



Digital marketing during a pandemic: A study on impact of digital marketing on consumer perception during lockdown in Guwahati city

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Abstract

Human necessities have changed over the years. In addition to the three basic necessities for survival, namely- food, clothing and housing, now internet is also considered as a necessity for survival. There are around 4.54 billion active internet users in the world. India is the second largest online market in the world with over 560 million internet users. With people commonly spending an average of 3 hours and 15 minutes on their phones every day, online marketing and advertising has established as the most result-oriented department for running a successful business. Online platforms are used to entice, engage and enchant customers thus generating brand awareness, brand identity and also turning viewers to potential clients as marketing is all about establishing connections in the right place at the right time. However, the situation has changed tremendously on account of the alarming impact of COVID-19. Aside from the health threats this virus has brought to the public, it has devastated the fiscal sectors as well. With people losing jobs, businesses making losses, cash flow hurdled and many more repercussions of the world being hit by Corona Virus, it is a difficult time for everyone. This paper studies the impact of digital marketing upon the consumer perception in this moment of distress and examines whether digital marketing has only increased its relevance in this period of social distancing.

Keywords: covid-19, Digital marketing, online advertisement, customer perception

Introduction

In marketing, 'customer perception' pertains to customers' awareness, their impacts, and their perspectives about the business, products, and brand. Presently, perception influences decision-making of buyers and is considered a huge success ingredient in the retail industry. Brands that observe and understand customer perception and its promoting elements can recognize opportunities better to enhance customer experiences. Perception not only impacts each individual sale, it also moulds the long-term relationships that customers initiate with the brand. Resultantly, every association the company has with customers must influence their perception positively. Businesses that build positive brand perceptions among customers are more probable to influence potential customers in indirect ways and prove themselves as extraordinary compared to other brands in their space. According to Forbes, "We live in an era where the perception of a brand is no longer reliant on the quality of a product. Instead, a brand's reputation is reliant on the perceived value to its customers and expands much further than whether or not the product works." Digital marketing is the element of marketing that makes use of internet and online based digital technologies such as desktop computers, mobile phones and other digital media and platforms to promote products and services. Its development during the 1990s and 2000s changed the way brands and businesses use technology for marketing. As digital platforms became increasingly incorporated into marketing plans and everyday life, and as people increasingly use digital devices instead of visiting physical shops, digital

marketing campaigns have become prevalent. Digital marketing ranges to non-Internet channels that offer digital media, for instance television, mobile phones (SMS and MMS), call back, and on-hold mobile ring tones. The diversification to non-Internet channels characterizes digital marketing from online marketing.

Statement of the Problem

With increasing spread of the ill effects of Covid-19 virus on the business sector, digital marketing has become a chief source for businesses to advertise their products. Brands are investing more than ever on digital marketing to engage with their target customers, as most of the population is likely to be addressed only by the means of online advertisement. However, whether these brands are successful in attracting more customers to purchase their products through such advertisements during lockdown remains questionable. Therefore, it is important to understand the customer perception of various advertisements on digital platforms and their buying behavior during lockdown. Hence, it is imperative on the part of the researcher to study the customer response in the purchase decision of online marketing.

Review of Literature

Some of the works related to the study are as follows: Purey (2016) ^[10] attempted to compare the various mediums of advertisement in the perception of consumer and examined the effectiveness of different forms of advertisement with respect to various product categories while Chakravarthy and Bade (2017) ^[5] made an empirical

analysis on consumer perception towards digital marketing and attempted to identify the impact of customer perception towards digital marketing. They further highlighted the scope of digital marketing in the Indian market and its various elements. Rai (2018) ^[11] studied the relevance of digital marketing in the present competitive era in the Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh and examined the impact of digital marketing on consumers purchase and Sankar (2019) ^[12] emphasised on social media advertising to understand consumer perception towards online advertisement and its present trend to advertise the products in order to grab greater attention from digital users. He further highlighted the impact and influence that has been created by online advertisement among consumers. Beenu and Rathika (2019) ^[8] analyzed the customers' attitude towards digital and conventional advertising. The study went further to comprehend the relationship between the various determinants of advertising and customers' attitude towards advertisement.

Objectives of the study

The study has been conducted with the following objectives:

1. To examine the various forms of digital marketing strategies applied during the lockdown for prevention against COVID-19;
2. To analyze the impact of such digital marketing efforts upon consumer perception.

Methodology of the study

The sampling technique selected for the study is stratified random sampling and the respondents have been randomly selected from total population in each stratum. The sampling size taken for the study is 200. The questionnaire were systematically prepared and distributed to the consumer respondents. The respondents varied from a wide cross section of various economic and demographic characteristics. The data for this study has been collected from primary and secondary sources.

Limitations of the study

The study has been conducted over a short period of time and among 200 population units only which may only be partially representative of the scenario.

Factors affecting consumer perception

Starting from very basic factors like price and quality to less tangible factors like consumer's perspective on the company's reputation, experience with service and goods, various complicated psychological factors determine a consumer's perception of goods and services.

Price: Consumer perception is affected greatly by price. Although, consumers are appreciative of an economically-priced item, very inexpensive items are often considered as cheap and disposable, ultimately degrading a consumer's perspective of a product even if the product remains the same and the consumer is benefited from a price reduction. Especially sophisticated or questioning consumers are even prone to discredit a product that is comparably cheaper than the alternatives. Resultantly, price should be an important part of a comprehensive marketing plan, where even cheap products are regarded as favourable alternatives, with a price that is somewhat lower but still comparable with other possibilities with similar levels of quality to the competition.

Quality: The actual quality of a product is a crucial part of a

consumer's perception of a good or service. Quality can be described in any aspect in a set of characteristics of the good or service that satisfy or disappoint a consumer, including desirability, reliability and durability. A consumer's actual experience with a product will determine his perception of quality, however marketing can influence a consumer's perception of quality in some cases. Outside the domain of mass communication, word of mouth concerning quality also advances very quickly.

Service Quality: By and large in the case of goods that evidence a number of flaws, exceptional service quality can often dominate a negative experience with the product itself. If a consumer feels that he receives extraordinary attention when facing a trouble with a product, that consumer is relatively more probable to trust the brand or product believing that the company or retailer provides a quick and effective response to problems. Humans are social animals and their consumer behaviour is often regulated by the social relationships that surround a product, including interactions with customer service representatives.

Packaging and Branding: Consumer Perception depends largely on Packaging and branding, especially while making purchase decisions. Usually, when consumers are purchasing a product for the first time, the way the product is presented can entirely set up their perception of the item. Packaging and branding blanket everything from the desirability and display quality of an item to the characteristics of a product the manufacturer decides to highlight. Based on the type of product and market, different branding messages from tough and reliable to fine and luxurious can be suitable and effective.

Reputation: A product's reputation is established over a period of time and is generally a blend of direct experience with the product, word-of-mouth recommendations and marketing campaigns that aim to generate a status or shared opinions of the product or brand. Moreover, a consumer's perception of a product's reputation is not only decided by the product's brand identity and manufacturer but by the whole chain of distribution. Even if a consumer trusts a product's manufacturer, for instance, that consumer may change his view about the product upon seeing it available in a retailer he relates with cheap, defective products.

Digital Marketing Strategies

There are a number of approach brands can exercise digital marketing to aid their marketing endeavours. The employment of digital marketing in the digital age not merely assists for brands to market their products and services, but also assists for online customer help care by way of 24/7 services to make customers feel supported and valued. The utilisation of social media interaction helps brands to entertain both positive and negative feedback from their customers as well as deciding what media platforms work fine for them. Per se, digital marketing has developed into an enlarged benefit for brands and businesses. It is now ordinary for consumers to send feedback online via social media sources, blogs and websites on their experience with a product or brand. It has become all the time more prevalent for businesses to exercise and encourage these conversations by means of their social media channels to have direct communication with the customers and administer the feedback they receive suitably.

Word of mouth communications and peer-to-peer dialogue time and again have a superior impression on customers, as

they are not sent directly from the company and are as a result not deliberate. Customers are more probable to rely on other customers' experiences. Examples can be that social media influencers share food and fashion products endorsed by brands to highlight their demand for and experience of the product to attract more customers. There are multiple digital marketing channels available namely;

Display advertising: As the word suggests, online display advertising concerns featuring informational messages or facts to the consumer on the internet. This consists of a broad array of advertisements like advertising blogs, networks, interstitial ads, contextual data, ads on the search engines, classified or dynamic advertisement etc. The approach can aim particular audience adopting from different types of locals to view a certain advertisement, the diversity can be established as the most creative ingredient of this approach.

Email marketing: Email marketing if compared to other sort of digital marketing is regarded inexpensive; it is also a means to quickly convey a message for instance their value proposition to existing or potential customers. However, this channel of communication may be recognized by recipients to be inconvenient and irritating particularly to new or potential customers, consequently the triumph of email marketing is dependent on the language and visual attraction used. With regard to visual attraction, there are evidences that making use of graphics or visuals that are related to the message which is striving to be sent, however less visual graphics to be used with initial emails are more helpful sequentially creating a somewhat personal feel to the email. With regard to language, the style is the main aspect in deciding how appealing the email is. Using casual tone creates a warm, gentle and welcoming feel to the email in contrast to a formal style.

Search engine marketing: Search engine marketing (SEM) is a kind of Internet marketing that concerns the advertisement of websites by escalating their visibility in search engine results pages (SERPs) mainly by way of paid advertising. SEM may include Search engine optimization, which alters or modifies website content and site architecture to attain a superior ranking in search engine results pages to improve pay per click (PPC) listings.

Social Media Marketing: The word 'Digital Marketing' has numerous marketing angles as it chains different channels used in and among these comes the Social Media. When we operate social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+, etc.) to market a product or service, the approach is called Social Media Marketing. It is a process in which plans are made and implemented to attract traffic for a website or to increase awareness of buyers over the web making use of different social media platforms.

Social networking service: A social networking service is an online platform which people make use of to establish social networks or social relations with other people who share parallel personal or career pursuits, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections.

In-game advertising: In-Game advertising can be defined as "inclusion of products or brands within a digital game." The game helps brands or products to position ads within their game, either in a slight manner or in the form of an advertisement banner. There are various aspects that prevail whether brands are triumphant in their advertising of their brand/product, these being: Type of game, technical platform, 3-D and 4-D technology, game genre, consonance

of brand and game, importance of advertising within the game. Individual aspects consist of attitudes towards placement advertisements, game involvement, product involvement, flow or entertainment. The outlook towards the advertising also includes not only the message shown but also the outlook towards the game. Depending on how pleasant the game is will decide how the brand is perceived, which means if the game isn't very fun the consumer may subconsciously create a negative feeling towards the brand/product being advertised.

Video advertising: These types of advertising regarding digital or online means are advertisements that stream on online videos, for instance YouTube videos. This sort of marketing has witnessed a boost in recognition over time. Online Video Advertising typically comprises of three types: Pre-Roll advertisements which play before the video is watched, Mid-Roll advertisements which play during the video, or Post-Roll advertisements which play after the video is watched. Post-roll advertisements were streamed to have enhanced brand recognition concerning the other types, whereas "ad-context congruity or incongruity plays an important role in reinforcing ad memorability".

Native Advertising: It concerns the placement of paid content that imitates the look, feel, and frequently, voice of a platform's existing content. It is most successful when employed on digital platforms like websites, newsletters, and social media. It can be sometimes contentious as some critics feel it deliberately misleads consumers.

Content Marketing: It is a method of marketing that concentrates on attaining and retaining customers through offering beneficial content to customers that expands the buying experience and generates brand awareness. A brand may use this method to grasp a customer's attention with the goal of affecting potential purchase decisions positively.

Inbound Marketing: Inbound Marketing is a marketing approach that concerns using content as a way of attracting customers to a brand or product. It entails widespread research into the behaviours, interests, and habits of the brand's target market.

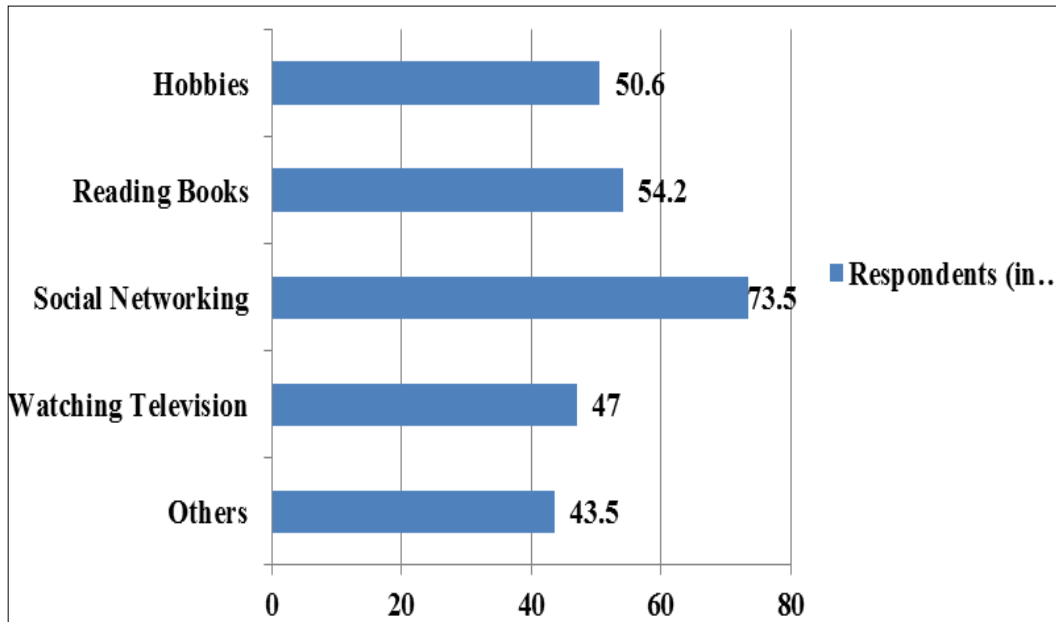
Viability of digital marketing during lockdown

The study had found that during the lockdown most of the people stayed at home and thus had sufficient time to engage into lot of activities other than their regular work. The emergence of Covid-19 over the past few months has brought people into a state of turmoil. The lockdown resulting from the pandemic has brought regular activities to halt and has compelled people to lock ourselves inside our houses. Even though the lockdown is proving to be unpropitious, it cannot be denied that life before Covid-19 didn't leave much time in the hands of the working people to engage in leisure activities such as reading, watching television or using social media as much as life during the lockdown. People who used to work on 9-5 jobs are now saved the trouble of spending the day in their offices and are working in the comfort of their homes and in their desired time range, so they have plenty of time to engage in their choice of leisure activities. While many people chose to spend their time in pursuing their hobbies or reading books, it is evident that a fair number of populations used most of their time watching television and being active on social media.

Hence, it won't be wrong to say that it is the best time for brands to advertise their products on the various platforms

of digital marketing such as Television, Social Media, Online Streaming Services, Games, Mobile Phones and Emails etc. as then it will have the potential to capture the interests of a larger share of population than in general. With the lockdown, as the chances of customers noticing the huge hoarding advertising the brands' product has decreased considerably, it is wise for the brands to adapt to the changing

Business environment and retreat to digital marketing to attract the interests of the potential customers. As per our survey, it has been found that 73.5% of the total population engages itself in social media, thus it will be considered best for the brands to use social media as their advertising platform to attract more and more people during the lockdown.



Source: Field Survey

Fig 1: Chart showing pastime activities engaged in by respondents

Effectiveness of advertisements during lockdown through digital platform

It has been observed that a large number of the population spend most of their time on social networking or watching television and thus it can be said that digital marketing is the most viable option to spread awareness, publicize and popularize products and services. Brands such as Myntra, Fabindia, Tjori, FabAlley, Zivame and many others are doing their best in digital marketing with their unique initiatives to keep the customers interested and involved in social media. According to reports, retail brands have amplified their digital marketing budgets by 20-30% to stay relevant in the market. But, it still remains to be seen if advertisements had actually resulted in forming positive opinion about products and services and then converting it into sales. Even though all these efforts of the various brands to keep themselves connected to the customers are gaining attention and almost everyone is aware of the products or services being advertised on digital platform, it has been seen that only half the population is involved in purchasing the product shown on advertisements. There can be a number of reasons for such behavior; some of these can be the fear of contamination of the virus by inviting external objects into one's house, the other being the financial crisis that almost everyone is facing during the lockdown.

Another important fact that has been noticed is that there is a difference of behavior regarding the purchase of different category of products. Even though people learned about Online Video Streaming services and Academic services the most through advertisements on digital platforms, almost half the population preferred to purchase Food products the

most, followed by Healthcare rather than other categories.

Table 1: showing effectiveness of advertisements during lockdown

Variable	Respondents (in %)
Noticing advertisements on digital platform	91.5
Awareness of new advertisements during lockdown	80.7
Awareness of new products via digital advertisements	77.1
Purchase of new product during lockdown	53

Source: Field Survey

Table 2: showing consumer response towards various products

Particulars	Respondents (in %)	
	Learnt about new products	Purchased those product
New Food Products	24.1	47
New Electronic Gadgets	22.9	18.1
Online Video Streaming Services	60.2	25.3
Healthcare	44.6	34.9
Academic Services	53	25.3
Others	22.9	18.1

Source: Field Survey

Findings

This study was undertaken to analyze the customer perception of various online advertisements during the worldwide lockdown. The viability of Digital marketing and its effectiveness was also determined. Effectiveness of such advertisements was determined with respect to various product categories. Digital marketing has helped the people

to come across various new products and services while sitting at home. Different category of products was advertised during lockdown on various digital platforms, be it on Television, mobile phones, Emails, Internet, Social media, games and so on. Although we can agree that the viability of online advertising/ digital marketing is the best during such times, however, the effectiveness of such advertisements on customers is not the most satisfactory. By comparing various categories of products, we have concluded that Digital Marketing is the most effective for Food products and Healthcare products, the reason being understandable keeping in mind the ongoing situation where almost everybody is facing financial hurdles, food and health surpasses other needs.

Conclusion

The situation of pandemic that stuck the civilization has not only rooted the people to their home but has also brought in a bigger financial uncertainty upon the people. Many people lost their livelihood or have been pushed to subsistence due to the prevailing situation. Marketing in such a scenario is a very difficult task. Most of the people seek to hold funds as a precautionary measure and are spending only in case of dire needs. This has been adequately reflected in our study as awareness is not necessarily converting into a purchase. The people are adopting a conservative attitude with regard to their spending and thus only a specific line of products are reaping the benefits from digital marketing.

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