to any unforeseen situation. Moreover, with the help of such an automated sales framework, DigitWise completely replaced its sales department, reducing the company's costs, and allowing easy business scalability.

2. CHANGES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The current crisis has radically changed consumer behaviour and marketing approaches.

A major change in consumer behaviour can be observed around the notion of loyalty, and method of purchase. Although many companies use different approaches for optimizing conversion, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the attempt and need for marketers to satisfy the customer on a psychological level to facilitate conversion (sale).

At the same time, customer retention seems to be more difficult while gaining new customers seems to be easier than in previous years.

Thus, this radical change required organizations to review, modify their marketing strategies and accentuated the search for certain new communication methods in order to increase customer engagement in the digital environment. All this, in view of strategic financial objectives and operational targets¹.

In order to maintain an efficient communication with clients, many companies have implemented marketing practices and paid campaigns that interact with them constantly, providing empathy and support.

For this purpose, we come with certain suggestions that organizations may take into consideration when preparing their marketing and communication strategies, already implemented and tested by DigitWise:

2.1. Vision and Strategy:

In DigitWise's view, an essential component for successful digital marketing is the delivery of a pleasant online experience. For this, it had to readjust its communication and marketing strategies, to be ready to operate in a digital environment where everything is built around a complex journey of the user/customer. With the use of a sales framework, we can compare it to a puzzle, where every step of the framework is a piece of the puzzle. To be able to build the whole puzzle, each piece must be in its right place. The same with the funnel, each step should be gone through in chronological order by the customers to get the expected result.

2.2. Online Presence:

The use of social networks and digital platforms is an important element with which companies can convey relevant information and maintain a strong positioning of their brand.

"If you are not online, you don't exist – Over 80% of users look for a business online before making a purchase decision. If you don't have a website, you have no chance to get a quote of this huge market" states Dimitrie Baitanciuc⁹, Co-Founder & CEO of Brizy. He further states that "Over 50% of prospects do not trust a company that has no online presence". At the same time, Balio & Casais¹⁰ use a consumer's level of social media interaction with brand content to gauge their level of interest, brand loyalty and current position in the funnel.

Digitwise understood the importance of online presence and used all possible digital channels to create connections with potential customers, maintain a transparent communication, in real time.

2.3. Segmentation and customization:

Providing customized digital communication is of the outmost importance. Thus, organizations should deliver a unique message to customers that match their preferences, behaviours and needs. DigitWise uses audience segmentation to deliver customized content and experience for each type of customer.

2.4. Innovation:

It is essential to update, modify or launch new services or products that incorporate new functionality that meet customer expectations. Companies can raise brand image and reputation by developing new products customized according to the feedback received from clients¹. DigitWise revises its clients' feedback and any content submitted by the client/prospect in order to identify problems and offer solutions.

2.5. Paid campaigns:

DigitWise launched marketing campaigns to instil safety, support and empathy and increase brand reliability, and build a closer relationship with the target audience.

At the same time, the use of marketing in social networks helps companies to easily spread information about the products or services offered and increase customer retention through tactics such as: content marketing, email marketing, retargeting campaigns.

2.6. Measuring the performance of paid and organic efforts:

The use of paid campaigns in conjunction with new data analytics applications, helps companies analyse, identify and gain a deeper understanding of customer behaviour, preferences and needs.

We would like to mention the importance of performance indicators, also called KPIs¹¹ (key performance indicators) that are an efficient tool to measure business performance in accordance with the main objectives set by it. The purpose of these indicators is to monitor the progress of a business over a set period of time and facilitate decision-making for the development of the company. For examples, possible KPIs of the marketing department may be: conversion rate, revenues registered following the launch of paid online campaigns, number of downloads of an application, etc. Setting these parameters helps the business offer its employees a clear vision on the set strategy and objectives to be reached.

2.7. Content revision:

Since the e-commerce world is changing, marketplaces move at a faster pace, and the “work from home” concept is gaining weight, there are multiple opportunities for potential customers to use more content in the online environment. For this, the use of content that provides value to the customer is already a standard. That being said, DigitWise revises current content, so as to lay more importance on the behaviour of the consumer looking for more value. .

Such content may be:

- Content related to the protection of the environment, bio / echo products, equality of rights, animal protection, “green” practices, etc.
- Educational, informative content that offers value to the client, comparison charts that provide in-depth information, “how to” video content that may encourage consumers to create a relationship with products, services and companies.
- Any type of content that strengthens brand trust and solidifies the consumer-business relationship. Other examples may be: whitepapers, case studies, etc.

2.8. Web user experience:

Re-adapting the layout of existing web pages to better accommodate the needs of the new consumer. For this, the most effective testing method for Digitwise is continuous A/B testing of different elements presented, from the shade of the page, to the text, images, buttons used, etc. Even this testing can be automated by the many platforms that offer A/B testing.

2.9. Content marketing:

The use of social platforms and communication applications can be seen as a business tool through which companies can achieve their goals by providing content to customers in a dynamic way.

Statista.com counted in 2020 the figure of 4.57 billion people active on the internet, representing 59% of world population at that time. At the same time, Desjardins¹² reports 5 billion searches (online searches) in a single day, 500 million Tweets, 294 billion emails sent and 65 billion WhatsApp messages.

The vital component identified in these statistics is the concept of 'content marketing'. Here are some varied definitions to better understand its applicability:

“Content marketing, as defined by the interviewees, refers to processes of creating and delivering content (i.e., text messages, pictures, videos, animations) to

target customers in ways that add value and engages them in relationships with the company"¹³.

*"Content marketing is a technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and relate to a well-defined and understood target audience, with the goal of generating customer profit and create customer-brand engagement and loyalty"*¹⁴.

The content marketing concept has been existing for a very long time, and has evolved during the years, with a major increase in the pandemic and post-pandemic times. Ayush, G. K., Gowda, R., & Rakshith Gowda, K. M.¹⁵ report a major impact of Covid 19 pandemic on digital content consumption, in a positive way.

People use more and more digital content, on a daily basis¹⁶. Thus, content marketing has become a vital element in all digital marketing aspects.

Lou, C., & Xie, Q.¹⁷ research the content marketing concept in depth, concluding that it enhances consumer experience and indirectly helps cement client loyalty. At the same time Bowden, J. and Mirzaei, A.¹⁸, claim that, content marketing is the motor generating engagement on different digital channels. Thus, the relationship built between brand and consumer is a main motivator of interaction on behaviour, affection, cognitive and social level, as the researches states in their 2021 study. At the same time, a positive aspect of content marketing is underlined by Lopes, A. R., Porto, I. P. A. M., & Casais, B.¹⁹ who identify a high profitability and low long-term cost following the adoption of this type of strategy.

A good example is DigitWise who manages, through its content marketing strategy, to connect, involve and engage its audience.

We see how all these researches indicate the need, which has become standard, to have 'content marketing' implemented in the strategy of any company.

2.10. Use of email marketing:

We would like to mention some of the benefits pointed out by the company DigitWise in relation to the use of email marketing:

- 10.1 customization of messages depending on the target audience;
- 10.2 lower costs in comparison to other marketing channels;
- 10.3 automation of sent messages;
- 10.4 Audience segmentation.

2.11. Building the avatar of the ideal customer:

Consumer awareness is a vital element of any business.

Successful marketers know the needs of their prospect and the most efficient way to make their product/service available. Consumer awareness goes further than the simple demographic data or income level. In order to create such a "client avatar" data such as: hobbies, preferences, objections, personality type are collected.

Moreover we also look at consumer's buying behaviour. For this, it is important to look towards the type of person that is most inclined to need/ have the product or service provided. The reason why the purchase is made, and how often the product or service will be needed (it will be purchased again soon, or never) for whom the purchase was made (for themselves or for somebody else) and where this purchase will be completed (on the website, social networks, physical store, by phone, etc.).

Digitwise generates 3 different avatars of the ideal client, segmenting the audience and creating different communication strategies for each of them. Through this segmentation and customization one can see an increase of communication techniques efficiency and its results through the actions of the customer in the purchasing process. For example, a lower interaction rate with the ad and link opening, a significant increase of clicks on the ad, an increase of app downloads a better conversion data and implicitly,

a lower cost.

2.12. Marketing Analysis – competitors and market analysis:

An in-depth understanding of the current context, trends and market players as well as their successful strategies is a key element in any conceptualization of marketing strategies.

2.13. Setting the vision, mission and long-term objectives:

The company may face challenges in becoming a leader in its field without these clearly set elements.

Digital transformation is a process of integrated digital technologies in business activities and strategies that may lead to an improved operational efficiency.

Without a doubt, the “perfect receipt” from the point of view of marketing tactics is more difficult to reach during these hard time, but not impossible, as everything moves at a fast pace, and what worked 2 months ago may no longer work at present. In order to discover the proper channels where the audience is and the proper content, companies need constant testing and optimization.

3. THE CHANGE OF POST COVID MIND-SET

Although many nations are still consumed by disturbances caused by the pandemic, there are some key tendencies that can be identified concerning the behaviour of citizens all over the world. Among there we can mention:

1. Increased digital adoption: significantly, people are switching to digital platforms to meet their daily needs. The consumer mentality has been changed during the 2 years of restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with users getting used to the comfort offered by increased digitization. Therefore marketers need to adapt accordingly and provide a better user experience.
2. Consumers invest more time in making purchases from companies that share the same values as them, so companies must move towards sustainable and inclusive growth. This requires changing the current organizational structure to maximize the contribution of all people. Moreover, organizational values that prove not to be harmful to the environment are what today's consumer is moving towards, according to a rigorous online study²⁰.

Despite this pandemic crisis, digital communication and collaboration tools shall become a common practice and a normality accepted on global level.

Post-Covid mind-set changes mentioned above, are also identified as audience segmenting by EY Future Consumer Index²¹ following a 5-stage study in 20 countries, conducted in 2021.

The study identifies the following segments:

- a. Affordability first (32% of consumers);
- b. Health first (25%);
- c. Planet first (16%);
- d. Society first (15%);
- e. Experience first (12%).

Organizations need to consider all the aspects mentioned above in order to be successful. Although in the past the marketing strategy could be the independence from organizational processes and company culture, post-Covid consumer demands and considers as standard: greater transparency, complete symbiosis between how the product/service is carried out, how the company is organized, what resources it uses and how it uses them, the impact on the environment, impact degree on personal health, what it claims to sell and what it actually sells, etc.

Such a connection is not new, discussions on organizational culture and management reported to the marketing strategy are held in numerous studies, such as Hatch M. J. and Schultz M.²² more recently, Wu Huang²³, studies that reach this conclusion that is more and more prominent: a complete symbiosis between organizational culture, organizational management and marketing strategy brings the consumer closer to the company, and implicitly closer to conversion. Post-pandemic effects have accelerated this need and turned it into a new standard.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This case study seeks to demonstrate the impact of digitization on marketing, the importance of the positioning and mentality of the entire company as well as the changes in consumer behaviour in relation to the current context, taking the Digitwise company as an example. Following the study, it has been demonstrated that a company with organizational culture based on transparency and flexibility managed to withstand, and even more so, expand in such difficult times. One of the key elements was the communication channel opened on internal level, so that company could be aware of the worries and needs of each employee, tending to everyone's needs, creating a level of employee satisfaction and operating more efficiently. Another aspect of digitization impact is the automation of company processes. By implementing an automated sales framework, DigitWise completely replaced its sales department, reducing company costs and allowing business scalability. In the end, we can see how digitization has had a positive impact on companies who managed to remain open to new trends. At the same time, through statistics accepted on academic level, the study managed to demonstrate that consumer behaviour was altered, so that companies had to reshape their marketing and communication strategies adapting them to consumer's needs and wishes, taking into consideration inter-organizational challenges and strategic management.

5. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The field of digitization is a vast one, which constantly adapts from one day to the next. This study uses academically accepted definitions to support and highlight the decisions made by DigitWise in a post-pandemic context. The study has its limitations, strictly using the example of the company DigitWise, which does not incorporate the risks and difficulties encountered by all existing companies. Moreover, it is located in Romania, another aspect that can influence the difficulties or opportunities that a company may encounter.

This study is written and edited by the two authors, who in turn may be affected by bias, being directly involved in DigitWise company, the company on which this case study is supported. Moreover, the definitions and webography/ bibliography are in Romanian or English language, and there may be slight nuances that may be lost in translation.

In conclusion, the subject tackled by this study, although very detailed, may benefit from additional analysis, exploring more companies and their reactions to the post-pandemic environment.

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Company presentation: *Digitwise is a Romanian marketing company active in the field of digital marketing collaborating with clients all over the world. The impact of the pandemic on the company gave rise to the need for organizational management restructure and the implementation of new digital solutions in order to be able to cope with the rapid changes of post-pandemic consumer behaviour. This was an extraordinary opportunity to grow and adapt to new needs, and implement the automation that has already become a standard.*