

B2B marketing post-COVID: Companies need to map entire customer journey

Dr K. Rajeshwari, Great Lakes Institute of Management, feels that post-COVID, B2B firms with more empowered & agile sales teams, higher levels of digitization and innovative offerings will stand a better chance of success. In addition, sales teams now need to get redeployed, based on their adeptness of digital and technology.



IBT: How has COVID-19 changed the business landscape and client expectations for Indian B2B firms in your view in domestic and global markets?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: The B2B landscape has been affected substantially in both domestic and global markets. Right from information processing to decision making to order placing to delivery, everything has been impacted. Since B2B is built on interacting with customers personally and regularly, the change in this dynamic has forced companies to rethink their strategy. Companies now have to do an entire customer journey mapping and modify their sales and commercial processes. E-commerce cannot be delayed any further.

India and Spain are leading the shift to digitization in the B2B sector across the world, closely followed by the UK and Japan.

The extent of impact varies across the nature of the B2B product as well as the country affected due to COVID-19. Some common coping mechanisms include – becoming more customer-centric, being agile, a rapid shift to digitization, reimagining product offerings, etc. B2B will now become B2B2E i.e. business to business to (client's) employee... as they will drive the B2B organization's revenues. A separate response team from the B2B organisations will help.

IBT: In what ways does this landscape change expectations from the marketing teams of such companies and how could this reallocate marketing budgets?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: Marketing teams need to get more agile. They need to find ways to do more customer insighting in order to identify emerging new product needs. Also, they need to track what alternatives the customers are seeking and produce them. So SEO and internet search strategies are critical. Real-time information availability to customers is crucial.

The exercise towards digitization needs to be driven across all aspects including research, product development, media reach and messaging. The communication to customers has to be more frequent and intense. It should be authentic and inform the customers about the initiatives that the organization is taking to ensure product and employee safety.

Newer products need to be mapped – this requires companies to very closely align with changing customer requirements. For example, a B2B company going out of business quickly redefined their offering into giving audio conferencing facilities to around 2,000 people at one go – but is back with huge demand.

Finally, pricing communication will need a relook. The value proposition in the revised scenario needs to be told clearly. Field force training of negotiation, price break up, and offering a 'flex' package – all become important.

Overall the marketing budgets could get shifted more towards online communication (live chats, demo videos), setting up timely information systems, new product idea generation and customer relationship building.

IBT: Marketing professionals are compelled to embrace digital engagement due to travel bans across the world and major business events/conferences getting cancelled/postponed. What constraints does this forced shift place on customer networking and engagement, and what benefits does it offer? Do you expect this to permanently shift some aspects of customer engagement to the online mode? Why or why not?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: Client networking and entertainment, a big part of traditional B2B, are dramatically changing. Online is facilitating interactions at reduced costs. In order to make up for personal interactions, companies are experimenting on other ways such as offering gifts, payment instalments etc.

Right from cold calling to prospecting to soliciting, online has enabled more effective methods, thanks to the huge customer profile data available on the internet. This saves time for the company and the customer. LinkedIn networking has gone up by 53% in B2B. Face-to-face interactions have moved to video conferencing, webinars, phone, chatbots etc. Many of these will continue as there are cost and time efficiencies setting in through these. However, some part of direct customer engagement will resume, especially for those products that are one time big sales and not monthly subscriptions. This will also be true where the purchase decision is taken on trust and feel, and not commoditised.

IBT: The salesforce has a major role to play in the customer outreach and engagement strategy of a B2B company. With the rising adoption of digital channels, are some traditional sales roles in B2B organisations under threat?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: Sales teams now need to get redeployed, based on their adeptness of digital and technology. One-third of each of the complaints in sales processes comprises the arduity of ordering, difficulty of finding the product and the technical glitches with delivery. So those who are capable of addressing these will be prioritized. Omni channels will come into vogue.

Customers also will prefer self-service products. To that extent, the after-sales set up will need a revamp.

Sales teams will need to classify high and low ROI clients and serve them accordingly. Sales teams will need to be empowered and trained with local decision-making skills. Routine sales tasks will be automated faster. Those salespeople who are unable to cope will need restructuring.

IBT: Also, as the digital space becomes more crowded, how can B2B brands stand out in terms of content approach, strategy, use of influencers, targeting, etc?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: Customers appreciate honesty and speed during these times of crisis. So organisations need to inform clients about the changes – e.g. Apple sent a communique announcing the closure of all retail outlets till further notice. New working hours, pricing information, safety in the supply chain – all these give confidence to the customer and need to be built into content strategy. Innovativeness will stand out. For instance, Airok, a company into making the air pollution-free, redefined their business scope to producing 5-layered masks – as they believed that even this is the same offering as cleaning polluted air.

Given that in-home has exploded online viewing of entertainment, media reach vehicles should include web streaming, TV (new channels) and other gaming apps (for youth). Delta has a separate portal for COVID-related information.

Influencer marketing must be chosen carefully as there may be a credibility gap in consumers perceiving the authenticity of the information. User testimonials may be a very effective strategy during these times. Targeting needs to show the difference in the ability of some clients to respond faster vs those that cannot. Companies need to segment based on this important criterion.

IBT: Harvard Business Review research estimates from an analysis of past recessions that 17% of companies didn't survive, 80% hadn't regained their pre-recession growth rate over three years while only 9% flourished (outperforming competitors by at least 10% in revenue and profit growth). What characteristics will separate the winners in the post-COVID period in your opinion in the B2B marketing space?

Dr K. Rajeshwari: In my opinion, the market will get divided across:

- Those who significantly digitize vs those who don't.
- Those who are agile in decision making vs those who are not.
- Those who have 'empowered' sales force vs those who don't.
- Those who innovate/reimagine product offerings vs those who don't.

IBT: How will the pandemic change the approach of B2B companies towards hiring young marketing talent in your opinion? What kind of skills could be in greater demand? Will contractual employment or gig economy rise? Please elaborate.

Dr K. Rajeshwari: Technology literacy will drive talent deployment. Prior crisis management and being a 'collaborator' will be additional skills required. Freelancing will definitely see a new high, as people may want to be associated with multiple companies to de-risk themselves. Organisations will see value in those who have spent time reskilling/upskilling themselves during the lockdown, thereby showing initiative taking. New product developers and those who are computer-aided designers will be in demand.

Link: <https://ibt.tpci.in/blogs/b2b-marketing-post-covid-companies-need-to-map-entire-customer-journey/>