



Marketing

10 Truths About Marketing After the Pandemic

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Summary. The Covid-19 pandemic upended a marketer's playbook, challenging the existing rules about customer relationships and building brands. One year in, there's no going back to the old normal. Here are 10 new marketing truths that reveal the confluence of... [more](#)

It's safe to say that 2020 was a year like no other and that 2021 will certainly not revert back to the old normal. So, as marketers think about building brands during this year and beyond, what should we take away from the pandemic? What can we do to help companies grow faster? And how is marketing being redefined in the age of Covid-19?

Asking and answering these questions is critical to marketing success in the months and years ahead. Over last several months I've been comparing what I've learned from two decades working in media and marketing with what we've all learned during this single year of epic change. In particular, I've identified 10 ways in which the pandemic



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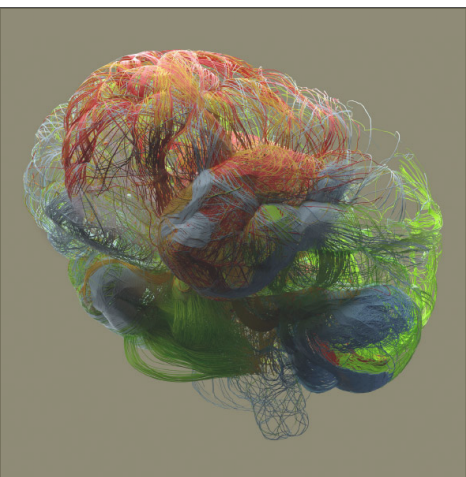
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challenged critical truths about marketing and gave us a new set of rules moving forward.

1. Old truth: Marketing begins with knowing your customer.

New truth: Marketing begins with knowing your customer segment.

The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced what we already know: that brands must communicate in very local and precise terms, targeting specific consumers based on their circumstances and what is most relevant to them. That means truly understanding the situation on the ground, country by country, state by state, zip code by zip code. For some businesses, such as banks, restaurants, or retailers, it may even mean tailoring communications store by store.

Beyond geography, we have learned marketing messages need to be personally relevant, aligned to an individual's situation and values, as opposed to demographics, such as age and gender. Creating a personal, human connection within any commercial message requires defining consumer segments that describe people according to multiple dimensions that influence their purchasing behavior — from their psychographics to attitudinal characteristics.

The EY Future Consumer Index, which has conducted five waves of research with 14,500 individuals in 20 countries since the start of the pandemic, has identified five different cohorts of consumers:

1. **Affordability first (32% of consumers):** Living within their means and budget, focusing less on brands and more on product functionality.
2. **Health first (25%):** Protecting their health and that of their family, choosing products they trust to be safe and minimizing risks in the

way that they shop.

3. **Planet first (16%):** Trying to minimize their impact on environment and buying brands that reflect their beliefs.
4. **Society first (15%):** Working together for the greater good, buying from organizations they find to be honest and transparent.
5. **Experience first (12%):** Living in the moment to make the most of life, often making them open to new products, brands, and experiences.

Utilizing customer segmentation and personas can bring deeper insights to media strategies and creative marketing approaches. Better still, these insights can be carried through to inform the full customer journey.

2. Old truth: You are competing with your competitors.

New truth: You are competing with the last best experience your customer had.

Consumer expectations were already on the rise before Covid-19. Gen Z grew up with technology seamlessly integrated into their lives. Direct-to-consumer companies (like Glossier or Parachute) were already conditioning us to expect a level of hyper-personalization since they were particularly adept with our personal data.

But when the coronavirus hit, digital transformation accelerated overnight. This, in turn, sent consumer expectations skyrocketing in terms of what companies could do for them with a more digital experience. The customer expects so much more than just a seamless digital transaction, as Carla Hassan, chief marketing officer of Citi, explained to me earlier this summer. Now that companies have their personal data, they want anticipatory, personalized experiences across the entire customer journey.

Companies should follow three strategies to ensure their experiences deliver their customers' rising expectations:

1. Make brand scores a key KPI for the full customer-facing organization, ideally using real-time analytics as opposed to a snapshot looking backwards from a point in time.
2. Build the right data and technology foundation to support important use cases throughout the customer journey.
3. Align individual and collective goals across the customer journey so any disconnects between functional silos like marketing, sales, and customer service are invisible to your end consumer.

3. Old truth: Customers hope you have what they want.

New truth: Customers expect you to have exactly what they want.

If the bar just keeps rising, we must aspire to new values around customer experiences — in both a B2C and B2B context. Consumers today expect that any experience will be frictionless, anticipatory, relevant, and connected. In other words, they are concerned only with getting what they want, when they want it. And they insist nothing gets in their way.

Creating these experiences requires companies to place data and technology at the core of their organization. This likely means building some degree of machine learning and/or artificial intelligence into the mix. Why? Because data enables us to create more relevant experiences across one or more dimensions of the four Cs:

- Content (that can be provided in experiences like emails or mobile apps);

- Commerce (such as physical retail, e-commerce, or a hybrid experience);
- Community (such as convening B2B buyers at a virtual trade show or hosting a webinar on home repair for consumers); and
- Convenience (like offering consumers coupons or benefits from a loyalty program).

Today, most of the 4Cs are delivered in “one-size-fits-all” approaches, but as consumers increasingly demand greater personalization, companies will need to use more data and intelligence to sharpen their decision-making and drive greater relevance in their customer interactions to build stronger human connections to their brands.

4. Old truth: Courting customers is just like dating.

New truth: Courting customers is just like online dating.

For a long time, marketing was largely about buying mass reach or targeted reach at the best rates in media and hoping to convert it. So, basically, it was like going to as many parties or bars as you could in the hope you would find that special someone. It was a world of spontaneity, serendipity, and frankly, a lot of face-to-face encounters.

Enter online dating and swiping through apps. Now, finding your perfect match may be less about chance and more about data and algorithms. In marketing terms, we have seen a shift from brand marketing to build reach to performance marketing to generate leads. The pandemic’s acceleration of digital channels only exacerbated that trend.

However, while performance marketing enjoys a strong and important position in the mix, leading CMOs recognize that it is a fine balance of brand and performance marketing that delivers the best results, and

they must fight hard against a bias toward that which is most easily quantified. Many are bringing their customer relationship management (CRM) team closer than ever to their media teams to see the full continuum more easily and realize efficiencies. CRM, which is powered principally by first-party data, or customer data that the company owns (with the consumer's consent, of course), is the driving force for initiatives like coupons, personalization, or email marketing.

However, that same first-party data can help generate greater efficiency in media, particularly digital media and other addressable formats allowing companies to target on a one-to-one basis. With third-party data declining in value as key browsers usher in rule changes by January 2022, marketers are getting way better at engineering the online “dates” that they want to go on, learning the new ways they need to harness the power of their own data, and developing new strategies to partner with publishers. Even as the targeting (or dating) strategies shift with the new rules of the game, it will be important for companies to leave space for both brand *and* performance marketing given that bottom funnel strategies drive top funnel goals and vice versa. Simply put: They work better together.

5. Old truth: Customers must sit at the heart of your marketing strategy.

New truth: Customers must sit at the heart of your customer journey.

The concept of customer-centricity is not news. However, the functional silos that interact with customers are often disconnected because of politics, org charts, technologies, or geography. The question is: How can we conceal these internal disconnects from the customer, who assumes that the whole company knows them holistically? We have all called customer service and spoken to a call center rep or chatbot that was not

operating with the same information as a retail location — and vice versa.

We must remember that marketing is often just the beginning of a relationship with the customer. For example, in a B2C context, we go through a journey of engaging them, converting them to a sale directly or indirectly, and then hopefully retaining them so they become advocates and potentially open to upsells and cross-sells. Marketing must be viewed in the context of the full end-to-end journey and, where possible, work to connect the dots.

It is not realistic to believe that the operating model for all customer-facing functions can or should report to the same place. The notion that reorganization solves all is a common misconception. It is far more important to look thoughtfully at the operating model and consider the processes, technologies, talent, data models, and KPIs to find the right ways to align objectively around the customers' needs — then drive change accordingly.

6. Old truth: Relationships matter.

New truth: Relationships are everything.

It goes without saying that it is vital to build relationships with customers founded on trust. Advertising, for example, makes a brand promise, and it then falls to the product, service, and customer experience to deliver on that promise.

But Covid-19 has placed a new emphasis on relationships, particularly in B2B sales. Faced with a virtual sales environment, teams with existing relationships have been able to maintain revenue momentum, capitalizing on the strength of their prior bonds. In contrast,

prospecting for new customers has required an evolved set of skills focused on selling solutions, not products.

In both cases, trust and integrity are fundamental to driving market momentum. For sales and marketing leaders in B2B organizations, this has necessitated a serious recasting of talent to identify people best suited to driving relationships in this new world of online interactions — a world that relies less on charm (and even an expense account) and more on insights and solutions. Trust will be built by and rewarded to those that listen to customer needs and then craft solutions to meet those needs.

In a B2C context, trust also plays a tremendous role. It is foundational to the value exchange between a company and a consumer. As companies rely increasingly on personal data that they obtain with consent from consumers, they must not only comply with the regulations on consumer privacy and ensure that data is secure, but they also have the opportunity to consider building even more loyalty and differentiation by designing more transparent interfaces for privacy controls. Consumers can make better choices if they know what they are agreeing to share with companies, and the clarity will foster deeper trust.

7. Old truth: Agility is a technology process.

New truth: Agility is a modern marketing approach.

We have heard for years that technological development benefits from agile cycles instead of sequential or linear “waterfall” approaches. Covid-19 created an irreversible trend for marketing to embrace a similarly nimble mentality. As the crisis has unfolded, a company could quickly find its message was wrong or its supply chain not in a position to deliver, immediately creating an advertising and/or public relations crisis. Imagine a commercial showing people clustered together not

demonstrating social distancing, for example. Suddenly, long-lead time creative processes and annual budget cycles felt anachronistic while all the traditional approval dynamics became constraining.

The fortunate outcome of the crisis was to create a mindset of marketing agility that is likely to be permanent. This includes continuous consumer listening and demand sensing, not only for the benefit of marketing but for the full company to capture the zeitgeist of consumer sentiment. Meanwhile, operationally, it also means faster decision cycles and more flexibility across key areas like creative, budgeting, and media.

8. Old truth: Your brand should stand behind great products.

New truth: Your brand should stand behind great values.

The pandemic truly challenged brand loyalty. The EY Future Consumer Index found that up to 61% of consumers, depending on the category, became willing to consider a white label product, let alone switch name brands. That dynamic coupled with growing consumer awareness and activism precipitated during the social unrest of 2020 should make brands very focused on the values they express.

In fact, key themes from EY research show that while quality, convenience, and price still very much matter to consumer choice, factors like sustainability, trust, ethical sourcing, and social responsibility are increasingly important to how consumers select their products and services. Marketing has an opportunity to educate the broader C-suite (and even the board) on the importance of brand values when it comes to differentiating in a post-pandemic marketplace where brand preferences have been upended.

9. Old truth: You need the right tech stack to drive modern marketing success.

New truth: You need the right balance of factors (including your tech stack) to drive modern marketing success.

As an abundance of advertising and marketing technologies proliferate, it has been easy to focus on the proverbial “tech stack” as an end-all game changer for marketing. However, having a Ferrari that you can only drive 40 miles per hour is not much use.

For your technology architecture to drive results, it must therefore be matched with sufficient scale in data to fuel its success, the right use cases to drive results, and the right approach to human enablement. This latter requirement is perhaps the most important. Human enablement involves understanding how data and technologies will be used across the organization, making sure that people have the right skills to employ it effectively and that the right measurement approach is in place to motivate innovation and success. Without technology, data, human enablement and use cases in fine balance, the desired return on investment for marketing technology will not be realized.

10. Old truth: Marketing is important for growth.

New truth: Marketing is at the center of the growth agenda for the full C-suite.

Unquestionably, there was a time when marketing was a cost center within companies for which the principal accountability was to maximize return on investment. In tough periods when topline results were compromised, it was often one of the first areas to get cut.

However, during the pandemic, marketing has been elevated within the C-suite as a driver of digital transformation, a key leader of the customer journey, and the voice of the consumer — all of which are of paramount

importance to other functional leaders. Without understanding the zeitgeist of the marketplace, in good times and bad, the C-suite cannot adjust to the threats and opportunities at hand and successfully navigate the future.

Covid-19 has created a leadership culture of immediate collaboration focused on the urgent need for resilience. Marketing now has the opportunity to seize an ongoing central role in that dialogue, thereby driving the organization's broader growth and innovation agenda.

Art and science

As marketers, we are charged with a continued blend of art and science. We must achieve the perfect balance of humans and automation to unlock a future of better analytics and deployment of AI at scale. We must use data as the fuel yet respect the craft of storytelling to drive meaningful human connections. We must tread a fine line between brand marketing and performance marketing, recognizing that we currently have a bias toward what we can readily quantify. And we must understand what should be centralized and what should be bespoke, identifying where consistency helps and where it hinders.

These new marketing truths embody this blend, highlighting the confluence of strategies, operations, and technologies required to drive growth in a post-Covid-19 world. Embracing them represents the path to pandemic recovery and long-term success. For companies and marketers accustomed to the ways of the past, a period of adjustment is ahead. Yet even at this time of flux, we can find familiarity and confident footing in the simplest and most critical truth of all: We must prioritize the perspective of the customer now, next, and beyond above everything.

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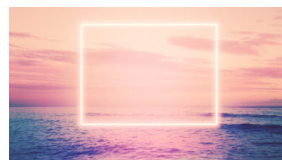


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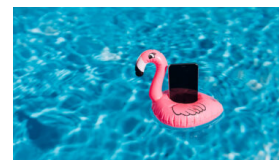
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