

Strategic Implications of Content Marketing in the Era of a Health-Crisis: Case of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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<https://doi.org/10.51137/ijarbm.2023.4.1.7>

Abstract – During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies adopted a multitude of content marketing strategies to communicate with their customers. There are also companies that choose not to communicate at all or stick to their original content marketing strategies for one reason or another. This paper presents a succinct overview of the content marketing strategy businesses followed during the pandemic in order to stay in touch with their audiences. Furthermore, the paper provides crucial insights into which aspects companies should focus on in order to be able to remain relevant and earn the trust of their community, especially during uncertain, chaotic and unprecedented circumstances, according to the literature presented in this paper.

Keywords – Content Marketing, Crisis Communication, Health-Crisis, COVID-19, Digital Marketing, Social media.

1 Introduction

Starting in December 2019, the whole world has experienced a pandemic that has multiplied at an alarming rate like a wildfire, disrupting the global market and of course companies. The COVID-19 pandemic is of unprecedented scale and is causing unexpected changes and transformations in the world (Meyer et al., 2022). This widespread crisis has had a profound impact on people's lives on a global scale, incurred significant financial and human losses, and affected many firms in diverse ways (Meyer et al., 2022; Bouncken et al., 2022; Harms et al., 2021).

In spite of the fact that crises might occur suddenly, their repercussions on firms are usually understood through a process (Bouncken et al., 2022; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Sayegh et al., 2004). Thus, they

should find ways to deal with this pandemic that could cause their businesses to suffer.

From the first signs of this health crisis to the writing of this report, several variants have emerged (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Furthermore, a number of behavioral changes in purchasing decisions and consumption habits have been observed since awareness of this pandemic (Keane & Neal, 2021; Zwanka & Buff, 2021; Naeem, 2021; Sheth, 2020; Dosi & Soete, 2022).

A lot of consumers have changed their habits. They moved less and therefore their visits to physical stores stopped. Besides, they were locked down, and thus the time saved was converged on online search, price comparison and online ordering.

Moreover, businesses have also been impacted. The fact that consumers have been more present on the web with confinement implies one positive side and another negative. An opportunity for many companies that have taken advantage of this virus by offering remote services, for example. And a threat to companies that felt a slowdown or a break that hit their activities hard.

Lastly, no one was prepared for such a shock let alone businesses. Currently, brands are aware that digitization is a necessity, not an option. Therefore, taking care of their content strategy is essential, especially in times of crisis, to attract the attention of the right target.

In this paper, we attempt to answer the following research question: How can businesses manage their content strategy in the midst of a health crisis (i.e. Covid-19)?

The article is structured as follows: Apart from section one which is the introduction, the second section presents some relevant literature on the importance of content marketing. The third section provides an overview of the subject matter. The final section is devoted to recommendations for an effective content marketing strategy to face a health crisis.

2 Definition and Importance of Content Marketing

The consumer has changed. He went from a phase of trust in advertising messages that are too beautiful and very convincing to a phase of doubt or even rejection of advertising by seeking sources of advice whether it was his circle of friends, his family or even online social communities (Kotler et al., 2017; Godin, 2012).

Companies are forced to adapt to this exponential evolution of the web and the internet and even consumer behavior with the digital that keeps evolving. Mastering digital marketing, specifically content marketing, has become a necessity and not a choice to survive and grow (Pulizzi, 2013; Rowley, 2008; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2015). According to the Content Marketing Institute (2015), content marketing can be defined as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience—and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.” In other words, content marketing is the art and science of pulling the audience toward the business (Crestodina, 2022).

Moreover, content marketing is described as the process by which useful, relevant, consistent, adequate, clear, concise, maintained, and user-oriented content is intended to be created and disseminated (Kissane, 2011; Pulizzi, 2013).

Actually, with this pandemic, consumers are moving even further into the digital world to make their purchases. And on top of that, online commerce is exploding and registering an extraordinary rise because of lockdown. In fact, since the Internet user is exposed to several messages per day, content marketing is a kind of antidote to overexposure advertising (Godin, 2012). Its main objectives are to increase the recognition of a company and brand awareness, traffic creation, lead generation and customer loyalty (Content Marketing Institute, 2013).

3 Content Marketing in the Age of a Crisis: Overview

In addition to loss of life, epidemics and pandemics are devastating economies (WHO, 2018). Many viruses, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-1) in 2003, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2013 and Ebola virus disease in 2014 may have been contained geographically, but the eruption of hyper-urbanization and global warming makes pandemics and other ecological hazards more likely to spread over a larger area and pose a very real threat to global economies. Despite the fact that we are far more prepared since the previous outbreaks, COVID-19 likely constitute the worst public health crisis in a generation (Ding and Li, 2020). In fact, firms not only need to deal with dramatic and unexpected changes, but also strategically address the long-term effects of these crises (Breier et al., 2021).

However, as He and Harris (2020) said: "Covid-19 pandemic offers a great opportunity for businesses to shift towards more genuine and authentic Corporate Social Responsibility and contribute to address urgent global social and environmental challenges". Hence, content marketing is a valuable weapon for the company to deal with this exceptional situation and take advantage of the crisis (Lund, 2018). This Covid-19 pandemic, for example, is a drag on business for many companies that are seeing their sales decline, their customers fleeing and their businesses penalized (Breier et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022). Whereas the complication includes a risk of its claim, managers might indeed belittle the complexity of crises (Reschke et al., 2010). Although, several companies were not prepared for such a crisis where several scenarios were not taken into account during the crisis management procedure.

However, for some companies, this is the opportunity of the year. They were able to take advantage of the situation and adapt perfectly to this pandemic.

As we said above, the customer's buying journey has been completely disrupted. This resulted in a forced slowdown in activity during the weeks of containment (several countries opted for full or partial quarantine to combat the spread of the virus) except for those companies that were able to adapt to this change. In addition, since the lockdown situation lasted several months, it would be harmful for a company to bury its head in the sand, cut off all communication and wait for it to pass.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled the eagerness to show solidarity with others embracing the negative effects on self-interest (Cap-pelen et al., 2021). In fact, based on the principle that “We're all in this together” (Sobande, 2020), several brands took advantage of the coronavirus to participate in the collective solidarity movement and thus improve their brand image. For example, Etam has launched the manufacture of fabric masks for caregivers (Etam, 2020), luxury fashion brand Ermenegildo Zegna has converted its production facilities to manufacture medical suits (Zegna, 2020), Alibaba, Xiaomi and Oppo donated thousands of FFP3 type masks to other countries (SCMP, 2020), Anheuser-Busch InBev, the world's largest beer company, has manufactured over one million bottles of hand sanitizer from excess alcohol in its breweries around the world (Ab Inbev, 2020).

Other companies have launched rebranding initiatives to show their support in the new era of social distancing. Their logos have been modified to encourage visual messages asking consumers to stay safe at home (#StaySafe) like Nike, which immediately adopted a new slogan: « Play inside, play for the world » (AdAge, 2020). Some companies have therefore relied on engagement and involvement in the actions that matter instead of promoting their products. Moreover, other companies have opted for an ecological posture in the creation of their content in order to focus on their mission and ‘raison d'être’ by providing useful information to their customers during this crisis (International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2021).

By the same token, aside from creating hot content related to the Covid-19 pandemic, a few companies have continued to create their consistent content to provide an “oxygen bubble” in this extraordinary health crisis such as white papers, podcasts, blog posts, video clips... The challenge for businesses is to succeed in building trust with their communities. For example, several companies were able to contextualize their content like Blink Fitness which hosted Facebook Live sessions during the week by promoting with the following message: "Just because we have to stay in doesn't mean we can't stay active. Let us bring the gym to your home" (Blink Fitness, 2020). Ultimately, « with the COVID-19 crisis, brands must act » (Gurkov, 2020).

This resulted in a kind of « brand darwinism » (Vollmer, 2009) where brands, as living organisms, would have no choice but to adapt to the mutation that is underway to survive this increasingly relentless competitiveness and massive sharing of content.

4 Recommendations for a Good Content Marketing Strategy to Face a Health Crisis: Case of the Covid-19 Pandemic

If marketing more «human» has been part of marketing theories for several years already (Kotler et al., 2010), the past few months have proven that brands that have mastered it win (Schaefer, 2019; Kotler et al., 2020). However, no crystal ball can help us understand and anticipate the full impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on businesses. This does not prevent companies

from following certain strategies to win out of any health crisis or at least with the minimum possible damage.

4.1 Show Empathy

The first of the values that consumers prioritize is empathy. Companies that are able to be closer to their customers, with emotional intelligence and compassion, build a relationship of trust and a long-lasting bond (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). The current health crisis the world is experiencing has changed the lives of millions of people and consumers have spontaneously changed their buying and consuming habits.

Showing empathy and integrity is not an easy thing as it includes honesty, understanding of the client's emotions and good communication to inspire trust and build a lasting relationship (Pedersen, 2021; Davis et al., 2017). Businesses must therefore rely on emotional communication in the event of a health crisis where the physical and mental health of consumers is at risk.

4.2 Develop a Disaster Scenario

Disasters inevitably bring crises to companies (Benson & Clay, 2004). A crisis scenario includes all possible, highly probable or improbable, minor, major or catastrophic threats. During the lockdown, public authorities in countries were forced to impose several restrictions that deeply affected some companies and are cited as examples: Closing cafes and restaurants, no fitting at stores, compulsory payment by card/online and no longer in cash, etc. This new era of "Stay home, stay safe" has forced companies to suddenly adopt new ways of working: Home delivery, creation of websites and apps to facilitate the shopping experience for consumers, etc. That said, businesses must be able to switch to the "Crisis On" mode at any time by having an answer to any possible scenario (Barton, 1994).

4.3 Go With the Wave

When a crisis occurs, consumption patterns change dramatically and companies need to be flexible and adapt quickly instead of blindly looking for sales (Ding & Li, 2020). A living example is that of Vodafone's loyalty program in the UK «VeryMe» which has replaced its lifestyle offers (free cafes, restaurant or cinema tickets at low prices, etc.) with educational and fun content such as free online training, eBooks and online subscriptions (Vodafone, 2021). Similarly, for communication, companies need to be agile in using fast brainstorming to publish content that embraces the consumer's emotions and proves that the company is there for them and with them in these difficult circumstances.

4.4 The Power of Generosity and Solidarity

Companies score several points when they show solidarity and generosity, especially in times of crisis when everyone feels abandoned, vulnerable and

isolated (Cappelen et al., 2021; Hoekstra & Leeflang, 2020). Over and above spontaneous actions such as masks, hydroalcoholic gels and respirators, companies can make donations to non-profit social organizations, especially those related to health, encourage employees to volunteer by helping elderly and vulnerable people who are living alone and no longer able to support themselves, remain attentive and available to consumers...

In addition, generosity has a much greater impact when communicated briefly and without boasting (He & Harris, 2020).

4.5 Maintain Contact

Brands must keep in touch with their communities, especially during turbulent and stormy periods when anxiety is at its peak. Businesses need to think outside the box and try a new approach by using their creativity and imagination for precise and penetrating communication. It all starts with small actions like a message to display on the homepage of the company's website or on the cover photo of its social media platforms. The time spent online by consumers has increased so much (Arora et al., 2020), and therefore businesses must also increase the rate of distribution of their content on the web by presenting an added value to netizens. Companies can also use notifications/emails to instantly send their latest news related to the health crisis or even set up a free special number for consumers (Hoekstra & Leeflang, 2020).

4.6 Diversify your Content Marketing Strategy

Under no circumstances should companies keep the same feed as before as if nothing had happened. It only proves that they are overwhelmed by events or worse, that they think only of profit! Brands must distribute relevant and regular publications on their activity but also publications intended entirely for netizens to help and advise them (useful content), advise them (informative content), make them laugh (entertaining content), etc. Companies can also work on their employer brand by posting videos/images of their employees working remotely, volunteering, supporting each other, etc. This will likely create a sense of belonging to the brand (Lou & Xie, 2020).

In the end, in post-crisis, consumers will remember only those companies that kept in touch during the crisis.

4.7 Tell Pertinent and Authentic Stories

Storytelling is a great tool to capture the attention of the cybernaut. It is about using a story to communicate a message whose purpose is to make the netizen feel something as well as humanize the brand. Storytelling is not limited to videos; stories can be told in images, orally or in writing. And they can be told on all channels, from social media to billboards (Belova, 2021; Pan &

Chen, 2019; Pulizzi, 2012; Godin, 2009). Some brands have produced compelling campaigns that reflect the realities of the pandemic. Dove, for example, highlighted the braveness and sacrifice of health care workers with a 30-second video entitled "Courage is Beautiful", which shows photographs of front-line workers with marks on their skin as a consequence of wearing personal protective equipment (Insider, 2020). Sam's Club, created a 60-second video to show their appreciation for the courage of their employees and call them "retail heroes" (AdAge, 2020). Apple's 'Creativity goes on' video shows the perseverance of ingenuity in difficult times (AppleInsider, 2020).

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of crisis is not new in itself. However, the coronavirus is the most sudden and unforeseen crisis of the century. Businesses were hit hard, abruptly and continue to adapt to post-pandemic damage. And no one can predict whether this global pandemic is the only crisis this generation will endure or other similar or even worse health crises are to be expected, so "Adapt, Innovate, accelerate" is the mantra of companies today.

There is no doubt that there is a forced acceleration of the digital transformation agenda as we recognize how quickly customers have embraced digital experiences. This Covid-19 pandemic is a double-edged sword but it can straightforwardly become a good opportunity for the company to survive in an increasingly relentless and uncertain environment. Therefore, companies must all think, operate and lead new paths in these insecure, chaotic and unprecedented circumstances.

Nowadays, businesses have the opportunity to earn the trust of their customers by caring and being there for them. This can easily be proven by implementing an effective content marketing strategy.

Finally, yet importantly, marketers and marketing scientists must take advantage of New Information and Communication Technologies, Artificial Intelligence and Gen Z's commitment to social media to propose useful strategies for the companies to survive and grow whenever new and exceptional circumstances arise.

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