

HOW DIGITAL MARKETING CHANGED AND HOW IT AFFECTED BUSINESSES IN NORTH MACEDONIA AT THE TIME OF COVID-19

Nazmije Merko Zabzun

PhD in Economics, International University of Struga, North Macedonia

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i02.007 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2022.v07i02.007>

Received: 15 Jan. 2022 / Accepted: 10 Feb. 2022 / Published: 28 Feb. 2022

ABSTRACT

Without a doubt, the year 2020 was a difficult one. The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on marketing in general, but specifically on digital marketing. Before we start with the analysis of how coronavirus' impact on digital marketing, it is important to define what digital marketing is and where it was a decade ago, in order to make a comparison of how the pandemic has impacted it. At the end of this paper, we will also describe how the digital marketing touched the business world in North Macedonia during the time of Covid-19

Key words: Digital marketing, Covid-19, Google, North Macedonia, Social distancing

Digital Marketing (Before Covid-19)

Google transforms become a digital marketing powerhouse

The search engine was able to expand its tentacles into many facets of how people, and thus customers, act online over this ten-year period. Any organization that could wield this kind of power would have a massive impact on digital marketing. Google effectively forced businesses to generate digital content that best addressed customer pain points by constantly tweaking its algorithms to ensure that customers received the best possible search results. Brands, particularly those that operate primarily in the physical rather than online world, had to transform their websites into industry knowledge hubs, delivering content that aided the user at every stage of the customer journey, from research to awareness to advocacy. When Covid-19 forced these brick-and-mortar businesses to close their physical locations, Google and digital became vital in ways they never expected.

If we return back before Covid-19 with Google gaining over 90% of the search engine market share over the last decade, it was only a matter of time before advertising on the platform exploded. Companies were (and still are) willing to spend up to £50 for a single click that might not even turn into conversion.

The software giant had such a huge impact on online advertising and visibility that it practically generated new occupations, disciplines, and marketing ideas. During this period, terms like pay-per-click (PPC), SEO (search engine optimization), and SEM (search engine marketing) were synonymous with the search engine.

The rise of the digital marketing agency

The increased influence of online browsing and its effect on consumer behavior, as well as the internet and the rapid development of communicative and internet technology, were bound to result in an increase in companies formed to assist other businesses in taking advantage of these phenomena for marketing purposes. Of course, digital marketing firms existed before 2009, but over the next ten years, they became an integral part of any company's marketing strategy and implementation if it wanted to grow, stay competitive, and meet customer expectations in the modern day (as we will soon learn when the coronavirus pandemic led to lockdowns world-wide, digital agencies would become even more important).

Mobile first: Mobile search overtakes desktop search

In May 2015, Google reported that mobile devices were performing more Google searches than desktop computers. That was gained because Google effectively rules the online search market.

This shift was fueled by a variety of causes, including an increase in the number of new mobile devices, greater smartphone capability, increased internet speed and availability, the advent of location-based search, and more mobile apps reaching the market. In a strange twist of destiny, these innovations would become crucial to how businesses would digitally respond to a global pandemic that was just around the corner, as we would learn.

With the release of mobile friendly algorithms, Google will soon transition to a "mobile-first" approach, giving preferential search ranking positions to web content that is optimized for mobile consumption.

As a result, digital marketing needs to innovate in order to keep up with these changes. Many aspects of the digital component of marketing had to adapt and improve, whether it is a website design and UX, SEO and content, PPC advertising and retargeting.

Due to how measurable and benchmarkable digital marketing is, many organizations (supported by creative digital agencies) that have been using it as part of their marketing campaigns for the past ten years have already establish their digital marketing strategy sweet spot.

Digital Marketing (During COVID-19)

It is no exaggeration to state that Covid-19 has transformed customer behavior for the better. Researchers and marketing historians will look back on 2020 as a watershed event in how marketing and business procedures are executed in the years to come, once the dust of these weird times has fallen.

Below are some of the unique elements and problems that the pandemic has posed for companies, as well as what they signify for digital and how it has been used to respond.

Lockdown

Some of the online-related effects of people staying at home are fairly predictable: an increase in Google searches; an increase in demand and consumption of online content in all formats (video, audio, images, text, etc.); increased use of mobile devices and the apps available on them; and, of course, a massive increase in online purchase and e-commerce. Other outcomes, on the other hand, are less visible, such as customers who do not fit the profile of technology innovators or early adopters, adopting digital technology not only for enjoyment but also to keep connected with friends, family, and coworkers.

What this means for the digital marketing?

Considering all of these elements, it is only natural that businesses and digital agencies approach digital marketing differently. For example, increasing content quality and quantity is not the only thing that needs to be done. It also includes:

- The type and context of content that should be delivered
- Content must heal new or evolving customer pain points (affected by changes in online behavior, user demographics, and customer attitudes),
- How content is delivered (tone of voice, platform of delivery) or (social media, blogs, podcasts, videos, microsites etc.),
- How content can assist customers in navigating their customer journey (which is increasingly likely to start and end online) and achieving their objectives at each stage

- How do you bid on search terms? (platforms to use, prioritising, budgeting, marketing objectives and goals)
- Being aware of new emergent search phrases that have been caused by the coronavirus and lockdown, both directly and indirectly
- How much time do potential clients have to shop?
- A shift in the starting point of a customer journey

Social distancing

People and organizations are using Skype, Google Meets, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams to duplicate these physical interactions due to the coronavirus pandemic's loss of socializing and face-to-face engagement.

Those solutions may not be sufficient for brands that regularly host events, trade fairs, expos, conferences. This can also apply to a normal individual who is in a circumstance when seeing a loved one is more difficult than picking up a digital device and launching Skype.

How digital has been used to respond?

- Amazon: When the pandemic forced one of the world's largest brands to look for a replacement for their annual Christmas PR live event, which shows products and gift items to the media, Amazon went to a digital solution. Amazon's events team, Jubba, approached digital agency with the goal of creating an interactive virtual experience that captured the atmosphere of the actual event and the spirit of the season.
- Royal Star and Garter: The social isolation imposed by the coronavirus epidemic has been particularly tough for people with family members in nursing facilities. Because the elderly are a high-risk category, even after limitations were loosened, visiting loved ones was not an easy task. There is also an issue of this generation for not being good with technology as the younger family members. Smack was able to link a family portal with the Royal Star & Garter website, a charity that offers nursing and dementia care for veterans and their companions. This gateway gave family members access to a wealth of information, photographs, and the ability to schedule visits with their loved ones in care facilities.

Search Engine Optimisation

Due to the epidemic, there has been a significant rise in online activity, particularly in search. What individuals look for, how they search for it, and the content they expect are all influenced. People's priorities have shifted as a result of the global pandemic. The peaks and troughs of search keywords and topics, as well as the introduction of new interests and the reemergence of old ones, may be seen in Google's search trends tool Google Trends. With internet search deteriorating, B2B (business to business) communication channels became increasingly limited to the internet, and more businesses competing for customer attention online.

What this means for digital marketing?

The key components of SEO must be factored into digital marketing campaigns like never before. Keyword research, user behavior analysis, structured data, UX (user experience), mobile-friendliness, website speed, and content that satisfies user intent, regardless of the intention of a piece of digital content. All of these factors, as well as others, must be carefully evaluated and addressed in order for messaging to perform well and stand out among the growing number of online voices. Delivering content that reflects client behavior and expectations throughout this time period, as well as a strong SEO strategy is important. SEO efforts must be increased and invested in by brands that typically see SEO as a minor component of broader digital marketing operations.

According to Nina Angelovska, head of the Macedonian E-commerce Association, North Macedonian e-commerce enterprises should leverage the momentum generated by the surge in online consumers caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to boost their competitiveness and readiness to compete worldwide. "Domestic e-commerce has been put on 'steroids' as a result of the Covid pandemic, and I feel that now is the time to accelerate the industry's growth even more" (Angelovska,2021). E-potential commerce's is now being recognized by a growing number of businesses, and more individuals are turning to online purchasing. The pandemic had a significant impact on e-commerce, prompting an increasing number of organizations and individuals to react by migrating from traditional to online commerce. According to Angelovska, the e-commerce market would continue to develop in the short term, albeit at a slower rate than during the pandemic, but still faster than before the pandemic. According to Angelovska, in North Macedonia, online transactions to local e-shops increased by 135% in 2020 compared to 2019. However, the data shows that e-commerce turnover to international e-shops and platforms declined last year as a result of weaker demand for hotel, travel, and airline ticket bookings. According to the Macedonian E-commerce Association's Ecommerce Analysis Report, 37% of buyers have boosted their online purchases since the outbreak, while 46% have not modified their buying patterns. According to Angelovska, about 20% of the respondents have started

utilizing e-government services for the first time. According to Angelovska, the government's initiatives to limit the spread of Covid-19 have been a major role in accelerating and encouraging individuals to learn digital skills and begin utilizing more internet services. During the pandemic, the selling points of e-commerce were no longer saving time and convenience, but rather preserving our health or having no other option due to government imposed lockdowns and restrictions. That was a major component in individuals learning how to pay their bills online, shop for groceries online, and other similar tasks. Angelovska was the co-founder of the Macedonian E-commerce Association in 2017 and served as the finance minister of North Macedonia from September 1, 2019 to August 30, 2020. In 2011, she was also the co-founder and CEO of Grouper, a local deal platform. When it first started, the platform was the first of its sort in the country. In May, Grouper was bought by Payten, a payment solutions provider that is part of the Polish ICT group Assec. According to Angelovska, one of the major roadblocks to the industry's rapid development and expansion is a shortage of digital capabilities. "To gauge one's progress, one must constantly compare, and when we compare North Macedonia to other European nations, we rank well in terms of e-commerce readiness indicators, but when we look at the actual statistics, we are near the bottom of the charts," she said (Angelovska, 2021).

According to Eurostat data, about 40% of internet users in North Macedonia now shop online, up 36% from a year earlier and 26% from 2017. "When we first launched Grouper, just about 3% of internet users were doing their shopping online. I believe Grouper had a significant impact on the development of the e-commerce sector, but there is still more work to be done, especially when compared to other European countries "she continued (Angelovska, 2021).

Other issues that local e-commerce businesses face include a lack of skilled labor, a lack of awareness, a lack of e-shopping habits, and a lack of trust in local e-shops, as well as disloyal competition from the high informal economy, insufficient use of payment cards, delivery costs, and other issues, according to Angelovska. "Managing and growing an e-commerce business is extremely demanding - there is a constant need to adapt, change, and implement new tools to acquire and retain customers," Angelovska stated (Angelovska, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the decade leading up to the coronavirus pandemic, digital marketing as a component of marketing was already gaining traction. However, now that the virus has been eradicated, lockdown and changes in online behavior have made digital marketing even more important in terms of engaging with and selling to clients. Businesses and the digital marketing

agencies they work with must develop, plan, and implement strategies to adapt to these shifts in customer behavior and expectations, with some of these shifts becoming permanent.

References

SMACK. 2021. Digital Marketing and How COVID-19 Has Impacted It - SMACK. [online] Available at: <<https://clicktime.symantec.com/3MT9SorsvKPRw9ZDTKEMaBt6H4?u=https%3A%2F%2Fsmack.agency%2Fblog%2Fmarketing%2Fdigital-marketing-and-how-covid-19-has-impacted-it%2F%26gt;> [Accessed 28 December 2021].

Seenews.com. 2021. INTERVIEW - N. Macedonia's e-commerce firms need to use pandemic-driven growth to expand further. [online] Available at: <<https://clicktime.symantec.com/37Ai2e5NPngwTtZvkkhvyzj6H4?u=https%3A%2F%2Fseenews.com%2Fnews%2Finterview-n-macedonias-e-commerce-firms-need-to-use-pandemic-driven-growth-to-expand-further-753924%26gt;> [Accessed 28 December 2021].