Marketing strategies in pandemic times in India – A critical review

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Abstract— **Various marketing strategies are used by companies to create awareness and increase the sales of their products and services across multiple channels. The pandemic times have initiated the need for a change in customer engagement and marketing mix. This paper aims to critically review the unique challenges faced by the marketers and measures taken up to overcome the same, due to limited customer access. Digital marketing is the most sought after strategy in the current times as consumption of digital content has peaked and seamless internet connectivity has provided access to the remotest of locations.**

Index Terms— **Marketing, Digital marketing, Display ads, SEO, SEM, E mail marketing, Social media marketing, Pandemic, Analytics**

INTRODUCTION

The world is going through an unprecedented crisis situation in the name of Covid -19. Lockdowns, hygiene and safety regimes, healthy eating, social distancing are the order of the day. The world has transitioned into protection mode with the closure of cross borders across countries and termination of men and material movement across borders. Manufacturing processes have come to a standstill owing to supply chain disruptions and social distancing practices. The pandemic has wreaked a havoc to the economy and business processes across nations. The intensity and the rate at which the virus is spreading has deeply impacted the daily lives of people creating anxiety, fear and confusion.

Amidst all this chaos, marketers are finding it difficult to gain their foothold and understand the changing customer behavior in these generation defining moments. This paper critically examines the prevailing situation and suggests ways in which organisations can engage with their customers, frame cost effective marketing strategies and send effective communication through the right choice of media.

LIFE IN COVID TIMES

Covid 19 seems to be a more serious pandemic than what the WHO and the ICMR had foreseen. It continues to spread rapidly across the world and the distribution is highly asymmetric. Governments across the world are working on a war footing in scaling up their traditional public health approaches to contain the virus and prevent its surge over the days. Host of countries have built surge capacities for critical care and isolation wards, to treat the affected and prevent the spread in their communities. As a precautionary measure, governments have issued health and safety advisory in the form of social distancing, self-quarantine and travel restrictions.

Due to these imposed societal norms, people are forced to stay in the precincts of their homes. The non-essential services have been moved to remote access modes. Children across age groups and university students are forced to stay home, which has led to a rise in the edutech space. Essentials are procured through grocery and convenience stores which have limited operating hours and the supply is also highly inconsistent. The consumers have therefore resorted to e commerce, putting major pressure on the electronic channels. Retailers are using frictionless electronic payment systems like Gpay, paytmetc are ensuring contact less delivery and enabling seamless payment, both online and offline. Live streaming content and other digital experience strategies have seen a facelift, owing to people resorting to escapism strategies from the gruesome reality. There is an increased awareness towards wellness in the form of home cooked food, healthy eating patterns and fitness routines. Some of these behavior changes may be temporary, but many

may be more permanent. As people move beyond the current mode of survival, the momentum behind digital-experience adoption is unlikely to reverse as people are forced by circumstances to try new things. (Balis, 2020)

From a business perspective, companies are witnessing unprecedented volumes for certain essential goods like hand sanitisers, due to panic buying and precipitous decline in demand for other non-essential goods like clothing and fashion. The supply chain disruptions, shifting customer touch points and non availability of critical resources further challenges the systemic and operational resilience of businesses. Many service industries like airlines, travel and tourism etc have been grounded on account of distancing norms. These testing times will help organisations identify potential vulnerabilities, diagnose critical processes and systems and take practical and timely action to minimize risk and loss.

MARKETING STRATEGIES IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Marketers act as catalysts to bring about insights and ideas to change the way the organisation works. Considering all the challenges faced during lockdown, the overall marketing strategy needs to be divided into two - strategies in the short term that are to be practiced during lockdown and the long term strategies that will be carried forward, post the pandemic.

The short term strategies focus on how to engage with the customers, considering the limited availability of customer touch points, stay relevant in the business during the crisis, how to effectively engage with the other stakeholders like colleagues and suppliers in the business world and support the overall well-being of family, friends and communities. All the above objectives operate within the framework of finding the right marketing practices that will generate maximum return for every dollar spent.

BRANDING AND PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Branding is one of the most powerful ways to communicate with customers in these testing times. Research done by HBS Professors, who have studied three slowdowns in the US over the last 40 years, shows that companies that cut marketing spends, cut research and development, cut innovation, during a slowdown, significantly underperformed those who did not. (Parameswaran, 2020)

Those brands which hold relevance to the current problems being faced by consumers need to reach out to the customers through multiple media like radio, television and digital platforms to reinforce its use. Dissemination of the right information has become the point of communication in the recent campaigns of most health and hygiene brands and digital has become their preferred medium to do so. One of the most successful campaigns is Dettol's 4 step #HandWashChallenge. (Nath, 2020) Brands which are not directly linked to the crisis in hand are sending out messages, to ride on the current sentiment over the safety concerns. For instance, insurance companies like Aditya Birla Sunlife launched the SAHI campaign to highlight the importance of staying at home and conveyed their upgraded remote touch points as part of the message, to add convenience.

The pandemic situation has put tremendous pressure on enterprises for sustaining the trust of consumers by building brand value. Almost everyone is making endeavours to deal with and survive the COVID-19 situation in the best possible manner, and going the extra mile to create brand conscientiousness. (Thakur, 2020) Facebook as a strong contender in the digital space, has launched a "COVID 19 information centre" which provides a direct link to the dashboard of the Government of India. The idea is to build a strong emotional connect with the target audience, rather than delivering the brand promise. People at this stage, intend to witness the social responsibility that brands are assuming, to create a difference in the society. Re defining brand impressions through creative acts of generosity, are known to create lasting impressions in the minds of the common man, whose benefits can be reaped even beyond the lock down period. Mahindra has retooled its automobile plant at Detroit to manufacture face shields and other medical supplies.

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND CHOICE OF CHANNELS

Customer optimism has hit an all-time low in the current season. The customer focus is towards hoarding on essential items and saving up for the uncertain times ahead. Companies have to engage empathetically in keeping up with the customer sentiments.

The organizations should not focus on pushing sales efforts through their engagement. Meaningful, supportive and positive engagement that alleviates the pain of isolation is the need of the hour. Companies should also sensitise their agents and employees to instill confidence and trust, in order to forge lasting relationship with their customers.

The best companies think very carefully about the customer journey. They recognize that every interaction between a prospect or customer and business is a critical moment of truth. Great outcomes happen when these moments are carefully thought through, choreographed, and executed with excellence. (Landers, 2020)

Creating high quality videos, newsletters, blog posts etc are some of the ways to communicate directly with the customer. Sharing short term milestones can make the conversation more engaging and create belongingness for the customer. Many health insurance companies went on to share the number of new online health insurance policies that had been processed during the covid time and the claim settlements made during the same. Technology can be used as a key enabler to touch base with clients – video chats with clients, enabling chat bots to answer standard queries are some of the interesting ways to connect.
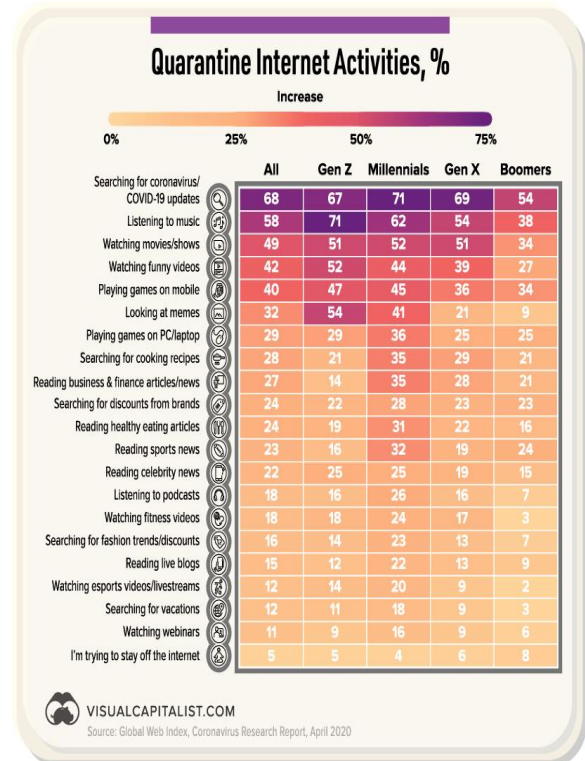
Customers today expect brands to deliver a balance of relevance, consistency and convenience at each stage of their journey, across the multiple channels and devices where they choose to engage. Frequent or irrelevant communication is quoted as the primary reason by many users for disengaging from a brand. (Martech advisors, 2020) Agile and personalized communication will help the concerned customers reach out to the right set of information. In the absence of physical access to stores, many retailers have been posting information on changed hours, updated delivery policies, new ways to reach customer service etc to its loyal clientele.

Listening is key to delivering customers what they want. This act facilitated through an omni channel network helps understand the current emotional state of the customer. It is a sure shot approach to making informed predictions around the shifting needs of the customers and repositioning the offerings. Employees in the front line need to be trained to lend an ear to the customer's ratings and reviews, as this will help identify opportunities to create superior customer experience.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Indians are spending nearly 3 hours a day on their smart phones, and more than 30% of this time is spent on consuming entertainment. Twitter saw its traffic soaring with users wanting to track news updates real-time whereas visits to online gaming sites and apps grew by 24%. (Brandwagon Online, 2020)

Quarantine Internet Activities, %

	All	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Searching for coronavirus/COVID-19 updates	68	67	71	69	54
Listening to music	58	71	62	54	38
Watching movies/shows	49	51	52	51	34
Watching funny videos	42	52	44	39	27
Playing games on mobile	40	47	45	36	34
Looking at memes	32	54	41	21	9
Playing games on PC/laptop	29	29	36	25	25
Searching for cooking recipes	28	21	35	29	21
Reading business & finance articles/news	27	14	35	28	21
Searching for discounts from brands	24	22	28	23	23
Reading healthy eating articles	24	19	31	22	16
Reading sports news	23	16	32	19	24
Reading celebrity news	22	25	25	19	15
Listening to podcasts	18	16	26	16	7
Watching fitness videos	18	18	24	17	3
Searching for fashion trends/discounts	16	14	23	13	7
Reading live blogs	15	12	22	13	9
Watching esports videos/livestreams	12	14	20	9	2
Searching for vacations	12	11	18	9	3
Watching webinars	11	9	16	9	6
I'm trying to stay off the internet	5	5	4	6	8

VISUALCAPITALIST.COM
Source: Global Web Index, Coronavirus Research Report, April 2020

With so many people being online, owing to long and undeterred internet connectivity in many places, digital marketing has come to the foray like never before. The growth of ecommerce and internet usage is already being adapted rapidly by organisations to expand their market reach and this crisis situation, has only intensified the same. In the absence of physical stores and physical contact with customers, digital marketing through company website, mobile apps and social media are the most effective ways to reach out to customers.

Organisations foraying into the digital space are seeking to create brand awareness to reach out to new customers, reinforce the brand and create engaging content to be in touch with existing customers, drive footfalls to their website and subsequent conversions, and promotion of the sale of products through ecommerce. There are multiple avenues in the digital space that helps businesses achieve the afore mentioned objectives.

Display ads: The global pandemic has changed the way people lead their lives. More and more of the public is turning to social media to get the latest corona status update and stay in touch with friends and family. The poll conducted on 28 March with 1,300 respondents in New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai found that 75 percent of people spent more time on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter compared to the previous week, largely to consume news and remain in touch, and that social media usage jumped from 150 minutes per day prior to the lockdown to 280 minutes a day during that first week. (First post staff, 2020) This trend gives ample opportunities for businesses to advertise on prominent news sites, insert ads on social media pages and circulate targeted marketing campaigns. Display ads further helps out to define the placement of the ads in specific pages in the websites for featuring in a notable manner. The filter conditions viz. age, gender, location etc helps to reach out to the right set of audience. Organisations should further focus on creating different campaigns to address different cohort groups to make it more relevant.

Corona has witnessed a huge spike in display ad inventory. Its prominence is due to the fact that it not only helps in creating awareness, but also works towards shaping people's opinion and retargeting the audience. Ads could be in the form of banner ads or videos packed with rich content. Advertising works best when it is targeted and when the ad copy and creative, match the context in which the ad is displayed. (Landers, 2020)Facebook Live is the leading live video platform used by 38% of marketers. Facebook ads are used by 70% of marketers and 58% plan on increasing their use of Facebook ads over the next 12 months. (Stelzner, 2020)Ads which are creative and customized to the target audience and context, connect well with the audience. Since covid has created a grim situation,

the messages are intended to be educative or create positivity. Customers have the liberty to access the ads through multiple dimensions like mobiles, tablet devices, laptops and desktops of different screen sizes. Making the ad responsive will ensure there is consistency and clarity of display across all mediums. Display ads are also helpful in measuring the effectiveness of the ads generated. Impressions to indicate if the ad carries the required visibility, click through rate (CTR) which conveys if the advertisement warranted the inquisitive user to seek more information. These ratios signify the effectiveness of the advertisement but the actual impact is felt through the conversion rate.

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION (SEO)

The lockdown has confined people to stay indoors for safety reasons. People staying indoors and working from home are finding newer ways to engage themselves. Internet has provided the much needed respite by giving them a window to the outside world virtually. There is a notable surge in the time spent online in streaming platforms, online learning portals and looking for information about specific products and services.

In a novel situation like this, corporations cannot stick to their traditional forms of marketing and advertising. Instead they need to tweak their strategies to grab eyeballs where the customers are. SEO is that long term strategy that allows businesses to stay visible even during the lockdown. When a website is well optimized it ranks higher in the organic searches, when people are looking for similar products or services as it ensures that the content is well understood by the search engine crawlers. This drives visitors to the website from the search engine pages enabling online transactions. Even if the purchase trigger does not happen right away, the website stays on top of people's mind creating a long term impact and enabling purchases when things stabilize.

The SEO technique also provides a competitive advantage during this period. When most of the companies have a taken a back seat towards marketing spends on account of cash crunch, optimizing the site with specific set of keywords gives a head start in the search engine results page.

The following statistics shows the impact of search engines and the most relevant search terms during the lockdown period.

With roughly 8.4% Indians using Google search engine for seeking information, in a population of 1.35 billion people, this translates into 113.4 Mn (approx 11 Cr) people. Also, an average person conducts 3–4 Google searches every single day, which translates into 339 Mn (approx 33 Cr) search queries on Google from India. With Google having Search Engine Market Share of 96.63% in India, the trends in terms typed in Google can be used as a rough estimate of knowing what Indians were interested in doing during the lockdown.

The exact terms which got the highest spike related to 'coronavirus' were like, 'thank you coronavirus helpers', 'www.worldometers.info coronavirus' and 'world coronavirus list'. This was closely followed by "online grocery delivered near me" and an extended lock down contributing to "how to" queries on fitness, losing weight and finally Masterchefs at home. (Mangal, 2020)

People cooped up in homes find it engaging to read content that is educative and entertaining. Content that is meaningful and that which connects with the current context is known to be engaging. ICICI bank launched a unique song called JayatuJayatuBharatam combining the efforts of 211 singers as a tribute to the indomitable spirit of India. The campaign had no connection to the banking products or services that the bank handles, instead was highlighting the positive spirit displayed by people, to overcome the crisis situation.

Marketeers need to use a trial and error method to gauge the content that is impactful. User metrics generated by search pages help to identify content that is relevant and that which generates more traffic to the website. Content that invokes a response from the user in the form of questions or contests tend to carry a better click through rate. Frequent updation of content to eliminate dead links and refresh the information is of paramount importance in fluid times like this. Search engines tend to favour fresher content and their algorithm is attuned to fetch the most updated information that better serves the user query. Establishment of backlinks from other noted webpages to the company's website adds credibility to the content. Such valuable content ranks higher in the organic search pages compared to competitor's websites.

SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING (SEM)

SEM is a simple and cost effective solution which works in combination with an SEO to generate steady traffic to a business website. The right choice of keywords determines the level of traffic that can be generated through an SEM solution. So key word analysis is a crucial step in an SEM solution. Finding keywords that are most relevant to the business, avoiding key words that have no connotation to the business under consideration, search terms frequently used by prospective customers are some of the considerations at this stage. This can be affected using popular keyword planner tools available on the internet.

SEM focuses on high intent keywords, as companies try to generate maximum revenue for every click routed through the paid search programs. Depending on the intent of launching an SEM campaign, organisations choose their keyword categories. Choosing key words that are sensitive to the current situation and including calls to action through the click ads makes up for a cost effective campaign. New products and special offers are best promoted through the PPC ads. Marketers should focus on offering special discounts to extend their support for their customer base, during this crisis situation. Comparison of keywords from a competition point of view is also crucial, since certain words tend to bid high and the CPC is justified only by choosing key terms with high volume and low competition.

Creating an effective landing page strategy works in tandem with the spends made on search campaigns. A prominent call to action, elimination of distracting web elements and a brief presentation of the content within minimal scrolling action on the mouse are some of the strategies, well appreciated by the attention starved visitors. Such tactics goes beyond simply generating web traffic towards conversions.

E MAIL MARKETING

E mail marketing is one of the best strategies to get up-to date messages to customers who are have already subscribed to the company's products or services. Unlike routine days, when people spare less

time to go through content on their email, Corona has given an opportunity to marketers to showcase their products better and send specific offers to interested customers through email. Educative and entertaining content still rules the roost, when it comes to email marketing. Colgate has been offering snippets on best dental practices and urging people to reach out to their free dental consultation through audio/video calls. This has been deemed as an empathetic move by the customers since dentists are not part of the essential services in these corona times and people do not have direct access to them.

Email marketing is being effectively used during the pandemic to convey information on channels to reach one's business, updated working hours, contact free delivery options updated products or services due to the ongoing situation etc. Marketers are also using this opportunity to showcase the munificent efforts and socially responsible covid relief activities undertaken, to spread a positive image about the brand. It is observed that specific campaigns addressed to groups of customers bring about better conversions than launching generic seasonal campaigns.

Email contacts database involves people who have opted for the company's products as well as those who have expressed interest towards the product by subscribing to the company's newsletter or promotional offers. It works in conjunction with search engine marketing to generate such contacts, who can be subsequently retargeted through smart shopping campaigns. E mail marketing has a unique advantage of having access to the demographic details of the customers and prospects, which helps in launching targeted and categorized campaigns. Many publishing houses are retargeting academicians by sending campaign for webinars and online book releases through email. The contact details are obtained during book purchases and search based targeting for content on specific topics.

SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social media have played a primary role in creating trust and forging relationship with its viewers. Free suite of tools is available in social media for businesses to stay connected with customers and employees to provide uninterrupted services. Facebook and instagram pages are utilized by companies as digital shop fronts to capitalize on online sales opportunities. Online product catalogues are made available to showcase company's products and services for subsequent targeting measures and ensuring visibility. For service based businesses appointments and consultation are made using social media tools like Whatsapp, messenger etc. Telemedicine has emerged as a critical technology during the covid crisis, to bring medical care to patients while attempting to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 among patients, families, and clinicians. Since consumers are tight stringed due to the prevailing uncertainty, the focus on social media spending is towards increasing the following on the social media pages and driving website traffic.

Social media has the unique advantage of creating a geometric progression on the dissipation of information through influencers, who have a readymade audience. Influencers have the expertise to self create content and exactly know how it resonates with their fan following. During this unprecedented event, trusted social media influencers continue to be a reliable source of information and an effective, authentic way to communicate with your audience. In the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust, we found 63 percent of 18-to-34-year-olds trust what an influencer says about a brand more than what the brand says about itself in advertising. (Amanda Mizrahi, 2020) Choosing the right grade of influencers that matches with the brand's voice and values will help showcase the marketing campaign in the right platform to the right set of people. Co creating the content to be showcased along with the influencers will result in compelling and compassionate content that leaves a lasting impression on the intended audience. (Amanda Mizrahi, 2020)

There is a need to reassess the campaign, creative, the tone of the message and the content conveyed constantly, as the market dynamics in the covid world are changing drastically. Static content that is unrelated to the covid crisis like entertaining home-bound children, time management practices to handle work from home effectively are also advocated in websites for customer engagement. Crafting content which is sensitive to the current situation, taking into account the new situation and concerns of the customers and being transparent and humane is the need of the hour.

The power of localized social media ads is yet another feature that is being capitalized during the pandemic times. Myriad of tools are available to filter the ads displayed based on age group and location. Locations could further drill down to people living in a location, people who are travelling in the location or people who were recently in the location or exclude certain locations altogether. This works towards effective targeting and comes handy for searches on mobile.

DIGITAL ANALYTICS

Corona virus has created a lasting impact on the digital marketing channels of numerous firms across industries. An eye for detail and adjustments to the delivery process are inevitable in the corona times to keep up with the changing customer trends. Different geographical areas afflicted by varying intensities, have exhibited different media exposure and portray different opportunities for the business enterprises. So location is identified to be a crucial variable to study in terms of opportunities.

Due to suppressed mobility among the general population, shift in strategy to focus on localized terms is prudential, as consumers are more and more reliant on the hyper local businesses that are prompt with their order fulfillment processes. Marketeers are also capitalizing on the opportunity to optimize their strategies and grow their CRM database.

Firms running search or shopping campaigns can understand the effectiveness of the campaign and study the performance across various dimensions like key word, ad grouping, device used, time period etc. using tools like Auction Insights. It is a competitive report that aids in making strategic decisions towards bidding for keywords and budgeting. It also brings to the foray the keywords or ad groups that contribute to the success of a campaign and missed out opportunities that are waiting to be capitalized. Given the gravity of the situation, a study on the creative imagery and messaging that resonates well with the audience helps run campaigns, that portray the empathy and compassion that brands share with their audience.

The ROI justifies the spends on paid digital advertising like SEM, display ads etc. It is substantiated by ratios like ad conversion rate, click through rate etc. Many health and insurance advertisers are witnessing a significantly higher ad clicks and conversion rates as users turn to search engine result pages for the much needed information on the pandemic and naturopathy medicines to ward off the pandemic.

OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES

The trying times saw the evolution of new business strategies to facilitate customer order fulfillment. Walmart owned Flipkart partnered with Meru cabs to deliver grocery and essential items to its customers in the Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR and Hyderabad markets, during the nationwide lockdown through a safe and sanitized supply chain. "This partnership with Meru is a result of our teams exploring new, innovative ways to drive value for our ecosystem of sellers, brands, partners, and customers to ensure the safe and swift availability of grocery and essential goods," Flipkart Group CEO Kalyan Krishnamurthy said. "Meru will use its fleet to ensure the timely and safe delivery of essentials to Flipkart's large customer base in a hassle-free manner. This service will also offer our driver-partners an additional earning opportunity during this challenging time," Meru Mobility Tech founder and CEO Neeraj Gupta said. (2020) The above strategy as clearly cited by the CEOs of the two companies proves to be a win-win situation, in the process of sustaining the business through the unprecedented times.

The FMCG companies noted that though there was a consistent demand for food and essentials, the disrupted supply chain, and acute shortage of manpower posed serious challenges to the last mile delivery affecting the sales. Marico Ltd launched SaffolaStore on Swiggy and Zomato. Cab-aggregator Uber India launched a last mile delivery service and has partnered with online grocery firm BigBasket. ITC has joined hands with Dominos to deliver ITC's essential items. Along with Dominos, it has also partnered with food delivery chains Swiggy, Zomato along with community centric apps such as Apna Complex, My gate, No broker and Azgo. Through such tie-ups, ITC has ensured home deliveries of its brands like Aashirvaad, Yippee!,Sunfeast B Natural, Savlon and Fiama. (Buch, 2020)Such winning strategies are here to stay post the opening up of the economy as well, to reap the benefits of ecommerce as a channel.

THE WAY FORWARD IN THE NEW NORMAL

In the peak of the covid situation companies have been focussing on short term goals to survive and near long term goal to sustain. As companies prepare for the next normal, the focus shifts towards identifying customer trends that are here to stay and those trends which would eventually fade out. Mc Kinsey believes that three priorities will define customer experience in the post-pandemic era: digital excellence, safe and contactless engagement, and dynamic customer insights. Each organization will pursue these priorities differently based on its industry and starting point as well as competitive landscape. (2020) Winning companies will build their capabilities towards adapting to evolving customer behavior and strengthening their long term strategic positions.

Companies should break the silo mentality, to opt for outsourcing opportunities and partner with firms across industries to rapidly scale up their capabilities and deliver an integrated customer experience. Customers have developed a flair for virtualization in the form of virtual transactions, virtual service consumption etc. which suggests that companies need to re-engineer their business models to accommodate the new norms. The traditional data analysis based on historical sales and behavior has gone out of context, so advanced analytics that provide a dynamic assessment of the changing business scenarios, need to be adapted by organisations to chart their strategic goals. To sum up the new normal is for resilient organisations that quickly adapt to fluid environments and offer a differentiated customer experience.

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