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CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

It is critical for marketers to improve consumer interaction and communication during the difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Brands that fail to do so risk becoming obsolete. As a result, marketers must begin connecting with customers and offering them with worthwhile experiences. Customers will have a special place in their hearts for brands that understand their emotions amid social isolation and provide extra care, concern, and empathy by meeting and exceeding consumer expectations. Not only that, but in these unique times, brand communication must be quite different. Brands are required not only to give back to the society, but also to preserve customer trust in them. This article examines how marketers used various digital platforms to engage with customers and communicate with them during the COVID-19 outbreak in India. Implications for the marketers are presented thereafter.

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Brand Communication, Covid-19, Coronavirus

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus hit us with a jolt, causing havoc in people's daily routines. The unexpected impact of COVID-19 has shattered the global economy, and the path to recovery remains unclear. In the wake of massive job losses, efforts by industries and businesses to improve efficiency and by governments to inject money into the economy seem to have fallen short. Working from home, social distancing, and restrictions on movement are the new norm, and brands and businesses must start adapting and finding ways to move forward rather than waiting for resolution.

Faced with declining sales volume, brands face the big question of whether to spend on marketing. For most brands in the food and beverage industry, aggregators like Grofers, Bigbasket, and Amazon, and OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, demand is increasing, and consequently these brands are spending their marketing dollars to reach out to customers. However, in industries hit hard by lost sales, such as fashion, beauty, home furnishings, electronics, retail, automobiles, and travel, does it make sense for businesses to spend on marketing? It may be argued that it is important for brands to stay connected with their customers amid this pandemic. Brands that fail to do so may soon be forgotten. Now a vaccine for coronavirus is available, but the return to normal may be slow. During these difficult times, improving customer interaction and communication will promote a customer experience leading to customer trust and brand loyalty. Thus, now is the time for marketers to begin engaging with customers and creating meaningful experiences for them.

Brands that understand customers' emotions during social isolation and provide extra care, concern, and empathy by meeting and exceeding customer expectations will hold a special place in

customers' hearts. The brands and businesses that succeed in creating this customer experience will be able to position themselves as the most preferred brand in both the short and long term, thereby generating maximum customer lifetime value.

Marketers appeared to have left no stone unturned in their attempts to deal with the unexpected problems that the coronavirus brought. Due to the partial/complete lockdown, customers were no longer coming to the stores. As a result, it was even more critical for marketers to keep customers engaged with their brands so that they did not forget about them. Customers may be reminded of the brand through traditional media such as television. But, more significantly, it was necessary to engage customers with a brand and develop unique stories and experiences for them. Not only that, but during these unusual circumstances, brand communication had to be extremely distinct. Brands were required to guarantee that not only consumers' safety was ensured, but that they also contributed to the community while maintaining customer trust in the brand. To cope with all these problems, this study analyses the consumer engagement and brand communication strategies that businesses used in the Indian market during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we shall examine how during the COVID-19 outbreak in India, marketers employed a variety of digital platforms to engage with customers and communicate with them. Following that, the implications for marketers are discussed.

Consumer Engagement Strategies during Covid-19

Consumer engagement is a multifaceted notion that serves to describe “consumers’ interactive brand-related dynamics and experiences” (Brodie et al., 2013). Using an integrative approach, engagement has been proposed to include a variety of beneficial interactions between consumers and businesses on three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The cognitive component of a consumer/brand connection refers to the degree of mental processing and elaboration associated with the brand. The emotional component of a consumer/brand connection refers to the degree of desirable brand-related affect. The behavioural brand engagement component, which refers to the time and effort spent by consumers on brand-related activities, accounts for the consumer activation process (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Considering that customers spend a major portion of their time on digital media, creating meaningful experiences for customers will also help brands generate positive electronic word-of-mouth. This calls for marketers to understand customer pulse and preferences in real time and derive new strategies to reach customers by using the right marketing communication channels and new ways of customer engagement. Customer behaviours, attitudes, purchase patterns, and purchasing modes have changed markedly in the last few months. Designing a new digital strategy requires an understanding of these altered dimensions of consumer behaviour.

An effective customer engagement framework for stimulating business and rejuvenating the brand focuses on

- a) Communication channels
- b) Customer engagement tools
- c) Immersive customer experiences.

Communication Channels

As the appetite for digital interaction sharply rises, brands are aiming to establish digital connections with their customers *via* focused digital marketing strategies and optimized communication using social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube; messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and Snap chat and mobile applications. Digital content consumption is growing due to lockdown or restricted conditions in most countries. As a result, it makes sense

for brands to spend on digital media and reach out to consumers with the help of sponsored posts, social media handles, and influencers and micro-celebrities.

Customer Engagement Tools

Communication strategies should increase brands' engagement with customers by developing interactive, creative and relatable content. Consumers now have more disposable time, and involving them in various online activities such as live games, quizzes, polls, contests, sharing stories, and tagging friends to win prizes or other rewards can lead to higher customer engagement. For example, Aashirwad Atta (wheat flour) has been promoting a contest on its social media handles asking people to share their recipes under various themes; the winning recipes are featured on the brand's Facebook and Instagram pages. Given that many people are now cooking at home under lockdown conditions, this is a good strategy to keep customers engaged. The excitement of having their recipe and name featured on the brand's social media pages and stories is an additional bonus that helps create a strong connection with the brand and attract other potential customers. Even brands experiencing declining sales due to the pandemic can benefit from a customer engagement strategy. For instance, Make My Trip is playing live games with its customers and writing blogs on world cuisine. Brands that keep customers engaged during this crisis situation will secure top-of-the-mind customer recall and a positive brand attitude, and customers are likely to return to these brands once the situation stabilizes or becomes normal.

Immersive Customer Experiences

Businesses should adopt a future-oriented approach by exploring the long-term implications of short-term strategies. Businesses that succeed will be those that recognize their customer's needs and wants and design innovative solutions using data and technology to enable a better customer experience. In particular, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies can help create immersive experiences for customers and further ensure customer engagement with the brand. Brands that have already invested in these technologies seem to be more future-ready to adjust to these 'new normal' conditions. For instance, Lenskart's AR feature helps customers try spectacles using its 3D feature from the comfort of home. During lockdown, customers have shared stories about selecting a pair of glasses using this feature of the app and Lenskart's quick, timely and contactless delivery. Retailers like Central have already introduced virtual tours of their shops to facilitate the purchase of apparel, shoes and other products by their customers, followed by contactless delivery at home.

With the sudden disruption of the marketplace, demand and customer needs, a rapid response and agility are key. Customer behaviour and expectations have taken new dimensions during COVID-19. The faster that business are able to adapt to the 'new normal' and adjust their products and services to changing customer needs and preferences, the better their chance of surviving and growing. Brands that become customer-centric and innovate during this crisis situation will create a stronger customer-brand relationship that will continue post-crisis.

Brand Communication Strategies during Covid-19

While most marketing and advertising methods have focused on increasing product sales in recent years, with the pandemic, plans have switched to pure brand image building. In the face of a global crisis, brands have kept the big picture in mind and focused on integrating themselves into solution-generation. Institutions and organisations are benefiting from disruptive technology in terms of corporate communications. Jarvinen & Taiminen (2016); Abratt & Cullinan (2017) have

found that they have improved corporate communications practitioners' content marketing and two-way engagements with various audiences. It was seen during the initial months of lockdown in India in 2020 that brands adopted the following brand communication strategies with their customers.

Brand Communication Regarding how they are Fighting Coronavirus

When it comes to the food and beverage business, companies like McDonald's advertised that "the only hands touching your food are yours." Pizza Hut conducted a promotion in which their delivery employees were photographed with a banner that stated, "Every 30 minutes, we wash and sanitise our hands for 30 seconds." Domino's pizza commercials showed how its delivery specialists go through rigorous medical exams, that their delivery boxes, bags, and bikes are sanitised every four hours, and other precautions that the firm takes to guarantee that their clients receive safe and sanitised food. All of these measures aided in ensuring customers that their food delivery were secure. In fact, several businesses used these messages as the basis for their social media stories across many platforms.

Critical Information Needed by Consumers

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Snapchat collaborated with the World Health Organization and the US Centre for Disease Control to offer users with the most up-to-date and reliable information. Many companies utilised celebrity endorsement as a means of reaching out to their target audiences. Customer attention, brand memory, favourable brand attitudes, and purchase intention have all been shown to increase with celebrity endorsement (Gupta et al., 2015). Celebrities serve as role models for many people and thus may inspire them to take desired actions. Many celebrities, including Kareena Kapoor, Twinkle Khanna, Ritesh Deshmukh, and others, made films from their homes (due to full/partial lockdown) discussing the necessity of sanitising various surfaces at home in order to guarantee safety during COVID-19. They were observed disinfecting with Lizol disinfectant. Lizol subsequently turned these films into educational advertisements that aired on television and across different social media channels. Dettol also collaborated with a number of celebrities (including Kartik Aryan) and influencers to teach people how to properly wash their hands according to WHO recommendations. MakeMyTrip is a smartphone application that allows you to plan your trip. Its chatbot supplied crucial information on the government's travel advice. Indigo airlines released information on terminal adjustments for departure and arrival of flights on its social media platforms when flights resumed after the first few months of lockdown in 2020.

Communication about how Brands are Helping the Community

During a crisis, brands that assist individuals and the community are viewed as socially responsible. This aids in the development of a good attitude toward these businesses. Harvest Gold bread has aired advertisements on its digital channels demonstrating that it is donating bread and sweet buns to many individuals in need during these trying times. During the lockdown, Parle-G partnered with the government to distribute 3 crore packs of Parle-G biscuits to those in need over a three-week period.

Use of Humour to Relieve the Stress

Some have recommended that companies employ humour in their communications with customers to help them cope with stress during a crisis. Harvest Gold, for example, employed

amusing animation material with characters from the popular movie "Sholay" such as "Gabbar," "Thakur," "Jai," and "Veeru" to send messages about social distancing, avoiding shaking hands, and so on. Zomato, a food delivery service, utilised amusing drawings of individuals working from home to help customers relieve the stress.

Use of Topical Content in Brand Communication

Many businesses have been seen using topical content in their brand communications. The 'Amul girl' was seen applauding the corona warriors, as did many others who came out in the balconies of their homes and applauded them with claps of hands or utensils. Kitkat backed up the concept of social distancing by displaying four pieces of Kit Kat chocolate separated from one another rather than stuck together. Due to the lockdown and the Ramayana being telecast on Doordarshan, Parker pens projected a 'Lakshman Rekha' sketched outside a residence. During the lockdown, Dalgona coffee was trending on different social media platforms, thus Dunzo, a delivery app, included Dalgona coffee in its messaging.

Implications for the Marketers

According to previous research, fear and anxiety can generate a desire for affiliation, strengthening customers' emotional commitment to a brand when they share similar emotional experiences (Dunn & Hoegg, 2014). Thus, we may say that a shared emotional experience is an essential prerequisite for consumers to feel emotionally linked to a brand, even if actual consumption is not required (Dunn & Hoegg, 2014). Not only this, it is critical to keep your consumers engaged during a crisis. Customers are likely to return to the brand that keeps them engaged when things return to normal.

- Invent new ways to keep customers engaged, such as games, quizzes, polls, and so on.
- Assure your customers that you are doing your best to take care of their safety.
- Make your message more relatable to your customers by using topical content in brand communications.
- This is the time when brands need to be seen as socially, morally, and ethically responsible.
- Now is the time to start cultivating a good brand image. Later on, the brand will benefit from this. Brands that can demonstrate how they care about their customers' safety, how they give back to the community, and how they strive to offer helpful, relatable information to their present and future consumers during these trying times will be able to establish a good brand attitude.

In terms of social media, it's worth emphasising that using digital media tools on a regular basis can help organisations strengthen their interactions and connections with stakeholders (Ngai & Singh, 2014; Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Organizations can use social media to provide status updates (Killian & McManus, 2015). Several companies may use social media to disseminate crucial information and news. Organizations that provide updates on Twitter on a regular basis receive more retweets and likes from their followers (Wang & Yang, 2020; Caerols-Mateo et al., 2017). In this crisis scenario, thus, institutions and organisations are urged to embrace digital media and engage in two-way interactions with various stakeholders, including consumers, especially now when digital is seeing a point of inflexion.

CONCLUSION

Brands are attempting to strike a chord with their consumers through various forms of customer engagement and brand communication strategies. Not only this, they tried their best to help the people by giving them the required information and by serving the society. Digital media,

in particular, was extremely useful for the brands in all of these conversations. In addition, since the country's first lockdown, customers' appetite for digital content has been growing. The term "digital" is increasingly being used frequently in discussions concerning the future of communication. With people's digital appetite growing, companies will strive to build a digital connection with their audience. They'll have to develop more engaging, innovative, and relevant content. Companies will also need to upscale their digital game and look at investment in various digital technologies.

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