Review

E-marketing Tools for Food Businesses Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic: Advantages and Challenges

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Abstract

Many businesses are interested in searching for the latest technologies to secure the tie with existing customers and to prevent potential customers from abandoning their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The food industry is one of them. Therefore, this review article is an attempt to identify various e-marketing tools adopted in the business world in the pre-covid era and to underpin their applicability in the food industry in the covid era by highlighting the advantages and challenges of their adoption. Research articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, and dissertations regarding the topic of applications of e-marketing published from 2000 to 2019 available in the google scholar database, were considered in the review. The final search of the literature was carried out in February 2020. The study reveals that the benefits of applying e-marketing tools in food businesses could compensate for the pitfalls of adopting them. Authors suggest that the ability to compare prices of similar products from different sellers as the most promising benefit of e-marketing, from the customer perspective. Similarly, the cost-effectiveness experienced by food suppliers compared to traditional marketing, makes the e-marketing concept attractive, for food businesses. This work discovers the ability and the inclination of people to launch, manage and organize business ventures with e-marketing approaches in the present as well as the future world.

Keywords: Advantages, challenges, covid-19, e-marketing, food businesses

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the way firms and organizations engage in business activities has altered owing to the advent of the internet [1]. In the present world, even small businesses are available online which boosts both their existence and sales in the market. In fact, online marketing has been a new promising force of economic growth in the modern world [2]. E-marketing is the process of marketing brands using the internet as an effective tool [3].

It is a popular fact that traditional ways of marketing have changed notably over the years [4], and the internet is the pioneer of this alteration. Marketers get the benefit of internet marketing by maintaining connections with consumers through the internet where they can sell their products meanwhile customers can purchase products, by enabling search through the website all throughout the day. It is quite obvious the use of internet-based technologies is becoming continuously widespread across many areas in the food sector.

With the concept of e-marketing, food manufacturers are capable of searching the internet for the resources

they require and comparing prices between suppliers to gain raw materials at the lowest possible price. Recent studies have shown that capability of e-marketing in aggravating the extent of competition in input supply businesses [5].

Online marketing has enabled customers to compare prices of similar products from different sellers. Thus, customers can switch between different alternatives of similar products according to their financial capability. The use of the internet has proven to reduce suppliers' ability to over-charge for products as consumers would know the comparable prices of other firms [6]. When considering the aforementioned facts, it is obvious that utilizing the internet, is a very beneficial source for both seller and buyer individually to retain a close tie with each other even under the barriers of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the goal of this review is to extract relevant information about e-marketing from the literature available in the pre-covid era and link that information to the covid era. By doing this, it is intended to underpin the applicability of e-marketing tools in the food industry in the covid era, by emphasizing the advantages and challenges of its adoption. Consequently, this may facilitate existing as well as potential entrepreneurs in the food sector to productively function in their businesses even under the restrictions of global pandemic contexts like COVID-19.

Methodology

Research articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, and dissertations available in the open access mode, regarding the topic of applications e-marketing (in different business environments) published from year 2000 – 2019 were searched electronically, in the google scholar database. Search results containing words like e-commerce/online marketing/internet marketing in their topics were also considered if the content closely matches the topic under review. The final search was carried out in February 2020. Based on the gathered information, the current review paper was built to imply the applicability of internet marketing specifically in the food businesses worldwide.

Definitions for E-marketing

Several researchers have given different definitions of E-marketing after many studies. Accordingly, Chaffee and his colleagues have defined E-marketing as "the application of the internet and related digital technologies to achieve marketing objectives"[7]. Meantime Kotler and Armstrong[8] see online marketing "as measures and activities to promote products and services and build relationships with customers over the internet". Burrett[10] has perceived online marketing as "carefully targeting users and getting them to interact with you while they're engaged with the most personal, intimate medium ever invented". An all-inclusive definition for E-marketing has been formulated by Chaffey as "Applying Digital technologies which form online channels to contribute to marketing activities aimed at achieving profitable acquisition and retention of customers (within a multi-channel buying process and customer lifecycle) through improving our customer knowledge (of their profiles, behavior, value and loyalty drivers), then delivering integrated targeted communications and online services that match their individual needs" [11]. Every one of these definitions emphasizes that internet marketing is concerned with internal engagement and the development of relationships with interested clients, which distinguishes it from traditional, offline marketing. E-marketing is also referred to using terms like online marketing, digital marketing, web-based marketing, and internet marketing.

E-marketing tools
There are multiple tools that assist in developing and maintaining productive and effective online marketing programs in the business environment. The choice of the most effective tool may vary from business to business and the correct selection of the most suitable tool will give fortunes for firms and make them outperform their rivals.

Email Marketing
Simply it is a process of sending promotional information through e-mails to active internet users. Several researchers have focused their attention on this marketing approach [12]. Researchers pointed out, fast seller response rates and reduced costs as its advantages [13] and believed that those "are rapidly turning email marketing into an invaluable tool" [14]. This strategy can be called one of the oldest and the most effective approaches to the e-marketing concept. The key benefit of this tool can be emphasized as the reduction of expenses while maximizing sales of the business. According to Salehi et al[15], recruiting a good email marketing campaign in a firm can be useful in several means such as sloping upward communications between firms and customers, creating a reduction of expenses through repetition of sales, making customers notified about new products and services of the business, assisting the firms to achieve feedback from the customers conveniently and by persuading customers to engage in offline purchases.

Social Media Marketing
This is the art that involves creating and sharing information on different social media networks in order to achieve a firm's marketing and branding targets. Social media consists of several components like social bookmarking, microblogs, forums, social networks, blogs, and virtual worlds, etc. [16]. Social media is currently being used by businesses to develop the latest searching strategies and adapt them to assess, select and purchase both goods as well as services [17]. Research findings have shown vividly that when compared to traditional marketing, social media marketing has a greater capability of reaching customers [18]. Research has further elicited that, the firms who do not utilize this method of e-marketing, may lack the key benefit of understanding the needs and wants of the customers in some way [19].

Search Engine Optimization
Parikh and Deshmukh[20] offer the definition of search engine optimization as " a cluster of strategies and techniques used to increase the number of visitors to a website by obtaining a high-ranking placement in the search results page of a search engine". Because search is one of the most common ways for individuals to get information online and ranking higher in the SERPs can result in more visitors to a website. According to Yang and Ghose[21], there is a positive effect on organic links and on the click-through amounts of paid links, potentially causing an increase in profits for businesses.

Display Advertising
The term "online display advertising" refers to the placement of advertisements alongside the main content on a website, which website visitors deliberately searched for [22].

Events and Webinars

It is an online event where a speaker or a small set of speakers, delivers information to a huge audience who participate by asking questions, making suggestions, and using various other available tools for interacting. B2B marketers can produce and deliver content in digitally built-up environments through different kinds of activities. Here, using several branded websites, it is possible to post white papers alongside the hosting webcasts [23] or to advertise the environment through various activities such as conferences.

A/B Testing and Website Optimization

It can be illustrated as the process of using controlled experimentation to improve the ability of a website to chase business goals. In the present world with the enormous growth of the internet, A/B testing based on social networks has captured huge attention, and nowadays it is frequently used in social network advertising. The massive development of A/B testing in social network advertising has helped many businesses to gather useful perceptions of consumer likes/dislikes and attitudes [24]. Most of the A/B tests are visible to the user and they are concentrating on the front-end of the website or application mostly including various attractive layouts, fonts, colors, etc. to grab the customer's attention from the first insight [25,26].

Content Marketing

This is a marketing strategy used by most of companies by focusing on creating, publishing, and distributing content for a targeted audience online. Localization and translation help content to be more effective for market and culture. Language plays a crucial role here. Localized content in the local language helps local customers to understand easily and correctly the information they need [27]. So, it is better to be careful when creating online platforms for marketing. Customers who are anticipating, personalized customer experiences are growing and they want to reflect their personal needs from them, they like it if their attitudes and situations match with what business has to offer [28]. This method is used when companies are seeking customer attention and when they need to generate promising leads.

Video Marketing

Through use of videos to market products or services, it enhances customer engagement on digital platforms, educate customers, and assists to reach out to a new audience. There is a rapid increase and improvement in online video consumption in all around the world. Furthermore, it is mostly done through mobile devices, they have become significant terminals for online content consumption [29].

Marketing Analytics

It is the process of monitoring, managing, and evaluating marketing performance in order to improve its efficacy and optimize return on investment. It enables advertisers to be more economical in their professions and reduces the amount of money wasted on web marketing.

Marketing Automation

This method is used when companies are interested in cost-cutting, replacing repeating tasks, and manual marketing processes with automated solutions. This can be seen high in email marketing campaigns. According to Wiersema[30] technological automation of manual tasks performed by marketers is one of the key developments identified in marketing automation to help businesses grow faster.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

Customer loyalty and client relationships are used in this technique and they gather customer data and relevant feedback. Thereby, they use this information to build long-term relationships with customers and to develop laser-focus brand awareness. The ultimate goal of CRM is to gain a satisfied and loyal customer base. All online businesses should have e-CRM as an integrated part of the business processes which helps to create e-loyalty and to be a success [31]. According to Bull[32], CRM is a very complex and holistic concept that needs effective leadership, sourcing, targeting, and evaluation strategies in order to be successful.

Content Management System

As Boiko[33] defines, content management is a process of collecting, managing, and publishing various content. Content can be typically stored in a database and displayed in a presentation layer based on a set of templates.

Pay-per-click Advertising

It is the use of online advertising to demonstrate business promotional items on the viewers' computers [34]. It can be stated as a way of buying visits to a business site, rather than attempting to "earn" those visits organically. Pay-per-click advertising includes sub-campaigns such as Bing, Google, and Facebook that run-on different channels. Here, to make an advertisement appealing and impressive, most advertisers participate in different auctions, stating a price. They usually have a daily budget for each and every sub-campaign of the pay-per-click advertising plan[35].

LinkedIn Ads

These are paid advertisements shared via LinkedIn profiles. LinkedIn social network is mostly targeting professionals. It was established in 2003, and has already identified as a standard recruiting tool in some industries, and it is viewed as "a living version of a résumé" [36].

Affiliate Marketing

A digital marketing method in which an online retailer gives commission to an external website for traffic or sales generated from its referrals. Most affiliate marketing programs are convenient to implement and execute, require less or no setup at all, and are free of charge. Thereby, it assists in generating a new source of revenue for consumers [37]. Many E-merchants and businesses use affiliate marketing as a tool, and industry experts and observers expect it to be a major source of new customer acquisition [38-40]. Businesses have identified referrals as a growing emphasis of businesses and a source for customer acquisition.

Advantages of E- marketing to Food Businesses

Online Marketing Creates an Empowering Effect

The word 'Empowerment' is generally regarded as a part of a firm-based strategy used to enhance the power given to customers in the operation of selecting products/services to allow the integration of different elements offered by the firm [41]. Dholekia and Kshetri[42] have shown that the "internet can extent market reach and operational efficiency of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), highlighting online marketing's enabling effect, especially on small businesses". It shows that even a small business is able to promote their products or services on a much larger scale with the advent of the internet.

Previous literature shows that, the advent of the internet has offered various opportunities for firms/ businesses to be visible in both the local and international markets in many different ways. Thereby, food businesses can exploit this advantage through the adoption of the appropriate online marketing tool/tools in their marketing activities. Email marketing, blogging, launching websites, etc. have been used as cost-effective and efficient inter-linked channels which could endow food businesses (especially small and medium scale) with the ability to survive and compete in the market [43].

Online Marketing Removes Geographic Barriers for Trading

We can identify one of the major and crucial benefits of online marketing as the elimination of geographical limitations which includes buying and selling all the time. Accordingly, Ostlere[43] has shown that the internet allows businesses to achieve unlimited goals with outstandingly lower costs which enable businesses to grow faster [43]. The traditional media like television, radio, and high-end luxury magazines are costly and many food businesses cannot afford to promote their products or services using such media. In such cases, using e-marketing tools, marketers could expand their products and services to customers all over the world.

Online Marketing Covers 24 Hours Per Day And 7 Days Per Week Availability

Internet helps to provide timely information to customers due to its broad availability crossing the barriers of time. With the establishment of online outlets and shopping spaces, customers can gain latest news on goods and services offered by firms freely. Thereby, shopping is possible at any time convenient to them. It could be day or night, whenever they wish and prefer. Online businesses do not necessarily deal with special closing and opening times. Sharma[44] has highlighted that people can visit physical markets and then they can look for competitive prices online or they can look for products online and then visit the relevant store to acquire the product which they wish. Undoubtedly, online shopping and purchasing are quite easy for customers than visiting competitive physical stores and comparing prices of similar products. Internet shopping is undoubtedly superior and more convenient. Online shopping is a turning point for people with more busy lifestyles. This not only saves a person's valuable time but also saves a person's energy.

Online Marketing is Cost Effective in Multiple Means

When comparing to traditional advertising media channels, online marketing is cost-effective in accomplishing a firm's marketing objectives [45]. Consequentially, online marketing enables businesses (especially small-scale food manufacturers) to save their resources and to get their products advertised with minimum/no cost using platforms like social media marketing.

Online Marketing enables Effective Tracking

E-marketing enables tracking. Thereby it is capable of measuring the number of clicks a specific advertisement collects and exact website traffic on a particular website. This information allows firms to identify what products are in high/low demand and which items to be produced more and which items to produce less according to the customer demand. Moreover, this information allows firms to take actions to reduce traffic so that customers feel comfortable with online purchasing and furthermore customer retention is guaranteed too [46]. These are very important messages to businesses like supermarkets and online restaurants which are dealing with food items.

In this situation, a marketer is enabled to track the visitors to a website and comprehend their purchasing behavior correctly. **"Whole Foods"**- an American food company collects email addresses on their website to create email lists that can be used later to advertise new products, sales, and events of them. The internet enables businesses to get information like whether their promotional campaigns are running as anticipated or not, the exact customer base that is interested in their products, what their origin (location) is and etc. Granitz and Greene[47] have shown that the ability and the possibility to track customers online, increases day by day because of that "Web site log software and real-time profiling track the number of users who view each page, location of previously visited pages, date of view, time of view, duration of viewing, links followed, and so on".

Online Marketing Allows the Customization of Messages

Personalization of products and services is another key advantage of online marketing. According to Ostlere[43], personalization referred as modifying products/services to tally with individual customer requirement by relying on their previous purchasing behaviour. This process allows customization of propaganda messages to specific customers and layout information according to their individual profiles. This personalization helps to build and retain a sustainable relationship with customers [48]. Traditional modes of marketing cannot customize individual user needs, demands, inclinations, and preferences when advertising products or services. Overcoming those barriers, online marketing helps individuals to save time through personalization efforts which is a massive gain to the field of marketing.

Online Marketing enables Comparing Prices of Goods And Services

As an upcoming trend, farmers seem to use the internet to meet potential buyers and sellers and promote their products to increase their income. Some farmers around the world have established individual farm websites to buy inputs and sell products to increase their farm income [49]. Rolfe et al[50] have tried to decide whether farmers use the internet for the purpose of reducing cost or increasing the harvesting productivity. The results gave evidence that American farmers were able to experience either cost reduction or time-saving with the help of the Internet. Similarly, Smith and his colleagues[52] have explored the perceived benefits of adopting the internet by Great Plains farmers and discovered that majority use it as an important source of information. One important feature in internet related marketing is that customers will be able to

see what different suppliers charge and agricultural inputs that are generally highly substitutable. The internet could reduce a supplier's ability to charge over prices for goods as consumers already know what other firms charge [6].

Challenges of e-marketing to food businesses

Online Marketing Accompanies the Problem of Integrity
Recent studies have shown some problems with regard to internet marketing. One of the major issues associated with marketing programs is that using of different offline and online promotions channels to promote products such as leaflets, catalogue, TV, mobiles, internet, social media and thus deficient in a coordinating marketing framework [43]. In here, each item is used differently and not as a component of an integrated program. This complication can be solved to an extent by taking an all-inclusive approach that explains and combines different offline and online marketing procedures as one integrated structure. For instance, the website will not be visited if there are no web links to it. Furthermore, viral marketing platforms has to have email addresses or social media websites to communicate the ideas to the potential customers. Therefore, none of the elements of marketing should be kept isolated.

Online Marketing Lacks Physical Contact Between the Customer and the Seller
Researchers support the fact that lack of personal contact is also a major problem in online marketing. Some individuals do not prefer this and they like to experience the environment of a physical store while they do shopping. Those people prefer to contact store personnel in the shop face to face, touch the product with their hands, and socialize with salespersons in the store with a perception that they would purchase the best product at best price. Kiang and Chi[52] have shown that for the types of products that requires personal examination, (may be like fresh fruits, vegetables, fish, meat etc.) internet marketing could be less suitable.

Online Marketing Deals with Security and Privacy Problems
Information privacy is a key topic to be taken into account in today's evolving electronic world. It is clear enough that nowadays customers' personal information can easily be shared with other third parties and companies without asking permission. Lantos has highlighted in his studies that customers' personal data (usernames and passwords) are potential to be hacked [53]. Another main constraint is spam/junk and pop-up advertisements on websites which are considered by the majority of online customers as both unnecessary and disturbing. Any private information regarding customers like credit/debit card details and username passwords of website logins should be purely protected. This may be a reason why many customers show reluctance to engage in online shopping.

Online Marketing Often Lacks the Trust of Customers/Consumers
Recent researchers have focused their attention on online trust-building as an effective strategy for uplifting online marketing platforms [54]. Bart and his colleagues[55] have explained online trust in a virtually built environment as "consumer perceptions of how the site would deliver on expectations, how believable the site's information is, and how much confidence the site commands". Today, despite the development of the online transactions technologies several people still mistrust them for use in payments and still keep doubt

whether the purchased product will be delivered or not. So, it is very important to build trust among customers regarding online marketing methods. It is known that without building the trust between the seller and the buyer, the full advantage of e-marketing cannot be accomplished. Therefore, marketers have challenges when altering the online climate where actual business transactions occur, in order to build more trust among online consumers. This creates the need to develop more trustworthy sites from the case of the customer perspective. Because unless customers feel it is a trustworthy business, they will not buy any products from those sites.

Conclusion

The key objective of marketing is to approach existing as well as prospective customers via diverse networks where people engage in online surfing, reading, socializing and many more. The advent of online marketing platforms has produced novel arenas in many industries including the food industry. Although, e-marketing seems to be a very promising force due to its whole bunch of advantages, some challenges associated with it still make customers use it sparingly. Literature supports evidence that in order to achieve marketing goals, there are plenty of available tools which businesses can use to deliver their targeted messages and make their customers aware of their products or services. Understanding which e-marketing tool/tools is/are needed by individual food businesses is very critical to getting the maximum advantage out of them. Otherwise, if the wrong tool/tools is/are being applied at the wrong time, it can create bad consequences like profit loss to the businesses. The emergence of online marketing has given new hope to the field of marketing in many aspects. The key advantages that internet-related marketing offers are, building up of an empowering effect, eradication of geographic barriers, the whole day or rather seven days per week availability, cost-effectivity, tracking ability, personalization, and allowing price comparison to make the best purchasing decisions. However, adoption and execution of online marketing tools in food industry can be associated with several constraints such as integration complications, the absence of physical contact, privacy problems and trouble in building online trust. Consequently, after a detailed literature survey, embracing the internet by food businesses seems to hold overwhelming advantages over its constraints. Similarly, these tools will assist a business to survive for the long term, especially during global pandemic circumstances like COVID-19, where physical contact is restricted. Further research is needed on the application of e-marketing tools in actual business environments in the food sector so that it enables a more precise forecast of the feasibility and the success of such attempts in improving the profits of businesses.

Acknowledgment

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