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Viewpoint: Here are the trends that will disrupt, redefine marketing in 2021

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2020 was a disruptive year, to say the least. However, from a marketing perspective, the disruption may have been less about pausing or cutting back and more about accelerating trends that were in the process of upending things anyway. Our estimate is that marketing dynamics, such as media distribution, digitalization, automation, artificial intelligence and more, have been accelerated about five years in just this year alone. Even savvy companies are working hard to catch up.

As we sit here at the start of the new year, it is very much up in the air whether 2021 will revert to normal or embrace a new normal. Agility is the key word in marketing strategy in 2021. Successful marketers will need to strategize, commit to their plan and yet be mindful of unexpected disruptions and opportunities that may demand quick re-concepting and reallocation of resources.

With that in mind, here are some trends we've identified that will drive marketing in 2021:

1) Many companies will be paralyzed with marketing indecision.

This paralysis will cause them to do nothing, or at most keep their status quo from 2020. Many in management will resign themselves to being satisfied with mediocre results, justifying that everyone is in the same boat.

2) Many marketing budgets will be cut in 2021.

Cuts will be based on wholesale markets, across-the-board percentages without regard to performance, competitive pressure, opportunities and other factors. Indecision will also impact marketing spending. The budgeting conversation will be ruled by those who specialize in cutting costs rather than investing in opportunities.

3) Brand awareness and market share leadership will change in many industries.

Marketing abhors a vacuum. As many companies pull back in 2021, valuable opportunities to overtake industry leaders in market share and thought leadership will present themselves to those strategically assertive companies.

4) Social media utilization will be re-concepted as result drivers.

Until now, most companies used social media as a secondary medium. Many see social media as a “newsletter” of sorts... as a way of keeping in touch, more in terms of awareness than in motivating results. In 2021, social media will take a more active marketing role re-concepted to create leads and even close sales.

5) With digital and social media’s more active roles in closing sales, the connection between advertising and sales teams will become seamless.

Management will need to combine advertising and sales into one team within the organization, as both are now working to generate leads and close sales.

6) Digital advertising will take priority over traditional advertising (especially in B2B), if it hasn’t already.

Consumer products are farther along this path than are B2B companies. Businesses will turn their marketing budgets upside down as digital becomes more valuable, while traditional media advertising is diminished in priority.

7) Lower-tier companies will partner with established brands and influencers to piggyback on their status and awareness.

With growth opportunities slowed or limited these days, it's more difficult to establish brand awareness. Up-and-comers will partner with recognized brands and entities to more quickly lift awareness and enhance customer comfort levels, hoping to put their brand on par with the established one.

8) New businesses and industries will become commoditized.

There is a marketing battle taking place between personalization and AI/automation. Automation is seductive because it appears to lower costs, but that may be offset by even lower margins. Be careful because profitability hangs in the balance, together with customer loyalty.

9) Metrics, metrics everywhere, but are they tracking what's really important?

It's easier than ever to track results and performance. However, things like customer loyalty and top-of-mind awareness are difficult to measure. Beware of setting strategy on the easy-to-measure metrics and overlooking what matters.

10) The human factor - companies embracing the new normal while overlooking what's continuing from the old normal.

Robots, automation, AI are important but don't let that eliminate the human factor in business. Short-term, companies will seek ways to replace human interaction - trade shows, sales calls, networking etc. But do so as humanly and responsively as possible. Even digitally, people crave human responsiveness and service. By 2022, the old normal with human interaction, may be back.

2021 is certainly going to be an interesting marketing year!

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