Digital engagement strategies in a pandemic

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Abstract   This paper discusses Blu Flamingo Digital's approach to digital marketing in a pandemic, examining the trends that have emerged and how the ecosystem has changed, along with solutions to mitigate the risk of not understanding how these developments are affecting consumer behaviour. More than anything else, however, the paper stresses the importance of flexibility, that is learning to adapt to an evolving situation without losing sight of one's original goals.

KEYWORDS: new normal, digital marketing strategies, pandemic, digital strategy, new media, e-commerce, PPC, digital engagement strategies, SEO, CRO, search terms, mobile traffic

INTRODUCTION

After two decades of relatively steady growth, digital consumerism went into hyper-drive when the coronavirus pandemic became a global health concern, resulting in country-wide lockdowns, the closure of schools and businesses, and changing life as we know it.

In its article 'How COVID-19 created a new consumer in just 90 days', Fast Company describes the rise of 'Generation N':

> People are thinking, feeling, and making decisions differently. Collectively, Gen N represents a connected consumer, by choice or by default, whose decisions are now also driven by the stressors, feelings, and consequences of a global pandemic.[1]

As yet, COVID-19 is not the worst threat the world has faced — at the time of writing, eight pandemics have had higher mortality rates.[2] Nevertheless, in terms of how people interact (and certainly how marketers do their jobs) it is hard to imagine that any previous pandemic has had a greater impact.

That digital technology has changed the way people's brains are wired is largely accepted. By the age of 11, 90 per cent of UK children have their own device, with phone ownership 'almost universal' once children are in secondary school.[3] The average adult, it is said, checks their phone every 12 minutes.[4]

It is therefore no surprise that adults in lockdown, physically separated from their family, friends and colleagues, become

near-dependent on all things technological for their food, medicines, social contact, entertainment and more.

BLU FLAMINGO DIGITAL'S RESPONSE

Much like many other companies, Blu Flamingo Digital engaged in scenario-based planning and cash-flow forecasting as soon as it became evident that the pandemic would have a global impact on business. This was followed by business continuity planning to assess the potential impact of the pandemic and to protect the agency at different stages of its evolution.

Four scenarios were anticipated, with expected dates and recovery timelines. In each scenario, the following were assessed:

- impact on business;
- the key activities performed at all levels, and the expected response;
- critical and non-critical functions; and
- work-from-home options.

One year after the lockdown, Blu Flamingo Digital conducted an in-depth survey to analyse the impact of the pandemic on its business. As this paper will discuss in due course, the results were better than anticipated.

To break the rules, one must first understand them. In this respect, Figure 1 illustrates how to understand the digital ecosystem. Likewise, to innovate successfully, it is essential to understand the reasons for other companies' success — and their failure.

Digital engagement has never been about likes, clicks or follows — it has been about meeting a need, servicing a gap and creating a community of advocates.

Consider the following:

- Netflix did not kill Blockbuster — ridiculous late fees did.
- Apple did not kill the music industry — being forced to buy full-length albums did.
- Airbnb is not eroding profits in the hotel industry — limited availability and pricing options are.

So, if technology is just an enabler, what then is the game-changer?

The answer is customer-centricity.

Applying this one principle will change the game for any digital marketer — and yet customer-centricity is so infrequently

Figure 1: The digital marketing ecosystem

considered during the development of digital engagement strategies that it is frankly astounding. Figure 2 shows how marketers should start to plan their digital ambitions. This process starts with going to where the customer is. To develop a proper relationship with end users, marketers must adopt the same channels as their customers use, select appropriate keywords for their website, write content that is helpful to their customers and so on. Simply put, ask not what the digital ambition for *your* brand is, but rather what it is for *your customer.*

WHERE IS THE CUSTOMER NOW?

With the advent of COVID-19, digital marketers have an opportunity to re-learn who their customer is: their intentions and aspirations, what they value now and why. The sales/marketing funnel, highlighting the consumer's path from awareness, to interest, decision making and finally purchase and advocacy, is no longer enough to help capture value.

The consumer is no longer on a linear path but rather a very complicated omni-channel journey that frequently doubles back on itself. For example, the consumer might see an advertisement on television and then experience the same advert on YouTube and Facebook. With their interest piqued, they seek out more information by conducting a Google search. They land on a website and immediately look for peer reviews — as they do this, they log on to Instagram to see what the product looks like when used and perhaps engage with some influencers.

They are not entirely convinced, but sign up for a monthly newsletter because they see some value in the content, eg great tips/advice in this area of interest. A month later, an offer from this company is shared via the same e-mail newsletter they subscribed to — the customer decides the saving makes it worth the try, and finally, they make a purchase. They are impressed with the product and leave a positive review, signing up to the company's loyalty programme and sending their cousin a link to try the product, thus becoming an advocate.

Tracking users' journeys (see Figure 3) and then reviewing the data assists digital marketers in their quest to define different users and how they interact with brands online.

Based on the data, it is possible for the marketer to further refine and define the platforms and strategy they will use to engage with the customer. For example, a marketer for a business-to-business company might choose to publish a white paper, while a marketer for a business-to-consumer company might shoot a YouTube video tutorial on how to use their product. These decisions will depend on how their customer is currently engaging with their brand, combined with a competitive analysis of how other players in their industry are shaping their customers' experience

Start With An Ambition

• What is your digital ambition for your brand?

• Take stock of current status:

  • **Website:** Ensure it is optimized for Google search and mobile devices

  • **Social Channels:** Reserve the handle across all social media platforms

  • **CRM Database:** Define how and where you will capture customer data

  • **Channel Planning:** Decide the role of each channel and which one to invest on and build

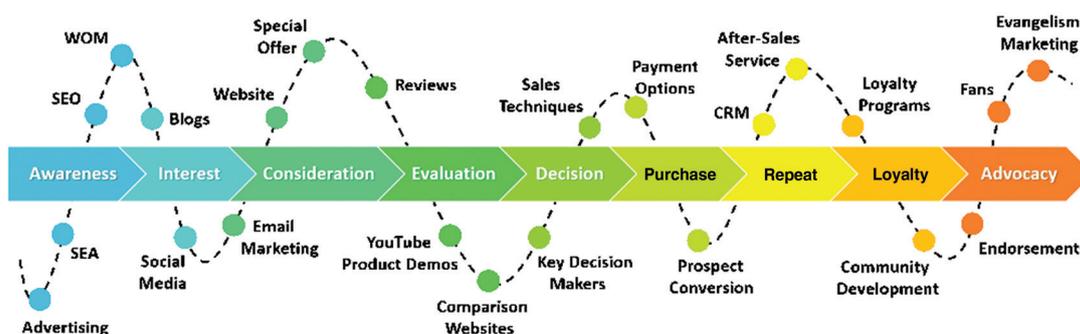| DON'T BE EVERYWHERE, YOU CAN'T. | Measure, |
FOCUS ON QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY.	Measure,
TRAFFIC ON YOUR WEBSITE IS PARAMOUNT.	Measure,
DEVELOP A TRUE RELATIONSHIP WITH END-USERS.	Benchmark, & Act.

Figure 2: Start with an ambition

Figure 3: The user journey

LEVERS FOR DIGITAL MARKETING EXCELLENCE

The final aspect allowing marketers to ensure they are being customer-centric is to understand what is referred to in the industry as the levers for digital marketing excellence (see Figure 4).

The key thing for marketers to note about digital levers is the timing.

The initial levers are employed to drive customer acquisition and conversion. This requires the marketer to have owned platforms, such as a website and landing page, to which they can drive consideration and traffic, via such tactics as search engine marketing and social media advertising.

Creating a buy-flow design and considering the buyer journey will help to optimise these digital efforts.

Pulling on different levers gives different results: some digital strategies are better for acquisition (eg social media advertising) and some for driving customer value (experience personalisation).

In a downturn, marketers tend to turn to growth strategies; however, without the intent to drive greater, personalised value for the customer, they may not fully understand what new consumer trends are emerging, leaking immeasurable opportunity.

Consideration must be given to enabler strategies, such as the marketer's operating

Figure 4: Levers for digital marketing excellence

model, how they use data and how they are tracking performance, as this helps optimise the growth strategy.

Best practice dictates that organisations start with the bare bones, master a simple process and only build in layers of complexity once they have understood and effectively implemented an easier process. This is the golden rule: standardise *before* you optimise.

TRENDS AFFECTING DIGITAL IN A PANDEMIC
In-person store visits nearly eliminated

To understand how their advertising efforts are contributing to in-store visits, many advertisers use Google Ads[9] to track their store visit conversions. These metrics allow local advertisers to optimise their pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns. Given that COVID-19 effectively eliminates unnecessary foot traffic, the lack of data presents a real challenge. The key solutions for this are explored below.

Website maintenance

A company's website is the bedrock of its digital footprint. Now more than ever it is important to ensure the basics are all checked off, such as making sure that site speeds are best in class. It is possible to use free online tools to test site speed in order to refine the call to action, headlines and search engine optimisation (SEO) on the landing pages, which in turn will impact PPC efforts as this is where the advertisements are leading.

Google My Business

Even though physical store visits have fallen drastically, it is still worth making sure that one's business is listed on Google. Now is the time for marketers to update their hours of business, address and any support they are offering to customers during the pandemic. Customers are looking for information so marketers must ensure their customers are getting accurate data.

Social media

The bulk of digital media strategies that are being altered during this pandemic actually sit on social media, with fashion brands and fast-moving consumer goods exploding onto TikTok (the clear winner among social channels during the pandemic). This goes back to that question — 'where is the customer now and how are marketers adding value?'. The use of influencers has seen a sharp spike thanks to the creativity and resonance of content they are creating, and the brands that have seen their online sales perform well at this time have used this to their advantage. Listening to customer feedback is essential: for example, with consumers spending more time at home, demand for more stylish 'loungewear' has spiked — as has demand for exercise equipment. Staying active and strategic via social media is an important way for a company to reassure the customer that it is listening and adapting to their needs.

E-commerce

With in-person store visits nearly eliminated, e-commerce has become a necessary addition to many businesses' websites. With social selling on the rise, and platforms like Shopify simplifying the process, marketers have looked into strategies that involve partnering with delivery companies and online stores to meet customers' new needs quickly and efficiently. Upon evaluation of whether e-commerce is a fit for customers and product lines, marketers should stay proactive and avail options to their customers.

COVID-19 has driven unprecedented levels of e-commerce growth — according to estimates from McKinsey, the market advanced ten years in just 90 days.[5] Within the business-to-consumer sector alone, the US e-commerce market is predicted to be worth US$6.2tn by 2027.[6]

To take advantage of this prospect, marketers must maximise every opportunity

and optimise every engagement. In other words, strategy is even more important than ever.

Key to any marketing strategy is to define the digital ambitions of the brand. Before this is possible, however, marketers must take stock of their current status. This entails the following considerations:

- *Optimising for Google — and more:* Marketers must check their websites are fully optimised for Google searches and mobile devices. For example, are they running engagement campaigns on Google My Business, and do they have an online reputation management strategy that looks at the reviews on Google Maps?
- *Social media as a driver of commerce:* Since the advent of the pandemic, social channels are acting as commerce drivers — Blu Flamingo Digital refers to them as the 4 'Cs' (community, connection and customer care — eventually leading to commerce). Research by Salesforce shows that 45 per cent of consumers are using social media more than they did prior to the pandemic.[7] Purchases from social channel referral saw the biggest increases in Q2 2020, growing 104 per cent across the entire fast-moving consumer goods industry.[8]
- *Customer relationship management:* How and where are marketers capturing customer data and how do the data circulate within the organisation to assist different departments build a more customer-centric e-commerce strategy?
- *Channel planning:* The outdated 'spray and pray' model has been replaced with a distinct role for each digital channel in line with its distinct contribution to the company's e-commerce strategy, informing which channels to invest in and build, rather than attempting to be everywhere.

Online promotion

With the death of organic reach, it is important that marketers start promoting their offers, products and services as soon as they have the foundational pieces in place. It is essential to spend time defining and refining targeting along demographics, geographies and even likes and hobbies, before taking advantage of the available PPC avenues, such as Google Ads, social media ads and programmatic ads, that offer wider reach across different kinds of inventory.

Declining mobile traffic

Sedentary behaviour has also caused a decline in mobile search. Paid campaigns have shown a sizable decline in the volume of search traffic coming from mobile.

Revisit device bid adjustments

Generally, this type of adjustment would only be made on the premise of very specific data requiring the change. With the pandemic ongoing, however, it is safe to assume that many more users are on their desktops rather than tablets or mobile phones.

Implement smart bidding

As search behaviour becomes unpredictable and prone to abrupt changes, smart bidding may just be the best way to hedge against this volatility. Smart bidding allows marketers to review changing data quickly and adjust cost-per-click bids in real time. Further key considerations include the marketing goals and campaign budget.

COVID-19 dominating search trends

As one might have expected, 'coronavirus' was officially the number one search in 2020. Even more interesting has been the rise in complex search terms indicative of a world in flux. As a result, much online marketing is reaching unplanned audiences. Searches such as airline ticket prices can be appended to information on country lockdowns — or COVID-19 tests. Marketers can now immediately draw a line to see how and where to change their keywords and SEO strategies.

Search query reports

Marketers must ensure they are adjusting paid search campaigns on an ongoing basis, looking out for new search terms and incoming volume. It is essential to review search terms regularly as this will assist marketers in comprehending the kind of traffic they are receiving.

Negative keywords

The other side to the coin is to ensure emphasis is always given to adding the right negative keywords that could have a net negative effect on a campaign. Whenever there is a new type of traffic or new volume of search words or trends, there is also an influx of more irrelevant terms within those queries. Marketers must ensure they are setting these aside so that their budgets are not being spent on terms that are not relevant to their business.

Follow trending searches

Google Trends is an effective tool to provide insights into how customers are searching. Google Trends now includes a new section dedicated to the coronavirus search trends. Marketers can use this section to track how people are prioritising within their searches, which can in turn help when filtering through keywords in PPC campaigns.

Measuring return on investment and tracking key performance indicators

The fact that digital marketing efforts are so measurable is at times a double-edged sword, with the C-suite sometimes imagining this offers a panacea to all marketing woes. The truth is, as much as what gets measured gets done rings true, it is also a function of measuring the *right* thing.

Too often, organisations focus on vanity metrics such as number of followers, likes and views. While these metrics may be helpful in measuring key performance indicators (KPIs) such as brand awareness, the more important and harder-to-measure KPIs are the likes of brand sentiment: how do people *feel* about the brand? Are they leaving positive reviews or are they neutral — or worse, are they complaining about the product or service and what can be done to change that? If they are not leaving reviews then it is important to encourage them to do so — offer incentives or discounts, or simply ask them to do so and measure the percentage of negative, positive or neutral comments. Due to the rise of e-commerce, digital marketers are increasingly being tasked with using digital to deliver sales. This leads to another important metric: conversions and conversion rate. How many of your customers (ie website visitors) are actually buying? What is that percentage?

In short then, the most important KPIs pertain to what the customer is saying (are they reviewing the brand, and if not, what can be done to change this?) and conversion rate (how many sales qualified leads can be attributed to online marketing and advertising efforts?).

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed three main trends affecting digital marketing in a pandemic: declining store visits, mobile traffic and online traffic searches dominated by COVID-19. While the engagement strategies that marketers can use to enhance their efforts in response to these trends have been shared at length, it is important to recognise that resources are finite and the learning curve can be steep.

In the event of any doubt, the number one priority should always be on owned media — in this case, the organisation's website. In this way, it is possible to ensure that the organisation can still be found, even when it is not actively advertising. It is with this in mind that Blu Flamingo Digital Africa puts the majority of its efforts into search engine optimisation and conversion rate optimisation.

Across the globe, there has never been a better time for organisations to relearn who it is that they are selling to. What is it

COVID19: IMPACT & KEY LEARNINGS

80 : 20 Work Model
Remote: Physical Work

Investment in tech + productization
GO.Digital Platform

52% Higher efficiency
Group meetings + CRM use

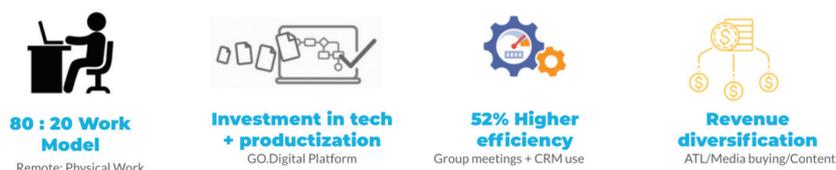**Revenue diversification**
ATL/Media buying/Content

Figure 5: Blu Flamingo Digital Africa's key learnings from COVID-19

that they need and how have their values changed? Any marketer who is paying attention will be able to glean the insights necessary to improve and possibly even transform not only their operational and business models, but also consider how to differentiate services, innovate new products and provide much better customer experiences.

As this paper has discussed, marketers that want to survive (and perhaps even thrive) must keep the following fundamentals front of mind:

- *Empathy:* For marketers to unlock a customer-first approach, they must be able to empathise — primarily through 'seeing and feeling' what the customer is 'seeing and feeling'. To understand how to continue to add relevance, marketers must follow the whole customer journey — reviewing each touch point, both online and offline.
- *Organise:* It is important to layer complexity in steps — to standardise then optimise — and build a customer-centric, cross-functional company or organisation that recognises the importance of reviewing real-time online shopping behaviours and customers' choices, to understand their preferences and learn what matters to them.
- *Act:* Once the data are in, get the right teams around the table to review patterns and seek buy-in from sponsors and stakeholders in order to convert insights into actionable pilots and programmes.

- *Invent:* Ask yourself how it is possible to turn the insights gleaned into opportunities to add more value to the customer experience. Re-imagine the customer journey instead of incorporating legacy journeys into the organisation's platforms.
- *Measure twice, cut once:* Do not simply document the return on investment or seek to review the standard KPIs — focus on a more nuanced approach, such as sentiment or consumer experience/ satisfaction, and tie company rewards into improving these metrics, and watch the organisation transform.

BLU FLAMINGO DIGITAL AFRICA'S KEY LEARNINGS FROM COVID-19

While the impact of COVID-19 continues to be felt at Blu Flamingo Digital Africa (see Figure 5), the agency's emphasis on customer-centricity has, among other things: (1) resulted in the introduction of new products and services (such as content and traditional media services) to the agency's offering, thus helping diversify revenue streams; (2) spurred the development of a freelancer platform, called Go Digital, to democratise the provision of digital marketing services to small and medium-sized enterprises; (3) driven operational efficiencies through the use of customer relationship management systems and timesheets; and (4) created a flexible environment for employees to work from home or office.

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