

CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION'S MARKETING ACTIVITY IN LIGHT OF THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The SARS-COV-2 pandemic has uprooted and changed our lives in an almost irrevocable manner. The current pandemic has changed our behaviour, our consumption, our way of life, but most of all it has affected the business environment. The current paper aims to underline some changes that have occurred in the lives of the organizations and of their marketing activities due to the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. The pandemic has led to some changes in the way we think about marketing and how we implement the marketing activity.

The ideas of self-isolation, individualism, self-centrism are terms that created new marketing and advertising strategies that the companies must adopt if they want to survive. The paper points out several changes that the companies undertook in order to adapt their marketing and advertising message to the current situation combined with the need for creative and innovative actions and strategies need for survival in a highly competitive and uncertain business environment. The article also pint out two important dimensions and four marketing strategies that are based on innovative actions.

Keywords: Marketing, Online, Sars-Cov-2, Pandemic, Advertising

JEL classification: M30, M31, M39

1. Introduction

The year 2020 is and has been, so far, one of changes and challenges for the companies, for the marketing specialists but above all, for the individuals and for the societies. Due to the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19)

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pandemic outbreak and the restrictions that have followed, the business world needed and still needs to change and adapt their activity in accordance with the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

What we do know is that the world has changed. Like other global events with planet-wide impact, Covid-19 could potentially change how we see the world, the ways in which we think, and how we conduct our lives (He and Harris, 2020).

The recent SARS-COV-2 pandemic has brought changes in the marketing activity in many fields, but especially those related to the encounter between the company and the individual, in the online and offline environment. Changes have occurred in marketing areas like online marketing, e-commerce, online experience products, social media and social campaigns, marketing communication, consumer behaviour & consumer ethics and much more.

2. The impact of SARS-COV-2 on the way we “think and do” marketing

When we are talking about the changes brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic, the marketing and marketing related activities are the ones that had to change the most in order to face the new business world brought upon by this pandemic.

He and Harris (2020), pointed out that “the impact of Covid-19 on the global economy is likely to be unprecedented since the 1930s Great Depression. Therefore, probably the Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in the modern marketing history, which could potentially have a profound impact on corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumer ethics, and basic marketing philosophy”. The same idea is underlined in by Euronews (2020), citing a source from within the International Monetary Fund.

The SARS-COV-2 pandemic has resulted in significant changes to advertising, marketing, promotional and media spends, forcing the companies to change their approach about the current and the future of advertising and marketing campaigns in order to keep earning the same.

At the same time, the great majority of the brands are currently are attempting to use the right tone during a global medical emergency. The future that is being projected, shows a significant alteration within the market, higher and stronger competition, and an increased demand for creative and aggressive marketing practices.

If we look at the main concepts of marketing presented before the SARS-COV-2 pandemic, marketing was and still is defined as *“the process by which companies engage customers, build strong customer relationships, and create customer value in order to capture value from customers in return”*. (Kotler et.al., 2018).

But there is a question that arises from this, in the context of the pandemic: Is the definition still accurate in the context of SARS-COV-2? It would seem, that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consumers, the organizations, and the society in general is starting to re-evaluate their way of doing business and they are changing their goals.

Like Kotler et al. (2018) suggested the main idea behind the marketing concept is the development of strong consumer relationships and the creation of customer value. Despite this, the pandemic seems to have generated a strong enough shock, that the marketing managers are forced to adapt their activities to a post-pandemic society, driven by individualism, self-isolation, remote working etc.

But what changed? According to He and Harris (2020), the pandemic world has found the society and the consumer unprepared for the upheaval that was generated by COVID-19. The consumers were forced into isolation, with limited choices in terms of products and accessibility and increase in immediate demand.

Probably the most affected sector, after the health sector, is the international business world, were in the SARS-COV-2 world, the global supply of goods was reduced to a virtual standstill, consumers that before 2020 were very interested in global brands, were forced to local, regional and national products or services. Another affected industry was the tourism, hospitality & airline industry, with hotels, restaurants being closed, airlines were forced to ground and cancel flights, countries limited the incoming of tourists etc.

There were limits in terms of consumer movements from their homes to the stores / work places, delivery times for ordered goods increased, but at the same time delivery apps, like Glovo, Foodpanda, Deliverooo are in business heaven, with an increase of orders, a bigger number of companies, including restaurants, retailers etc.

At the same time, changes in the marketing strategy have occurred, changes generated by the shifts that have happened in the marketing environment (internal and external). The marketing activities and strategies must become more adaptive and agile, to become more flexible in the context

of the rapid development generated by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic and the post pandemic world.

For the organizations, a new need has risen, the necessity for new methods of reaching the consumers in a pandemic and post-pandemic business environment, were the main objectives of the organizations have changed, in order to accommodate the changes to their customers, their needs, their competitors and at the same time, they must prepare worst case scenarios and crisis management measures that “incorporate long-term survival, strategic agility, meaningful social responsibility, possibly centred on a societal marketing orientation” (He and Harris, 2020). In terms of marketing, the most visible changes can be seen in the online world and in the advertising area.

3. SARS-COV-2 and the advertising and marketing strategy

The pandemic has forced the marketing and advertising departments to become more creative and innovative in their approach to the way they deliver ad campaigns and how they promote their brands in this new Covid-19 reality.

In this context, the main changes that must occur in the advertising field, must focus, according to Holland and Knight (April, 2020, online), on the following issues: (a) addressing sustainability; (b) evaluating operational options and challenges presented by strategic planning in an environment of uncertainty; (c) analysing brand reputation issues; (d) identifying potential new products and services needed to meet consumers' needs and expectations; (e) focusing on creative and strategic marketing campaigns and targeted advertising; and using social media effectively.

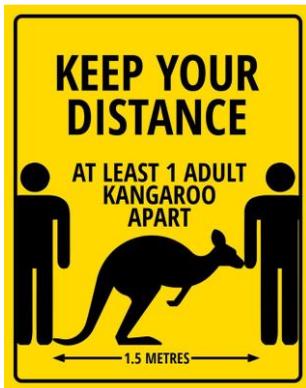
Several important brands have adapted their online and offline advertising campaigns to account for the needs of the society and of the consumers in times of the pandemic. According to Nesterenko (2020), we can identify some examples that show this change like:

a) The Japanese car producer Nissan adapted their advertising campaign by, underlining the need to stay at home.



b) Keep Your Distance by National Parks and Wildlife Service South Australia, uses humour, animals (kangaroos) and a message for keeping the distance between individuals.

c) Burger King France is presenting one of their products “the Whopper”, how it can be made at home, the ingredients, and together with Carrefour and Uber Eats, they ensure the delivery of said product.



As we can see there are many cases, where creativity and innovation can help the companies to promote their goods and services in the times of a pandemic. The main idea behind advertising during the pandemic, is to

resonate with the current situation, get creative, and avoid practices that have already become clichés (Nesterenko, 2020, online).

There are many benefits that can be obtained by companies using innovative and creative advertising campaigns in times of crisis. The online marketing activity and advertising actions during these pandemic and future situations like this, must aim to:

- a) increase the brand recognition of the company and of their brand products.
- b) keep the public and consumers engaged with the brand.
- c) keep on generating advertising and media coverage.
- d) offer your product / service for free for a certain trial period – e.g. Apple Tv, Netflix, HBO Go offered free access to their platforms, universities like Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, offered online access to free online courses, National Geographic offered a free educational content etc.
- e) initiate social campaigns by supporting social initiatives, support for local communities, donations, charitable collaborations – e.g. of Fundația Comunitară Sibiu, which raised large amounts of money and goods for the Sibiu County hospital by inspiring and promoting the needs of the medical staff and the needs of the medical system in the period of SARS-COV-2 lock down in Romania.

As stated before, the marketing and advertising strategies and actions in times of a pandemic must be based on creativity and on innovation, to be able to face the challenges of this difficult time.

To properly identify the right marketing and advertising strategies that the organizations could or should adopt during pandemic times, must consider two conceptual dimensions (Wang et.al., 2020):

- a) *motivation for innovation* – the dimension highlights the degree of impact a firm is suffering during the crisis period. Some companies might have a different level of motivation to innovate, in accordance with the impact that the crisis had on the organization.
- b) *level of collaborative innovations* – this strategy identifies if the marketing innovation strategy is primarily based on a company itself or is based in collaboration with other organizations. Choosing this strategy is based on the company's production capabilities, resources, access to funds etc.

Figure 1. Typology of marketing innovation strategies in times of COVID-19 crisis.

		Motivation for innovation	
Level of collaborative innovations	Level	Problematics search	Slack search
	low	Responsive strategy	Proactive strategy
	high	Collective strategy	Partnership strategy

Source: Wang et.al., 2020

From figure 1, we can identify four marketing innovation strategies that can be chosen by the companies to adapt to challenges of the crisis, in this case the SARS-COV-2 pandemic. The first strategy, *responsive strategy*, happens when the company responds to the changes in the business environment for the purpose of adjusting the existing business to said changes.

The second strategy, *collective strategy*, has a focus on the companies that have been strongly affected by the crisis and lack the resources to compensate for the need for change. The third strategy, *proactive strategy*, is based in the case of the company that has not been strongly affected by the crisis and uses the new opportunities that come from the changes that occur in the market environment, and benefits from them. Lastly, the fourth strategy, *partnership strategy*, as its name suggests is based on developing important partnerships with other firms and develop new businesses that are supported on the new needs and wants of crisis affected consumers, in order to expand their user base and their portfolio of goods or services.

Although cooperation should positively affect company performance, at this time it is unclear how implementation of these marketing strategies can take place during large-scale emergencies, and for longer periods of time (Chick and Chick, 2020).

The marketing activity is in general a fluid one, with many changes that occur in short periods of time, but in the case of the 2020 SARS-COV-2 pandemic, that we are still living at this time, the marketing and advertising activity of the company has found, in an extremely short period of time, the right way of adjusting their strategies and tactics in order to survive the current difficult times.

4. Conclusions

The SARS-COV-2 pandemic has greatly changed our lives, our way of thinking, our consumer behaviour, and our interaction within the society. With this paper we intend to underline some changes that have occurred in the marketing activity in general and several modifications that have happened in advertising and marketing strategies, in particular.

This brief study shows some of the changes that the organizations, and especially the companies had to adjust, for the purpose of coping and surviving the difficult times of the pandemic and of the lockdown that has happened in the great majority of the countries. As we have seen, the most affected areas were the medical and health services, the tourism and hospitality industry, the travel and airline industry and many more.

In order to survive many companies have had to change their marketing strategies to accommodate new social interactions, or lack off, they had to adapt their marketing and advertising strategies to the online, delivery services for goods have surged as well as the online platforms that facilitate teleworking or remote working.

Advertising changed in the way of supporting the government and public officials, by starting social campaigns for distancing and #stay at home messages, big brands have offered online content for free to adapt to the new needs of individuals / families that were stuck at home. Does this mean that there will be a resurgence of social and societal marketing? This is something that cause for future research.

At the same time, as we have seen, new marketing strategies had to be developed based on creativity and innovation, new models of approaching the consumers and for surviving the diminishing demand in times of crisis had to be brought to life.

The current paper has certain limitation derived from the little research that has been done on the impact and effects of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic on the companies and their marketing activities. Of course, this calls for further research on this issue and especially on the issue of consumer behaviour and the decision-making process, consumer ethics, how the citizens / consumers responded to the challenges of the virus and on the impact of the COVID-19 had on the marketing activity in general.

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