LUMEN ET VIRTUS

Digital marketing as a growth strategy after the Covid-19 pandemic: A study on local enterprises in the municipality of Campos dos Goytacazes-RJ

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ABSTRACT

Considering that the business scenario has undergone radical changes due to the 2019 pandemic, the research on Digital Marketing as a growth strategy after the Covid-19 pandemic: a study on local enterprises in the municipality of Campos dos Goytacazes in the state of Rio de Janeiro, focused on understanding the impact of digital marketing strategies on companies and how they have adapted to this new context. To this end, it was necessary to analyze more comprehensively the use of Digital Marketing by local companies, seeking to estimate the level of adoption of strategies during the health crisis, to assess the main challenges and opportunities faced by companies when entering the digital world, and to examine the impact of these strategies on business performance, in addition to providing an overview of trends in the field of Digital Marketing post-pandemic. In the meantime, exploratory research with a qualitative approach was carried out with 83 municipal companies. Given this, it was found that digital marketing strategies were essential for the growth of companies after the pandemic, boosting audience engagement and the search for an effective online presence. The results highlight the relevance of the presence on digital platforms and social networks, as being a key element in the growth strategy of these companies, in this new post-pandemic context.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Marketing Strategies, COVID-19 Pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, with the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Brazil and the world were intensely impacted in all sectors of society, and the way companies relate to their customers and carry out their activities was transformed. In the face of social distancing and the closure of physical establishments, the transition to the digital world has become an essential necessity. In this context, Digital Marketing has consolidated itself as one of the main business growth strategies, as it is able to promote business expansion and assist in customer loyalty.

This article is justified because it takes into account the evolution of e-commerce operations in Brazil during the pandemic. It should be noted that in 2021, online sales grew more than twice as much compared to 2019 and also had an increase of 30% compared to the previous year. Online has become the preferred shopping channel for 6% of multichannel e-commerce shoppers, double the number in 2019, and as a result, e-commerce revenue has grown considerably since the pandemic.

In the meantime, this work aims to analyze how much Digital Marketing has been used as a growth strategy by companies in Campos dos Goytacazes in the State of Rio de Janeiro, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic period, as well as to investigate how this innovation is revolutionizing the performance of these companies.

Specific objectives include:

- Estimate the degree of adoption of Digital Marketing strategies by companies in the period of contagion;
- Verify the impact of these strategies on business performance, focusing on business expansion, customer retention and customer loyalty;
- Provide an overview of the main trends and innovations in Digital Marketing after the pandemic.a

In addition to this section, this article is structured as follows: a section dedicated to the framework linked to Marketing, its evolution and applicability of Digital Marketing; another section addressing the methodology used; presentation of the case study carried out and its main results, and the final considerations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

MARKETING

Philip Kotler, American economist known as the "Father of Marketing", states that "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions and processes to create, communicate, offer and exchange offers that have value for consumers, customers, partners and society as a whole". Marketing provides companies with knowledge about who their customer is and what they value, to

the point that the product or service is more appropriate and practically sells itself , with little effort from the salesperson (KOTLER, 2010, p.18).

Sehundo Kotler and Keller (2012, p.14), marketing seeks to satisfy the needs of the customer, when they acquire the product or service and everything associated with its creation until consumption. Marketing should be a set of activities with the purpose of generating value for stakeholders, and this is much broader than just selling products or services, making marketing essential for every organization and in need of constant evolution. And in this case, there is a search by companies to find out what the needs of their customers are and then meet them through products or services. By identifying the needs of customers, the purpose of satisfying them begins, establishing an exchange between organizations and customers, in which the latter buy from them (HONORATO, 2004).

Since 1960, Jerome McCarthy has defended the existence of four marketing variables that can influence product demand, which are: product, promotion, place, and price, which are known as the four P's of marketing, mix or marketing compound.

According to Baker (2005), these variables tend to be considered controllable, and each one must be adapted by managerial decisions, in order to outline strategies for each element of the compound, based on the organization's objectives and the intended positioning. Kotler and Keller (2012) highlight these four pillars as essential for any marketing strategy, as can be seen in Figure 1:

Figure 1 – The 4 P's of the marketing mix



EVOLUTION OF MARKETING

In the first phase, Marketing 1.0 took place at a time when there were few demands from consumers, who accepted what was offered without hesitation. At that time, marketing focused on production, with the main objective of "standardizing and gaining scale, in order to reduce

production costs as much as possible, so that these goods could have a lower price and be purchased by a larger number of buyers" (KOTLER, KARTAJAYA and SETIAWAN, 2010, p.3).

Entering the new phase, Marketing 2.0 begins to consider the interests of the consumer. In the information age, people had more knowledge about products, their variations and qualities, and were able to make comparisons between market offers, being more judicious in their choices (KOTLER, KARTAJAYA and SETIAWAN, 2010, p.4).

Marketing 2.0 expands to Marketing 3.0 with the spread of the internet and the globalized world. In this new context, the essence is to serve the customer in an even more personalized way. Therefore, each human being, endowed with his or her intelligence, values and personal needs, needs to be considered unique, which has led to a significant change in the way companies communicate with their audience (KOTLER, KARTAJAYA and SETIAWAN, 2010, p.5).

For Kotler, it is possible to differentiate these three phases of marketing by observing in which direction the company's focus is, whether it is focused on the product (Marketing 1.0), or on the customer (Marketing 2.0), or even if it is for the set that guides the desires and needs of individuals, linked to their emotions and values, and united with hope for the problems faced by the world. that characterizes Marketing 3.0 (KOTLER, KARTAJAYA and SETIAWAN, 2010).

At the end of the twentieth century, the world began to use online means of communication with great intensity, generating a digital transformation that brought new opportunities for companies to delve into research and understand their customers in depth, their habits and customs, what adds value to the product for them, and how to best attract and keep them. This is Marketing 4.0, a junction of traditional and digital marketing (KOTLER, KARTAJAYA and SETIAWAN, 2017).

It is possible to see that marketing is advancing in technological tools, in response to consumer behavioral changes, aiming to provide the best possible experience for customers.

With the boost of technology caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which began at the end of 2019, authors Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan published in 2021, the book Marketing 5.0: technology for humanity, which represented the opportunity for companies to fully unleash the force of advanced technologies for the good of humanity.

MARKETING DIGITAL

As noted, the use of the internet became intense from 1990 when Marketing 4.0 began, bringing Digital Marketing to the twenty-first century as the main ally of companies to promote their products (KENDZERSKI, 2009, p.17). According to the definition provided by Gabriel (2010, p. 104), the concept of digital marketing refers to marketing actions that employ strategies in some digital element present in the marketing mix, such as product, price, distribution or promotion.

As KENDZERSKI (2009) argues, digital marketing is related to three keywords: segmentation, mobility and interactivity. It is very important to identify in which markets you will launch your product, recognizing that this can boost your marketing strategy and give you a competitive advantage (KENDZERSKI, 2009).

In line with this thought, Vaz (2010) believes that the differential of a company is in knowing its customers deeply, because knowing about their interests, it will be able to direct its advertising, highlighting the points of greatest relevance and getting it right when giving discounts on prices. The more original the site is, and the more focused on what draws the attention of your target audience, the better your sales and results will be.

It is becoming increasingly important to pay attention to consumer attitudes using technologies such as: mobile internet access, digital convergence, *e-commerce*, blogs, websites and social media. All changes in the technological paradigm have resulted in increased communication, leading to a dilution of what is known as market massification, fragmentation, and increased individuality (McKenna, 2006).

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in consumer behavior, especially with regard to consumption. With social isolation, purchases made through apps and online have grown exponentially. This new reality forced companies to quickly adapt to the digital world, which represented a challenge, especially for micro and small companies that did not have the financial resources to invest in this regard, after a period of economic recession in the country.

According to Sampaio and Tavares (2017), consumer behavior is changing due to the use of the internet, as they consider the purchase through this means faster and safer, making consumers prefer this tool to make their purchases. Tavares (2013, p.19), highlights the importance of understanding what influences consumer behavior, because according to the author, understanding how the consumer is influenced in the purchase is not a simple task, but essential when starting the marketing process, in which one seeks to study the reason for the purchase, how and when the customer will choose to purchase your products and services. The shift in sales promotion to digital during the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on consumer behavior, and has affected consumer behavior in several ways:

- Increased preference for online shopping: With sales promotion being conducted primarily through digital means, consumers have become more likely to shop online. Convenience, security, and ease of access to a wide variety of products have been determining factors for this change in behavior.
- Changes in product and service preferences: The rise of online shopping has led to

changes in consumer preferences. Products and services that are more easily accessible and delivered safely at home have gained prominence.

- Greater attention to digital communication: with sales promotion happening in the digital environment, consumers are more attentive to brand communication through emails, social media ads, blogs, and other online channels. This requires companies to communicate in a more personalized and relevant way to attract and maintain consumers' attention, as customers want the best experience every time.
- Search for information and reviews online: consumers have been looking for more information and reviews of products and services online before making their purchases. They rely on the opinions of other consumers and the information available on the internet.
- Adoption of new forms of payment: the promotion of sales in the digital environment has also driven the adoption of new forms of payment, such as contactless payments, digital wallets, and other contactless technologies.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the proposed objectives, an exploratory research was carried out with a qualitative approach with companies of different segments and sizes, which adopted Digital Marketing strategies during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was carried out with 83 micro and small companies in the municipality of Campos dos Goytacazes, located in the north of the State of Rio de Janeiro, which according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2022) has a population of 483,551 inhabitants, and that the average monthly salary of formal workers in the city is 2.3 minimum wages.

For data collection, a questionnaire composed of 14 multiple-choice questions was applied, in order to assess the degree of adoption of Digital Marketing strategies, and the main challenges and opportunities faced by companies during the transition to the digital world and the impacts of these strategies on business performance.

The questionnaire was applied directly to the managers and marketing professionals of these companies, seeking a representative sample from different business sectors. The questions addressed topics such as the use of digital platforms, the creation of relevant content, engagement with customers, and the adaptation of marketing strategies in response to changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic and its consequences for the post-crisis scenario.

THE CASE STUDY

With social distancing and the closure of physical stores, the migration to the digital environment has become imperative. In this scenario, Digital Marketing has emerged as a critical need, as it plays a key role in scaling up companies' operations. Among the companies surveyed, it can be observed that these are from various sectors, with greater emphasis on the Aesthetics and wellness sector (14.5%), tied with the companies of Clothing and footwear, Services, Food and Computers with 12%, Retail (10.8%), Construction and Health (6%), Entertainment (4.8%), Education and Others (3.6%), and *Pet* (2.4%).

The diversity of sectors among the companies participating in the survey plays a crucial role in the results, as it provides a more accurate representation of the local business scenario, allowing the conclusions to be generalized to the various branches.

In times of economic change, the variety of sectors also offers valuable lessons about business resilience and adaptation. Therefore, the variety of sectors among the companies in the survey contributes significantly to the validity and applicability of the results, allowing for a more complete understanding of the impact of Digital Marketing strategies in a diverse economic context.

Regarding the size of the participating companies, it is noted that there is a higher incidence (54.2%) of Individual Microentrepreneur (MEI), which has annual revenues of up to R$ 81 thousand; followed by Microenterprise (ME) with 42.2%, which is characterized by a turnover of less than or equal to R$ 360 thousand; and last with 3.6% Small Business or Small Business (EPP), with revenues between R$ 360 thousand and R$ 4.8 million.

It is worth noting that, due to obstacles in communication and access, the survey focused mainly on small entrepreneurs. Although the city has large companies, obtaining answers from the managers of these companies proved to be challenging, resulting in the predominance of answers from the micro and small entrepreneurs sector.

From the data, it is possible to observe a city characterized by small businesses, with a high concentration of micro and small entrepreneurs. These ventures usually have a limited number of employees, low revenues compared to medium and large companies, and a strong presence of individual microentrepreneurs (MEI).

These ventures play a vital role in the economy, contributing to job creation, economic growth, and diversification of the business sector. However, it is important to note that the excessive concentration of micro and small entrepreneurs may reflect economic challenges, such as a lack of job opportunities in larger companies or limited resources to invest in larger businesses.

The survey data show that 1.2% of the companies surveyed did not yet exist in the *boom* of the pandemic, having been created less than 1 year ago; 22.9% were born during the pandemic,

aged between 1 and 3 years; 43.4% may have been born during the pandemic, or were still newly created in 2020; and 32.5% are more than 5 years old.

It is evident that the significant increase in the number of new MEI began in 2020, reaching its peak in 2021, before showing a decline in subsequent years. It is worth noting that in the years prior to the pandemic, from 2012 to 2018, no significant changes were observed in this indicator, which further highlights the impact of the pandemic scenario on local economic dynamics.

Next, in relation to the degree of adoption of Digital Marketing before the pandemic period, it is possible to infer that the adoption of Digital Marketing strategies proved to be heterogeneous among the organizations presented. Most companies (44.6%) stated that they already had a digital presence, although this was described as a limited performance before the pandemic. On the other hand, approximately one-third of companies (33.7%) began their foray into the digital environment during the pandemic period, providing an adaptive response to the challenging environment. Finally, a smaller contingent of companies (21.7%) showed a higher level of preparation and maturity in the digital environment.

From these data, it is feasible to conclude that the regional context was impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the participating companies reveals that the overwhelming majority, representing 78.3% of the total, was either present in the digital environment with a limited presence or planned digital strategies during the pandemic.

In this way, it is possible to conclude that most of the participating companies declared an increase in investments in Digital Marketing during the pandemic period. Specifically, 47% of companies stated a significant increase, while 39.8% indicated a moderate increase in investments in this area. The finding that only 10.8% of companies did not change their investments and 2.4% significantly decreased their spending on digital marketing suggests a general trend of recognition of the importance of this strategy as a response to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Based on the information presented, we can conclude that the significant adaptation of companies when increasing their investments in digital marketing during the pandemic period highlights the growing importance of this strategy as an effective tool to maintain the competitiveness of organizations and expand their presence in the digital environment.

The reference to "fiscal challenges" in the context of the crisis refers to the financial and budgetary obstacles that governments face during economic crises, where declines in tax collection, increased public spending, and the need for financial support can unbalance public finances and create budget deficits. This situation affects all sectors of society and requires careful management of public finances to ensure long-term economic stability.

Based on the data collected, it can be deduced that the implementation of digital marketing strategies during the pandemic had a mostly positive impact on the sales of the participating

companies. The overwhelming majority, represented by 83.1% of entrepreneurs, reported a significant increase in sales. In addition, 13.3% observed a moderate increase. It is notable that only a minority portion, 3.6% of respondents, did not notice a difference in their sales after implementing Digital Marketing strategies. The absence of entrepreneurs who have noticed a decrease in sales suggests that digital tactics may have been effective in mitigating the adverse economic impacts of the pandemic, contributing to business stability and growth. This trend emphasizes the importance of digital marketing as a useful tool for business activities during crises and periods of uncertainty.

As for "Marketing Planning", about 31.3% of the companies considered it very relevant (note 4), demonstrating that it is a highly valued tool. Approximately 21.7% evaluated it as relevant (grade 3), while 8.4% classified it as not very relevant (grade 1).

This analysis highlighted the significant importance of the six tools evaluated in the marketing strategies of the companies participating in the survey. Based on the scores assigned by the survey participants, a ranking of the relevance of digital marketing tools can be established as follows, considering the percentage of maximum scores (grade 4) received by each tool:

1. Paid Ads: 43.37% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, which places it at the top of the relevance ranking;
2. Content Marketing: 39.76% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, demonstrating its importance as one of the main digital marketing strategies imposed by companies;
3. Digital Influencers: 36.14% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, showing its relevance in the digital marketing strategy of the companies surveyed;
4. Analysis Tool: 34.94% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, emphasizing its relevance in obtaining insights and information for strategic decision-making;
5. Marketing Planning: 31.33% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, evidencing its relevance in the development of digital marketing strategies, although it was evaluated as slightly less relevant compared to the previous tools.
6. Automation Tool: 24.10% of the responses gave a score of 4 to this tool, showing that, although important, it was analyzed as less relevant compared to the others mentioned;

It is important to note that the perception of relevance may vary according to the nature and specific objectives of each company and sector of operation. Therefore, the relevance of the tools can be influenced by contextual factors, but these results reflect the importance of these tools as essential components in the digital marketing strategies of the companies surveyed.

Based on the responses of the entrepreneurs who participated in the survey, it is possible to conclude that the social media platform considered most effective for promoting companies during and after the pandemic is Instagram. This is evidenced by the significant majority of 62.7% of

respondents who chose Instagram as their preferred platform to promote their business. Secondly, WhatsApp is also seen as an effective tool, with 20.5% of entrepreneurs considering it relevant to their promotion strategies. Facebook was rated by 8.4% of respondents as an effective platform, while YouTube and TikTok were cited by 4.8% and 3.6% of respondents, respectively. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents chose Twitter and LinkedIn as the most effective platforms to promote their business.

As evidenced by the data, the content strategies that proved to be most effective for promoting companies during the pandemic and in the subsequent period included: the use of videos or images with explanatory texts, indicated by 31.3% of participants; the implementation of promotions and discounts, pointed out by 25.3% of respondents; the creation of videos, which obtained a percentage of 18.1% approval; sharing photos of the products, with 15.7% of preference; and the use of illustrative images, considered effective by 9.6% of the interviewees.

The survey results revealed a highly optimistic outlook regarding the future of digital marketing strategies among the investors interviewed. The expressive majority, represented by 77.1%, believed that these strategies would be even more crucial after the pandemic than during the pandemic period. In addition, the 22.9% who considered that these strategies would be as important as during the pandemic, indicate a perception of continuity and stability in the value of digital marketing for business.

This positive view can be interpreted as a recognition of the effectiveness of Digital Marketing strategies during the pandemic, demonstrating their ability to adapt to changing market conditions and evolving consumer trends. In addition, the absence of responses that indicate a decrease in the importance or abandonment of these strategies suggests that entrepreneurs are aware of the need to maintain a strong and effective digital presence, even in a post-pandemic scenario. This perspective reinforces the idea that digital marketing is an effective tool for collaborating on the growth and success of companies.

The results of the survey indicate an almost unanimous perception among entrepreneurs that the pandemic played a key role in making companies more aware of the importance of Digital Marketing. The overwhelming majority, represented by 98.8% of the responses, stated that the pandemic had this positive impact on the awareness of companies.

According to the results of the survey, it is possible to observe a strong presence of companies in various digital channels. The expressive majority, 97.6% of the companies, indicated that they are present on "Social Networks". This reflects the increasing importance of these platforms for business promotion and customer interaction. In addition, other channels were also relevant, such as "Own website" (43.4%), "Mercado Livre" (28.9%), "Shopee" (24.1%), "Amazon" (16.9%), "Elo 7" (8.4%), and a specific company "Ifood" as an additional platform.

The presence in multiple channels also underscores the need for an approach in which companies seek to serve their customers at multiple touchpoints, providing a more comprehensive and convenient experience. Furthermore, the inclusion in these e-commerce platforms, highlights the importance of online commerce as an essential part of businesses' operations.

In an analysis of the answers about the Digital Marketing strategies used to stand out from competitors and increase sales, most respondents highlighted the importance of professional photos and videos (74.7%), which suggests that companies recognize the need to invest in the visual quality of content to attract and engage their audience. Secondly, the relevant content strategy (68.7%) demonstrates the emphasis on delivering valuable information to consumers, which is essential to attract and keep the audience engaged. Discounts and promotions (67.5%) are also considered relevant strategies, bringing recognition of the effectiveness of offers and incentives to contribute to sales. The personalization of service (49.4%) appears next, emphasizing the value of the personalized customer experience to increase satisfaction and loyalty.

The strategy of texts with persuasion (44.6%) demonstrates the value of communication in persuading customers to take desired actions. The presence of "Frequency" (41%) indicates the importance of maintaining a constant and consistent presence on digital marketing platforms. The use of strategic hashtags (38.6%) reveals the importance of content discovery on social media and the ability to target audiences through relevant hashtags. "Product personalization" (27.7%) highlights the importance of tailoring products or services to individual customer preferences. The "e-mail marketing" strategy (19.3%) shows that it is still a relevant tool for many companies in communicating with their customers.

The results of the survey unequivocally reflect the relevance and centrality of Digital Marketing as a growth strategy for companies after the COVID-19 pandemic. An impressive 91.6% of respondents identified Digital Marketing as "Extremely important for the company's growth". This data highlights the widespread perception of the importance of the digital environment as a key tool for business success in the current scenario.

Only 8.4% of the participants indicated that Digital Marketing is "Essential to be in all channels, but it is not the main focus of growth". This response suggests that while these companies recognize the need for a digital presence, they can prioritize other strategies together.

It is notable that none of the companies currently considers Digital Marketing as "Unimportant, because the digital medium is not their main sales channel". This indicates that all companies confirm, in some way, the relevance of the digital environment, even if it is not their main sales channel.

These results reinforce the notion that Digital Marketing has become a fundamental part of the growth strategy of companies in various sectors. The survey demonstrates that companies are

aware of changes in consumer behavior and the opportunities offered by the digital environment, as well as the need to invest in this area to remain competitive and sustainable.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research sought to analyze how much Digital Marketing has been used as a growth strategy by companies in Campos dos Goytacazes after the Covid-19 pandemic period, as well as to investigate how this innovation is revolutionizing the way these businesses operate. To achieve this purpose, specific objectives were established, which consisted of estimating the degree of adoption of Digital Marketing strategies by companies during the period of contagion, evaluating the main challenges and opportunities faced by companies in their transition to the digital world, verifying the impact of these strategies on business performance, in addition to providing an overview of the main trends and innovations in Digital Marketing after the pandemic.

The results obtained from the survey data revealed valuable information about the adoption of Digital Marketing strategies by companies in Campos dos Goytacazes during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. A relevant piece of information that stands out is the predominance of Instagram as the most effective social media platform for promoting companies, with 62.7% of the responses. This trend indicates the growing importance of this social network in the marketing strategy of local businesses, surpassing other platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok.

The survey highlighted that 98.8% of companies believe that the pandemic has made companies more aware of the importance of Digital Marketing, corroborating the perception of the growing relevance of this strategy. Regarding Digital Marketing tools, the results showed that Paid Ads led in terms of relevance, with a small difference to Content Marketing, followed by Digital Influencers. This analysis underscores the importance of these tools in the marketing strategy of the companies surveyed, with significant implications for how these companies plan and implement their digital strategies.

However, it is important to highlight some limitations of this research. The study was carried out in a sample of companies in the region of Campos dos Goytacazes, predominantly composed of individual microentrepreneurs and micro and small companies. This characteristic of the sample limits the generalization of the results to larger companies or to other regions with different economic and business contexts. In addition, the survey focused on the responses of the participating companies, which may not fully reflect the reality of the market as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the results in light of this specific context, confirming that different business realities may present different nuances in their Digital Marketing strategies.

As a possibility for further studies, it is suggested to carry out more comprehensive and longitudinal research, which can follow the development of Digital Marketing strategies over time and in different regional contexts. In addition, comparative studies between different regions can contribute to a more complete understanding of the impacts of Digital Marketing on the business scenario.

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