MARKETING in times of COVID-19

Tata Motors, Tata Consumer Products Ltd, Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance, DBS Bank, Gaana, Policybazaar.com, UpGrad, Urban Company, Acer, Godrej Appliances, OYO, Shopify, Pernod Ricard India, Housejoy, Fujifilm and Tupperware India
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People are recognising the importance of family and increasingly all consumption behaviour is tilting towards safeguarding their aspirations: Abhishek Gupta

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Abhishek Gupta, CMO, Edelweiss Tokio Life helps us understand how the insurance sector has been impacted and how the brand prepared itself to face these uncertain times.

- He also tells us about his priorities as a marketer during times of crisis and his learnings from the experience so far.

The Coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdown has disrupted the world. There has been a lot of interesting changes in consumer behaviour over the past few months, especially in the insurance sector.

Before the pandemic, buying insurance was largely dependent on face-to-face counsel from advisors and wasn’t really considered an absolutely necessary financial instrument. However, in the times since the outbreak, people have started recognizing the importance of insurance. People are recognising the importance of family and tilting towards safeguarding their aspirations.

While the overall industry has witnessed a slowdown, agile brands have been able to adapt to the changing times and needs and been able to stay afloat.
We recently spoke to Abhishek Gupta, CMO, Edelweiss Tokio Life to understand how the market has been impacted and how the brand prepared itself to face these uncertain times. He also tells us about his priorities as a marketer during times of crisis and how he’s tweaked the brand’s marketing strategy during the lockdown.

Excerpts:

Q) How has the lockdown period been for you so far? How have your consumers reacted?

The initial transition from office to work-from-home (WFH), now seems like a distant memory, as we step into Lockdown 4.0. As an organisation and a brand, we did not have to make any extraordinary changes to move to a seamless WFH. We had digitally transformed our processes and operational capabilities in recent years, which to a large extent, has facilitated an easy transition for us. Following the initial impact in March, which is a business-critical month for insurance, we found our footing in April and have sustained it since. Our APE has grown nearly 60% year-on-year in April as we have been able to re-orient ourselves and respond to evolving expectations of our stakeholders.

The lockdown experience has been disorienting for customers across sectors. We have proactively taken steps to counsel our customers and provide them access to authentic information. The pandemic has led to a significant shift in how customers perceive the insurance category. With risk to future cashflows and health uncertainties in focus, insurance has become far more important. Discretionary spending is at a standstill and customers are now looking at insurance as an avenue for long-term wealth creation to protect their dreams and aspirations.

Q) Has there been any interesting consumer behaviour trend you’ve noticed in the past few weeks?

Before the onset of Covid-19, insurance buying was largely dependent on face-to-face counsel from advisors and was not considered as a must-have financial instrument. The pandemic has changed both these paradigms. Given the magnitude of health risks we currently face, protection has become crucial and people are beginning to recognise that they need insurance to provide for their long-term goals. Also, the impact on current cashflows has elevated the importance of savings. So, customers are looking at insurance as a secure means for wealth accumulation and creation.
The pandemic has also significantly affected people’s emotional quotient. People have become much more cognisant of their social responsibility and we are seeing simple acts of kindness across geographies. People are recognising the importance of family and increasingly all consumption behaviour is tilting towards safeguarding their aspirations. Self-reliance is slowly becoming a habit now, considering social distancing is likely to continue in the near future.

Q) Insurance is one of the few sectors that hasn’t been impacted due to the lockdown. Have you seen an increase in people buying life insurance policies?

The overall sector has experienced a considerable slowdown since the first lockdown was announced. But companies that have been agile and reinvented themselves quickly, have managed to stay buoyant. There is certainly an increased interest to buy insurance and that is reflecting across the board – be it with insurance companies, aggregators or brokers. As mentioned before, our APE has recorded a nearly 60% year on year growth in April, which reflects increased customer interest.

Q) While it would have been difficult for anyone to predict the current situation, how prepared were you as a brand to cope with the implications? How fast were you able to adapt to the new normal?

Over the last 2 years, we have accelerated our spends on digital platforms because our customers are present there and it is undoubtedly the new-age frontier. This gradual shift has augured well for us and helped us adapt to this new normal with relative ease. We have been able to focus on finding the right messaging and communication for our customers, instead of reinventing the wheel.

We have all been dazed by this unprecedented situation, and as a marketer that was our first area of focus in the initial period. It was crucial to offer the right counsel to our customers, and we made aggressive marketing efforts to support our salesforce on this front. Similarly, we as an organisation also setup a helpline to provide access to credible information, which in part helped manage concerns regarding this new normal.

We have established an online property called Login Zindagi. We have conducted 4 Facebook Live sessions so far, earning us a reach of over 90,000,
over 24,000 views and about 13,500 engagements. We are still experimenting with the format and are trying to work with more platforms. For instance, instead of doing an FB Live, we had people pre-register for our recent session and received a massive response with over 13,000 viewers logging in and more than 2,000 viewers asking questions. While Login Zindagi started off as a limited series event, we are considering building it into a long-term initiative.

To adapt to the evolving changes in customer behaviour, we have kickstarted an initiative called DigiTools. It aims to make customer communication friendlier, personalised, and suitable for the current ecosystem, wherein information consumption on devices like mobiles has increased. It also facilitates our salesforce to interact with prospective customers, without taking away the ‘Do It Yourself’ or ‘self-reliance’ behaviour they have developed during this period. We are looking at building a long-term relationship with our customers, and initiatives like DigiTools will help us achieve that.

Q) What are a few things that a marketer should keep in mind while coming up with marketing communications during times of crisis?

As a marketer, here are the factors I consider in each communication that we create currently:

a) Does my communication align with my brand values? This is a good rule to follow at all time, but, is especially important during such disruptions. With the emergence of moment marketing, it is very tempting to steer away from what your brand stands for to garner temporary brand impact. But, going back to basics will always give you clarity of thought.

b) How can my communication be informative and mobilise people to support those in need? As a brand, we have a bigger responsibility right now to be socially responsible and be the conduit of authentic information for our stakeholders.

c) Is the communication relevant for my stakeholders? Your key stakeholders, especially customers, must be the focal point of your communication. What you say now will stay with them for a long time. So, use this as an opportunity to strengthen their trust and confidence in your brand.

d) Do I need to participate? This is a guiding principle that all marketers must use in the current scenario. You cannot risk being perceived as a brand trying to monetise a crisis. So, don’t speak up unless it is absolutely essential.
Q) What have your key learnings been so far?

Agility is paramount to facilitate quick problem-solving and easy innovation. We all need to have the foresight to recognise the merits and longevity of new-age platforms and stay ahead of the curve, in terms of adoption. Both these factors will help brands stay relevant in the long run.

Q) Do you expect things to pick up in the second half of the year? Will consumer sentiments change, or will people continue to be careful about their spending?

In the immediate future, I expect discretionary spending to take a backseat as customers will focus more on financial planning for future aspirations. While perception of term insurance has evolved in the recent years, I see customers proactively considering savings plans like guaranteed products, which offer a risk-averse wealth-creation model. In current times of reducing interest rates, wherein traditionally preferred savings instruments like FDs may offer significantly lower returns as compared to guaranteed products, insurance is likely to see a spurt in customer interest.
Retail will witness an overhaul, but traditional outlets won’t lose their position on the network map: Anil Viswanathan, Mondelez India

- Like most businesses dependent on retail and delivery, Mondelez India’s business was impacted too in the first few weeks of the lockdown, considering the complete closure of retail stores, super markets and e-commerce.

- However, with the gradual relaxation of the lockdown, things are slowly picking up.

- Anil Viswanathan, Director – Marketing (Chocolates), Mondelez India tells us how the importance of agility has been one of his major learning from this experience. He also tells us all that the brand is doing to ensure business continuity and the safety of all its stakeholders.

- He also tells us the brand’s broad marketing strategy and how things will be different in the post-Covid world.

Dirk Van de Put, Mondelez’s global chairman and chief executive officer (CEO), during a recent investor call, spoke about the impact of the initial phase of the lockdown when the confectionary major saw almost zero sales, according to reports.
Mondelez, like most other organizations, experienced disruptions in the initial phase due to strict lockdown which led to widespread trade closures and operational and distribution difficulties.

However, with the easing of restrictions, shops opening up and online grocery platforms delivering again, people have been ordering more and more snacking products. As people spend more time at home and with family, there has been a steep increase in the demand of chocolates, biscuits and beverages.

According to Anil Viswanathan, Director – Marketing (Chocolates), Mondelez India, there has been a perceptible shift in buying patterns of consumers. “There has been an increase in demand for packaged food items. As most of us are stranded in the confines of four walls, in-home munching is gaining momentum and we foresee a spike in demand for snack items,” he said.

As things are slowly falling back in place, we caught up with Viswanathan to understand how Mondelez as a brand, dealt with the adverse situation. We also try to understand how the rest of the year looks. We also try to understand how the brand was able to stay connected with its consumers, and how things will be different, in the post-Covid world.

Excerpts:

Q) Considering the initial weeks of lockdown was a complete closure of trade and production units, how were the past few weeks for you as a brand? What has the brand’s focus been?
Over the last few months, we have all experienced the importance of availability, safety and convenience of packaged foods in times of lockdown. Our products are an integral part of the consumer’s grocery basket. We’ve seen consumers seek out our trusted brands like Cadbury, Oreo, Bournvita and Tang – especially as they spend more time with family at home and need treats like their favourite chocolate, biscuit or beverage.

Like all companies, we did experience some disruptions in the initial phase due to strict lockdowns that caused widespread trade closures as well as operational and distribution difficulties. However, we’re seeing significant easing of the situation on ground as our manufacturing scales up and our sales and distribution network can more easily service the market. I’m very proud of how our teams geared up to meet these unprecedented challenges
so, while we have experienced a short-term disruption, business is getting back on track.
Our focus through all of this has been on our people – firstly, protecting our sales and manufacturing colleagues who have been at the frontline even during the lockdown and ensuring they stay safe and secondly, through continuous engagement with our colleagues working remotely. Our utmost priority has always been to build a resilient system that will enable us to maintain good service levels across channels. Understanding that time and safety are the essence of the moment, we have cautiously configured ways such as direct to consumer storefront, strategic partnerships etc. We are also working directly with hypermarkets to negate any possible time lag or safety risks for the consumers.

As far as the exigent demands are concerned, we’re leveraging the strong relationship we have with our suppliers in order to maintain consistent supplies of critical raw materials and packaging. Additionally, we’re constantly working with the central and local government bodies to keep our factories open during the lockdown and have reconfigured our supply chain network to fortify our routes to reach the consumers. Correspondingly, our staff across factories and our agile workforce at the back-end are all working dedicatedly to maintain good service levels. Considering the pandemic and the challenges that followed, it is important more than ever to have consistency in production and a well-thought-out RTM (Routes-to-market) strategy to ensure shelf visibility across channels.

Q) As the pandemic led to people stuck inside their homes, did you witness any interesting consumer trends? Were people ordering more chocolates during the lockdown, maybe to tackle the stress?
We are starting to see a steep rise in demand for chocolates in the last one month after a slow start at the beginning of the lockdown. This is at the back of increased in-house snacking which has taken precedence as part of the ritual of spending more time with family or with oneself. Amplified social media influence has also triggered a trend wherein homebound consumers are now increasingly looking at ways to indulge in or create-at-home eating experiences and in doing so, they are predominantly relying on brands like Cadbury, for superior quality and the assurance of safety. This has resulted in increased demand which is further fuelled by the rise in online shopping. With lockdown and the new norms of social distancing, the market and the consumption pattern of consumers are significantly leaning towards e-commerce, as health and safety has become a non-negotiable priority for
people.

Q) With people getting more time to stay at home, almost everybody is experimenting with cooking/baking. We have seen a lot of brands take up this opportunity and use content marketing as an effective tool to stay connected with consumers by hosting cooking classes/using chefs to share recipes etc. How have you been communicating with your consumers during the lockdown?

Considering the ongoing scenario, we have reconfigured our communication strategy to adapt to this lockdown phase. We are leveraging our innovation arm to connect and communicate with our consumers in a light-hearted manner. With Cadbury 5Star, we directed the proposition towards a larger purpose of encouraging consumers to stay indoors by creating a distraction in the consumer’s life and help them breakaway from the monotony of daily life. We curated a Cadbury 5Star campaign namely #5StarDoNothingOutside challenge in order to generate some light-hearted content and at the same time equip consumers to better live the new way of life by reimagining their outdoor activities in the indoor space.

Cadbury Dairy Milk released a heart-warming film encouraging consumers to stay in and celebrate all those moments of joy with your loved ones.

On the other hand, with Oreo where playfulness was always a part of the brand’s DNA, the lockdown provided an opportunity to naturally advance the legacy and help consumers steer away from the pandemic gloom. Through the ‘#AtHomeWithOreo’ campaign, the brand wanted to showcase to the world that even if you are locked-down, the world is as playful as we make it.

As the lockdown continues, we aim to amplify our connect with the consumers through our campaigns and provide them avenues to keep their innovation plug sparking.

Q) How are you, as an organization, preparing to tackle the post-Covid world? The retail space might see a complete overhaul, so will you increase focus on online/e-commerce channels?

Although we are already complying with the new normal where daily processes and operations have significantly changed, we believe the reconfiguration in the coming months will be even more rigorous. However, any change in plans, partnerships and processes will be undertaken keeping the interest of our people and consumers at the core.
The retail space will witness an overhaul, but traditional outlets will not lose its position on the network map given the system’s ability to reach the deepest pockets of the country with convenience. However, the spotlight will be on e-commerce. There is a definite shift in the traditional shopping habit of individuals fueled by the fear of stepping out into crowded places, which favored the growing appetite for online shopping in the country. A trend which will be taking precedence even in the post COVID-19 world considering that health and safety will be a non-negotiable priority for people going forward. Keeping this in mind, we are strengthening our efforts in this space by changing the nature of our partnerships and pushing several of our sales and marketing activities through e-commerce platforms.

Having said that, we believe the role of physical retail stores cannot be negated and the traditional route will retain primacy in our layout, but the key to success will lie in building a resilient system by adopting a balanced approach amongst all conduits.

Q) Cadbury Dairy Milk has been using ‘Generosity’ as a global theme in its communication. You also launched limited-edition Thank You bars during the lockdown. How else have you been spreading this message to your consumers?

Purpose resides at the very core of our business which we are fostering today by evoking the spirit of generosity with Cadbury Dairy Milk.

Since the progressive journey of Cadbury Dairy Milk in India has been nothing but a blend of emotions for close to 75 years, the cultural infusion that the brand holds only made it a natural choice for us to push our generosity agenda. The aim was to address social issues by conceptualizing purpose-driven campaign. We started with the campaign ‘The Wrapper that Gives’ to address the issue of lack of resources in the rural areas. Through this campaign, consumers could click a photo of an empty wrapper of Cadbury Dairy Milk and choose to either keep the data offered for themselves or donate to Pratham Education Foundation who ensured that the collected data reached the right schools to carry out the internet enabled learning activities among children. The Purple Heart Campaign addressed the impending issue of cyber bullying. It was based on the idea of standing up for each other and expressing solidarity with victims by replying with the ‘Purple Heart’ emoticon in response to every troll comment on the victim’s timeline, along with the hashtag #HeartTheHate. And the recent example of infusing generosity has been the launch of limited-edition Cadbury Dairy Milk ‘Thank
You’re bar in recognition of the relentless spirit of health care workers who are battling it out at the frontline, as well as the ancillary staff, whether ambulance driver or IT personnel, who are enabling seamless operations at hospitals, at all times. The campaign came full circle with the part of sale proceeds committed towards health insurance policies of the daily wage earners, via a partnership with Nirmana, an NGO that works with the unorganized sector.

Q) While it might still be difficult to predict, do you anticipate business to get back on track within the next few months?
In the initial days of the lockdown, most industries witnessed a slump in sales and production, as consumers predominantly focused on staples and essential items. However, the packaged food industry has weathered the storm and has slowly started observing signs of an uptick in consumer demand. At Mondelez India, we have witnessed a perceptible shift in buying patterns of consumers and an increase in demand for packaged food items. As most of us are stranded in the confines of four walls, in-home munching is gaining momentum and we foresee a spike in demand for snack items. Consumers have started becoming more vigilant and cautious about safety and hygiene, hence naturally leaning towards brands they have trusted for years.

Q) What have been your key learnings from this experience so far?
We have learned that agility will be the primary factor dominating all operations for brands to align themselves with unanticipated challenges and opportunities that influences the consumer’s consumption/demand graph. Case in example being the increased in-home consumption which has not only led us to reinvent our supply chain network that now includes direct deliveries to housing societies, but also change our communication directive considering many consumers are taking reference from social media to create new eat experiences at home. Therefore, even the communication plans require a re-haul where with drastic change in customer’s motivation and paths to purchase, it has become imperative to adopt a focused approach to ensure that every message is relevant to the current times with empathy residing at its core. This will further help in reinforcing the emotional connect with our consumers who are closely observing the brand’s reaction and their critical role in combating the pandemic. Consequently, paving way for purpose-led marketing which will command better impact and resonance.
We expect the business to revive post 6 months: Anupam Mittal

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- While the wedding industry has come to a standstill due to the lockdown, Anupam Mittal, Founder & CEO, Shaadi.com tells us how they are ensuring the matchmaking industry doesn’t impact too much for the lockdown.

- Mittal talks about all the things the organization is doing to ensure its seamless functioning while also innovating to bring people together in the midst of a lockdown.

It’s been over a month since we have been locked up inside our homes, venturing out only if absolutely essential. It has changed the way we lived our lives, went about our professional lives and it is bound to have a far-reaching impact on how we live in the future too, in the post-Covid world.

Despite the obvious cons that the pandemic brought with it, there has been a silver lining to the entire situation. Most organizations have been thrown into the middle of a crisis and it is proving to be a trial by fire. Businesses have had to put their thinking caps on and innovate, to be relevant in a world where consumers are stuck at home and a lot of them are doing a good job, testing their own agility and adaptability.

While there are some segments that haven’t been impacted as badly as a few others, there are some segments, like the live events space, cinema, retail etc, that thrive on human presence and have been majorly impacted.
Another segment that has been obviously impacted is matrimonial sites. For a business that thrives on bringing people together so that they can meet up, get to know each other and eventually decide if they want to live their lives together, making all this happen while under a lockdown has been a challenge. However, Shaadi.com took up this challenge head-on and has been coming up with innovative solutions to make sure that people on the lookout for love and a life partner aren’t left stranded.

We recently caught up with Anupam Mittal, Founder & CEO, Shaadi.com to understand how they are sticking to their idea of togetherness in times of social distancing. He also tells us about their marketing campaigns and the steps they are taking to ensure that the consumer experience on their platform remains seamless.

Edited excerpts:

Q) The past few weeks have been very difficult for the world in general and businesses have had to rethink how they do business. For an organization like yours, what have been the functional challenges?

The impact of this pandemic has truly been unprecedented and some of our biggest challenges revolve around the radical changes we are seeing in human behaviour. For one, consumer habits have changed overnight, and we’ve had to reorient towards the new consumer in a very short period of time. What was once a smart business decision, could now be seen as one lacking empathy.

Relevance, empathy and compassion have taken centerstage in this large-scale humanitarian crisis. We are working extensively on employee wellbeing and have a dedicated team driving this. We have made 3 services available to employees for free – counselling, medical services and fitness training. We have also put an empathy fund in place that employees facing economic hardship, can draw down upon. For our users, we have added the lockdown days as free days to their subscription.

Working from home also comes with its own set of challenges. While it might be comfortable for a lot of us, there are several people who live in small homes and don’t have access to the most reliable internet connections. Providing them all the necessary tools to perform their duties seamlessly has been fairly challenging.
Q) ‘Weddings from Home’ is an interesting and innovative concept. What was the thought behind it? What kind of reception has it seen so far?

This initiative finds its roots in our promise of togetherness, and in times of social distancing this is our way of delivering on the promise. We wanted to do something contextual and we felt WFH hit all the right notes – In India, weddings are a major production that are planned way ahead of time. So, there was the practical consideration for people having to reschedule their wedding.
It also demonstrated a victory of the human spirit of sorts by cocking a snook at the Corona Virus. Saying, in a way, come do your best but I will not succumb.
Finally, it sent a strong social message that if some can get married from home, the least others can do is stay at home and save human lives.
Based on above, we decided that it was time for the Big Fat Indian Lockdown Wedding.

The interest amid users has been overwhelming. We’ve got a bunch of people reaching out to us, thanking us for what we’re doing. We have already done two weddings, one on the 14th & 19th April and we have another one finalized for 8th May. We are receiving about 4 – 5 requests every day.

Q) The wedding industry has now come to a complete standstill and it might affect you as an organization too. Even if the lockdown is lifted, it might still take a long time for things to get back to normal. What plans do you have in place to minimize business impact on your organization?

We are in the matchmaking business, so not directly or as significantly impacted. Our registration and platform engagement metrics continue to hold well and we expect them to do so in the time to come. Having said that, we expect some parts of the business to stay muted and in anticipation of this we’ve taken some important steps as an organization.

Avoid predicting the future – Stay agile and operate with short term cadence
Move to a Zero Based Budgeting approach – Trim out all the unnecessary fat in expenses and invest in aspects that drive growth
Keep your ears to the ground. Stay connected with the consumer and keep pace with their changing habits.
Act with empathy and compassion across the board, be it employees, partners or consumers.
Q) How is the 'Wedding from Home' benefiting small-scale wedding industry vendors?

April and May is the wedding season and is one of busiest times for all wedding vendors. However, due to the lockdown and by virtue of weddings getting postponed indefinitely, a lot of small vendors are at risk of going out of jobs. Initiatives such as Weddings From Home can prove to be instrumental in giving them a livelihood despite the lockdown. For instance- Prius Sharan Tripathi, the priest conducted the wedding via video calling, while Mumbai-based makeup artist Chriselle Baptista has been roped in to help with makeup through tutorials and Faridabad-based singer and performer Vanita Sharma was hired to play the dhol during the sangeet. While the scale of impact is limited at this point in time, every little bit of support counts.

Q) Are there any innovations that you introduced during the lockdown period to help matchmaking from home a seamless experience?

Yes, we introduced some and a few are in the pipeline. In fact, one of the first things we did was to actually waive off membership fees during the lockdown period for premium members. This has played a pivotal role in improving the matchmaking experience for many since it ensures lesser friction in the process. Our tech team is also working round the clock to deliver some tech interventions that can materially improve the matchmaking experience of our members. We expect these to play out in a week or two.

Q) What have your key learnings from this experience been so far?

Agility over Experience: Your years of experience are largely nullified in such exceptional times and staying agile drives a lot more value for the business. Togetherness is a sentiment that is timeless and all the more relevant in a crisis.
Communicate constantly and clearly – Be transparent with your team, with your members and with the people at large. And talk to them at regular intervals, it alleviates some of their anxiety.

Q) When it comes to communicating with consumers during a period of crisis, it is extremely important to make sure your brand communications don’t come across as opportunistic or insensitive. How have you ensured that during these past few weeks?
We’ve always had our ears to the ground and our orientation towards compassion and empathy have held us in good stead. One of the first things we did was to ready a document that would reflect our Brand Purpose in the times of Covid-19. Every single employee was asked to imbibe these values and it had to reflect in their approach, regardless of their function. We’ve also taken the route of staying optimistic and communicating positive human stories in an otherwise morbid world. Powerful human stories are proving to be invaluable in driving positive sentiment and if your brand can be the creator of positive human stories and drive genuine community impact, it will be remembered by the people long after this is behind us. Some of our campaigns such as Weddings From Home or Dil Toh Mil Hi Sakte Hai are a reflection of these amazing human stories.

Q) How large will the impact of the lockdown be on the overall wedding industry? Do you see things picking up in the later half of the year, if things slowly start getting back to normal?

If Covid-19 is entirely behind us, then yes, I expect there to be a strong resurgence in the wedding industry. The question that looms large is, will this be entirely behind us? Will we be allowed large scale gatherings once again? No one really knows.

On an average, a wedding in India employs 200 people, many of which are small-time businesses. It’s going to be incredibly challenging for them to survive this downturn though. I’ve been reading reports about how several people in this industry are moving out of the business and are opening kirana stores or other such businesses which aren’t as badly impacted by the pandemic. While the big wedding planners might survive this, it is going to be incredibly hard for the small-time decorator or mehendi artist to make ends meet, solely on this business for the next few months. Post 6 months, we expect the business to revive.
We are looking at doubling our revenue by June 2020: Arjun Mohan

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- While different kinds of industries try to grapple with the current situation and resort to lay offs and salary cuts, upGrad, on the other hand, is on its way to becoming a ₹500 crore brand by next month.

- upGrad’s Arjun Mohan shares with us a few reasons why upGrad has seen an uptick in downloads by over 75%, its marketing strategy and plans to earmark ₹500 million for 2/3 acquisitions in FY 21.

With the nationwide lockdown, everyday hustle-bustle has come to a complete halt. We have more time for ourselves now than ever before and people are using this time to discover and hone their talent. They are getting experimental and extremely creative, using this time to gain new skills inside the four walls of their houses. It has brought online education to the forefront and helped accelerate its growth in India.

As a result, upGrad, a higher-education platform, has seen a 75% increase in app downloads and is on track to becoming a ₹500 crore brand by next month. In Q4, the app recorded over 100% Q-o-Q jump, as it expanded its portfolio two-fold by adding new programs under its Management and Data verticals.

We caught up with Arjun Mohan, India CEO, upGrad to further understand its marketing strategy, mantra behind its sustainable business and revenue goals for this quarter.
Q. How has the last month been for you? How have you observed the consumer behaviour changing? Have you witnessed any uptick in demand?

The novel Coronavirus has brought online education to the forefront, which otherwise was playing second fiddle to the offline model. Majority of India has become accustomed to the new normal, which indeed is a catalyst in this situation. Individuals have become extremely alert about the collateral damage (fears of job loss and insolvency) that they may suffer and are looking forward to utilising the additional time on hand meaningfully, by opting for upskilling options.

We have launched the largest cohort (batch) with 4,000 learners in March and have doubled our course capacity in April, to cope with the surge. We have moved to monthly cohorts which earlier was at a quarterly level with each class now having a peak of 1000 learners at a given time. Additionally, with over 6 lakh downloads till date, our Android mobile App (upGrad App) houses professional communities in the field of Product Management, Data Science & Machine Learning, MBA, and Digital Marketing with live discussions, exchange of ideas and opportunities within each community. In these communities, engagement in terms of comments and shares increased by 143% in the same period. Overall, the app downloads increased by over 75% after the lockdown was announced on March 24 this year.

Also, with remote working coming into force, we have witnessed a growing intent towards business & management programs. There's been an increase in total interests and enrollments we have received for our Global MBA programs, which we have launched earlier this year in partnership with the renowned Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) and Deakin University. These programs have contributed to 40% of the growth recorded in April.

Q. Have you introduced any new courses/tools to leverage this surge in demand?

We have now doubled our course capacity and moved to monthly cohorts (batches) which earlier was at a quarterly level, to take on the surge in demand from working professionals. Each batch now has a peak of 1000 learners at a given time.
Recently after the COVID-19 outbreak, we are allowing learners to start a university-certified MBA, Master’s or Diploma program at an initial cost of ₹10,000 only, and experience it till June 15, 2020. We have received more than 1,00,000 interests and over 1000 enrolments, so far. Additionally, we also launched a wide range of free programs, which offer 350+ cumulative hours of content in terms of recorded sessions, quizzes, live lectures, projects, etc., and have reported more than 26,000 enrolments, till date.

Q. Do you expect this uptick to continue even after the lockdown ends?

upGrad recently launched the whitepaper with FICCI in which research indicated that 92% of learning leaders have confirmed the adoption of online learning journeys from 68% in the pre corona period. Most of these are in building digital skills in the areas of Data Sciences, AI, ML, Full Stack Software Engineering, Digital Marketing and MBA courses.

Even before COVID-19, online education in India was on the rise, and people were making a gradual shift from offline to online. However, with COVID-19 hitting the world suddenly, the pandemic has steered everyone towards online learning, making it mainstream rather than just another option for learning and upskilling. Online education has hit the fast track and with various universities and colleges adopting edtech platforms, we think the demand will be sustained even after the COVID-19 era. The comfort, safety, and flexibility offered by online education will continue to steer the demand.

Q. How does this quarter look like for you? Do you still see upGrad meeting its goals?

The current COVID-19 situation is a net positive for online education. In Q4, upGrad recorded over 100% Q-O-Q jump, as it expanded its portfolio twofold by adding new programs under its Management and Data verticals. We have witnessed a 72% growth in booked revenue in April and touched the 53K paid learners mark at the ARPU of ₹ 2.5 lakhs, highest across the online education landscape. We have also successfully crossed the mark of 5,00,000 learners, who are largely working professionals, from the South Indian cities of Bengaluru, Hyderabad, followed by Mumbai, Delhi NCR, and Pune.

Additionally, this quarter we have partnered with the Top B- School - IMT Ghaziabad for an 18-month online program, followed by a job guarantee by
upGrad; we have also partnered with the renowned O.P. Jindal Global University for 2 new Degree programs— a 1-year LLM in Corporate & Financial Law and a 2-year MBA in Digital Finance and Banking.

Therefore, to conclude, I would like to add that with our revolutionary initiatives, and well-structured programs that help professionals’ transition in their career, we look forward to doubling our revenue by June 2020 and crossing an annual run rate of Rs 500 crore.

Q. How do you see the online learning sector shaping up for the lockdown?

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the education landscape across the globe. Even in India, online education has proved its robustness as compared to the offline institutes that have been shut for an infinite period. Owing to its flexibility and feasibility, learners in the coming times would prefer to take up online programs from the comfort and safety of their houses. Also, as the trend continues, with more and more renowned universities adopting e-learning and investments reducing in infrastructure, the cost of education will substantially be reduced. Therefore, to conclude, I would like to add that the online learning sector is anyway on an upward trajectory and will continue to rise in the future, making it the way forward.

Q. You had announced last month that you are looking at acquiring companies. How is that search coming along? Have you found your partners yet?

Capitalizing on the boom for the online learning sector, both worldwide and in India, we have earmarked ₹500 million for 2/3 acquisitions in FY 21. We are in active discussions and have also shortlisted a few prospective companies. However, it is too early to commit who these companies are, as we are still in the process to meet some great entrepreneurs and understand their vision.

Q. Tell us a bit about your recent campaign?

The new #AageKiSoch rap song, is the sequel to upGrad’s upskill anthem by the same name which was launched last month and reached 30 million individuals. This quirky piece aims to inspire young Indians to stay productive and upskill themselves during the nationwide lockdown. The latest music video is a fresh take on how professionals and college students now have
extra time in hand and can use it meaningfully to enhance their professional growth, at large.

upGrad through its marketing effort is trying to shed the stereotypical perception of education brands being serious. These two sets of videos (last ones and this one) bear testimony to the fact that creativity and storytelling is at the centre of our marketing communication. We used animated graphics for the latest music video - features possible without any shoot that yet turn out to be a visual treat.

Q. In these uncertain and stressful days, how are you communicating with your audience?

With the remote working concept, individuals and working professionals have been deprived of a very important aspect of human civilization - which is socializing. To minimise the adverse effects of the widespread pandemic on the psychological health of individuals, we had launched a ‘COVID-19 Awareness Program’ last month. It was a 5-day long online program, wherein the domain experts gave live talks on safeguarding one’s finances, and career along with mental health in the current scenario. Also, expert sessions were hosted live, allowing for active interactions and query resolution for the ~4500 participants who participated, completely free of cost.

Additionally, we understand that the remote working has also brought other side effects to the forefront, like lethargy, lack of interest in work, monotony, etc. Therefore, to motivate individuals to use this extra time on hand, meaningfully and to promote productivity, we have launched #AageKiSoch campaign last month, and have successfully reached 30 million individuals.

Q. What does your media plan look like? Which medium gets your lion’s share?

At the beginning of the year, we announced a budget of Rs 175 crore as a part of our media plan for the year 2020, wherein we have Rs 100 crore allotted for television and Rs 75 crore for digital. Both the mediums have seen higher traction during the pre and post COVID-19 outbreak and therefore, we are continuing with it.

Q. How big is your team right now and how is upGrad helping its employees
deal with lockdown blues and anxiety?

Happy employees are more engaged and productive. For us, the emotional wellness of our employees is crucial as it is the driving force to make people the best of themselves.

Boredom and loneliness can impact mental well-being and therefore, productivity as well, if not nipped in the bud. At upGrad, we have tied up with YourDOST as our Employee Wellness Partner to provide expert counselling to all our 1200+ employees with round the clock support on career, relationships, work-life balance or anything else that bothers them. In times like these, with such tie-ups, we strive to support our employees in every way possible.
As marketers, our focus should be on improving quality of content and adding value to our customer’s lives: Arpan Biswas

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- In today's interview, Arpan Biswas, VP – Marketing, Housejoy tells us how the startup adapted to this new way of functioning and all that it has been doing to keep all its stakeholders safe and connected with the brand.

Since the government decided to impose a lockdown on the country to curb the spread of Covid-19, businesses and organizations across the country, and the world, have been impacted. During this time, its organizations that have managed to stay agile and open to evolving how they function have been the ones that have been less impacted.

Over the past few weeks we have read of a lot of organizations and brands that have diversified their businesses, in an attempt to stay relevant to the dynamic times. Among many other examples, we saw Housejoy, a tech-driven construction, renovation, interiors, and home maintenance company, launching a service for the delivery of essentials.

The startup was able to pull this off right at the start of the lockdown, when people were stuck at home and were struggling to get essentials delivered as supply chain had been impacted too. This was a good example of how the startup (whose core offering in the construction and maintenance space came to a complete halt) innovated quickly to make itself relevant to the consumer’s evolving needs by expanding its offerings.
We caught up with Arpan Biswas, VP – Marketing, Housejoy recently, to understand how challenging diversification under the lockdown was, and what kind of reception they have seen in the past few weeks. We also ask him what his learnings as a marketer from this whole experience has been and how Housejoy, as an organization, is gearing up to function efficiently in the post-Covid world.

Excerpts:

Q) How has the last 2 months been for Housejoy as an organization? Were you prepared as an organization to make the transition to WFH?
Just like most other startups, the pandemic did have an impact on Housejoy and our operations given that our construction and maintenance services came to a complete halt. Now, we are back on track and all our businesses across all cities have resumed, except in containment zones. Our teams are back in office and our construction services have resumed.

Though we were not completely ready for WFH initially, our tech and HR teams facilitated the transition and top management ensured the teams are well engaged with regular virtual catchups.

Q) Your core offering is in the sphere of construction, renovation, interiors, and home maintenance. However, the lockdown has forced most work in the sphere to come to a complete standstill. How do you anticipate the next few months will pan out for you as an organization?
Yes, construction and home maintenance do not fall under essentials. Hence, our businesses came to a standstill. During lockdown, we encouraged our construction and interiors customers to get their house designs finalized. We have also been working on building confidence among our existing customers and keeping them updated about our activities. As WFH will become a norm in the future, we foresee demand for home offices and an overhaul of how new spaces will be constructed. We anticipate a high demand for home maintenance, fumigation, and beauty services post the lockdown.

Post easing of the stringent lockdowns, demand has picked up and our B2C business is getting more orders vis-à-vis pre-Covid period, partially due to the pent-up demand. We are also seeing considerable traction from construction and renovation.
When our core businesses were halted, we took several initiatives like Housejoy mart to ensure customers get super-fast grocery delivery and our idle service providers get a mode to earn. Additionally, we also collaborated with the Karnataka state government in their effort to combat the pandemic by offering free fumigation in public places. We recently joined hands with leading healthcare brands like Portea Medical, SRL Diagnostics, Biognosys and BAF to set up mobile COVID-19 testing camps across Bengaluru to arrest the spread of the virus.

Q) How have you been communicating with your consumers during this time? As a marketer, what has your priority been, in terms of the marketing communications going out?
Our external communication is focused on the essentials and customer’s needs like fumigation, grocery delivery, etc. We have stopped all spends on traditional mediums and primarily focusing on digital as a medium to generate demand and educate customers of our offerings. Within digital, the focus is on intent-based searches and quirky content to engage with our consumers. Additionally, we have reached out to all our existing construction customers on the delays and provided them assurance on their investments. A large chunk of our content is dedicated towards informing our customers about the measures our service providers have taken to keep themselves and our customer’s safe.

Internally, we are trying to keep the team’s morale high by sharing all the media buzz we have received, the deals we have cracked. These are testing times for all employees and it’s important to assure them about the financial health of their organization.

Q) What was your media mix pre-COVID and how did that change during the lockdown? Do you think you will tweak your media mix even after the lockdown is called off? Has digital seen most of your marketing investments?
Prior to the COVID pandemic, it was a mix of traditional and digital. However, during the lockdown, digital marketing and PR have been our go-to medium. We are implementing and leaning toward strengthening our digital marketing strategies. Our strategy has been to engage customers with quirky and interesting themes and messaging, and we will continue to do this going forward.

Q) Did content marketing play a big role for you during the lockdown?
Content marketing is one of our focus areas and our single-minded objective on digital is to improve the shareability of our content. We wish to keep our construction and interiors customers updated with newest technologies, trendy designs, and latest ways to upgrade their lifestyles. For our on-demand customers, the focus is to educate them of the WHO-suggested safety measures we have implemented and keep them aligned to our new offerings like car sanitization and labor on hire.

Q) You recently entered the grocery-delivery space. Was it a natural extension for the brand? What kind of uptake has this service seen during the lockdown? How have you been marketing this offering?
Expansion to grocery-delivery was a natural extension as we have the necessary tech and supply for the same. Our primary focus through this initiative has been to ensure work continuity for our teams and helping our customers in this hour of crisis. We partnered with various Kirana stores and helped them in expanding their business.

This is a very new field for us, and we are evaluating the business model currently. Once that is set, we plan to invest in marketing.

Q) What have your key learnings from the COVID-19 experience been, both as a marketer and as an organization?
As an organization, we have learnt that flexibility is one of the biggest virtues and we have exhibited the same. We entered two new categories – healthcare and delivery services – keeping in mind the growing demand. We have also realized that great companies are built when people stick together in such times of crisis. Our employees have exhibited immense character, took complete ownership and executed some tough projects.

As marketers, we have learnt that marketing is not about big budgets. Focus should be on improving quality of content and adding value to our customer’s lives. The distribution is taken care of by customers.

Q) While the lockdown might be lifted soon, things might still take a few more months to settle down. How are you going to cope with the post-COVID world? How are you preparing as an organization?
Though the lockdown will be lifted, the fear of transmission will still loom large. There will be some permanent changes in customer’s behavior and way of consumption. We are trying to keep our eyes and ears open to understand and validate the changes and work on ways to connect with them better. There is no denying the fact that we must adapt to this new normal and we are doing everything possible to ensure things run smoothly.
There’s a surge of first-timers who will be transacting online during the lockdown: Chandramohan Mehra

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- In today’s interview, Chandramohan Mehra, CMO, Bajaj Allianz Life and Bajaj Allianz General Insurance shared how they have altered their marketing strategy to surf through the challenges posed today.

- Mehra told us how the brand is using digital media at its best to connect with its consumers.

- It has also on-boarded fitness experts to keep their audience motivated and remind them to build a strong immune system to survive in today’s challenging environment.

In wake of COVID-19, the anticipation of staying at home for a prolonged period of time may have become overwhelming. Marketers have, ergo, started listening to social media conversations, drawing insights and building their campaigns to support their customers in this journey.

These unprecedented days have posed a lot of challenges and questions in our minds. People are therefore re-evaluating their financial investments, health insurance policies and have started taking good care of their health.

To help its consumers adjust in this new normal, Bajaj Allianz Life has empowered its investment advisory to make pitch calls through WhatsApp, webinars, and has created video content, blogs to solve the common queries.
The life insurer has also on-boarded fitness experts like Mandira Bedi and Anushka Panjwani to keep their audience motivated and remind them to maintain their physical and mental well-being.

We caught up with Chandramohan Mehra, CMO, Bajaj Allianz Life and Bajaj Allianz General Insurance to further understand how they have altered their marketing strategy to stay relevant today and ask for a few things he has learned about operating in today’s volatile environment.

Excerpts:

Q) How have the past few weeks been for the brand, considering the country has been in a lockdown?

It has been a challenging time for all of us, yet I’d say the constraints faced during the lockdown have helped us identify several opportunities. Insights gained from customers, employees and partners during this time will help us make relevant interventions in our customer experience journey.

Q) What is your marketing strategy during the period of COVID-19? How have you tried to build a connection with your audience during these tough times?

Through our advanced digital services including WhatsApp services, chat bot and customer self-servicing portals, our focus has been to cater to servicing needs of customers. In context of market volatility, we have intensified our investment advisory through Webinars, blogs and video content aiding long term decisions for our customers. To ensure physical and emotional well-being of our customers, we have partnered with an array of fitness experts to bring live streaming of “Fitness from Home” on our social media pages.

Q) How is your brand making a difference in terms of spreading awareness?

In these unusual times, we are doing our bit towards providing access to fitness regimes from experts, to our employees, partners, agents, customers and many others, for them to stay physically and emotionally healthy. Towards this, we are offering LIVE streaming sessions on Yoga, Meditation, Wellness on our social media platforms, by renowned fitness experts to keep
people fit and active from the safe confines of their homes. This is in addition to the educational ‘Keep Calm, Stay Invested,’ engagement series with our investments team that provide relevant investment advisory to our customers, partners, advisors and employees to manage their investments in these times.

Q) TV viewership and digital engagement continue to increase, where are you betting your money?

Choice of medium is a function of the marketing task at hand. Obviously, a strategic integrated strategy will get desired yields.

Q) What are the few key learnings for you as a brand custodian in the last few weeks?

There is a surge of first-timers who are and will be transacting or buying online during the lockdown – be it for groceries, medicines, telecommunications or insurance. I believe this trend will continue in the insurance industry and we will see an increased usage and reliance on digital tools by both financial intermediaries and customers across profiles. As more and more stakeholders take to the digital platforms, it is essential for brands now to make the online buying experience of consumers frictionless, and sometimes even assisted in case of first-timers.
This is a great opportunity for enterprises to be brave and invest in innovative communication approaches: Karan Kumar

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- In today’s interview, Karan Kumar, CMO, DLF Limited tells us about the impact on the real estate market and how the brand has been navigating these difficult times.

- He also talks to us about the brand’s marketing strategies and the steps it has been taking to reassure all stakeholders during these adverse times.

The ongoing Coronavirus outbreak and the resulting lockdown has led to consumer sentiments hitting an all time low. While a lot of segments have come to a complete standstill, even real estate is bearing the brunt. Recent surveys and reports around the sector have revealed that both residential and commercial real estate will be hit adversely.

The real estate sector is expected to witness low demand and might even find it difficult to launch new projects or finish ongoing projects. Experts believe that the sector will continue to see a slowdown even after the lockdown is called off.

While Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her latest speech offered some relief to the sector when she said the COVID-19 disruption would be treated as force majeure under Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act provisions, it will still take the sector to come out of the slump. As a part of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat mission, the FM also announced that registration and project completion timelines would be extended by six months.
We recently caught up with Karan Kumar, CMO, DLF Limited to understand how the lockdown has impacted the brand as well as the overall real estate industry.

Edited excerpts:

Q) The Covid 19 lockdown has been challenging for most sectors. For real estate, what are the challenges and how are you working around these difficulties?

Like for any sector, the biggest challenge right now is to try and comprehend the revised consumer expectations from the category and for every enterprise to evaluate how well they are tooled to meet them. These expectations will fundamentally impact product design and processes that govern its presentation and sale. Specific to our category, we need to understand increased physical distancing will impact design of new homes, offices and malls. Another aspect is the incidence of working from home. Although precipitated by the current pandemic, I am sure the concept will find much greater acceptance than ever before. What is the import of this while we plan our next set of products and how we incorporate this as a core utility as part of new designs is also something all real estate developers will have to evaluate and factor in as part of their plans.

Q) Has the current situation made you innovate and think out of the box, in terms of how you communicate with your consumers?

At one level it has and at another, it has encouraged us to strengthen certain existing capabilities which needed greater reinforcement. Improved and more immersive customer engagement while the product, the buyer and the seller continue to operate in discontinuous and remote locations is a challenge which we need to face with fervor and innovation. We are learning all the time and piloting initiatives that we think can provide successful and sustainable solutions in this regard. Engagement via social and digital media is also stronger now than ever before. So this is a great opportunity for enterprises to be brave and invest in communication approaches that are new, offering heightened levels of consumer engagement.

Q) Real estate spends big on OOH, Print, two mediums that have been badly hit. How have you modified your marketing strategy during these unprecedented times?
The entire industry is trying to reassess and prioritize overall cash flows, marketing included. The first priority is to clear all and any old outstanding amounts that are payable to various partners. Second, to provide financial security to all stakeholders employed either directly or indirectly with the business and this includes the daily wage earners. Only after that are we arriving at spends that are necessary to ensure stakeholder communication and engagement. We are trying to explore innovative and efficient ways to drive this engagement – both to communicate as also to interact virtually from remote locations given the imperatives of physical distancing. So while there spends on conventional media platforms have been impacted but investments continue to be made to develop a more robust and long term engagement strategy in response to situation all of us find ourselves in.

Q) What have your key learnings from this experience been?

The one thing that has been reiterated is that especially during times of crisis, our ears need to be as close to the ground as possible. Understanding the impact on various stakeholders (consumers included) and how it will influence new consumption behavior is critical. That in turn triggers critical reevaluation of the current product design and mix as also reevaluation of the processes that currently aid their delivery. Changes that may need to be made to both would be derived out of this fresh understanding and such changes must be implemented with speed and clear purpose. Such incidents also nudge everyone to retool themselves, explore innovations and alternate approaches that help at identifying new breakout opportunities.

Q) How long do you think the effects of the lockdown will take to wear off for a brand like DLF? What have your crisis management strategies been?

We are still studying the medium to long term impact of this crisis on the sector. I suspect it will be a couple of quarters by when consumer sentiment towards purchase will show any sign of rebound. That said, I am equally sure that brands like DLF who are trusted by consumers because of its proven legacy of delivering on commitment made will have a head start during this period of rebound and restart.

Q) How are you ensuring you keep communicating with consumers effectively and that your efforts aren’t seen as opportunistic as it is easy for consumers to misread a brand’s marketing efforts during times like these?
Our communication has largely been around the measures we have been undertaking to keep our immediate and extended community protected. Medically, financially and from any other aspect that we can control. Our language is one of honesty and transparency and our intent is only for all stakeholders to be reassured in the knowledge that DLF is here to stay and will stand by them, caring as much as possible for them during this unfortunate and unprecedented pandemic.
We invested the lockdown time and efforts in enhancing our consumer connect: Kashyap Vadapalli

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Kashyap Vadapalli, Chief Marketing Officer, Pepperfry shares with us how the brand is preparing to open up its stores and why communicating with your audience in times of distress is extremely important.

Pepperfry, which started as a pure online portal, felt the need to launch a studio only after two years of its existence. Its success story is a testimonial to the booming sector of virtual trading, which helped the brand to thrive even in today’s volatile market.

However, since furniture wasn’t listed under essentials, the first two months of lockdown was a challenging period for Pepperfry and its employees. Now that markets are opening up, the brand is gearing to deliver furniture in key cities and non-containment zones.

Pepperfry also saw its social media engagement rising up because all employees are working from home and there was a need for office infrastructure -- work desks, chairs, etc. While the brand couldn’t deliver its products, it kept in touch with its consumers by solving their queries online and offered tips for furniture maintenance, DIY interior décor, safe ways to rearrange your furniture and so on.

Kashyap Vadapalli, Chief Marketing Officer, Pepperfry, has seen the brand growing from scratch. He shared with us some marketing lessons he has picked up from today’s challenging environment, what kind of precautions the brand has taken to open up its stores, future of retail industry and changing consumer behaviour.
Q. How challenging has the last month been for you as a brand?

This period has been challenging for most organisations, but the situation has also given us the opportunity to re-analyse our business, innovate to adapt and explore newer ways to connect with our consumers.

Pepperfry is a unique omni-channel marketplace and our offline presence through Studio Pepperfry has been a key consumer touchpoint. However, given the nation-wide lockdown, we suspended operations at all our Studios towards the end of March. With the recent relaxations, we are adopting an extremely cautious approach to reopen the studios gradually after ensuring complete sanitization and putting in place other preventive measures.

Another challenge that we faced was the disruption in logistics. Since furniture was not listed under the essentials category, our warehouses were not functional and deliveries were halted. However, markets are now opening up for ecommerce and non-essentials, albeit with restrictions. We have received permission to start delivery services in key cities and have also resumed operations at most of our warehouses.

As a brand, we invested our efforts behind enhancing our consumer connect by engaging with them on topical subjects and relevant content. In line with the current situation and consumer behaviour, we aimed to address their existing needs. For instance, given that several people are working from home, there was a need for good home office infrastructure - a proper chair, desk, storage options for work-ware and units to keep their printers, etc. In these last few weeks, our focus has been to help them achieve this set-up, educate them in simple ways to maintain their homes and even tips on using interior design to strengthen mental health, in these stressful times. We, therefore, witnessed an uptick in the engagement level across our platforms and channels.

Q. What has your marketing strategy been during the lockdown? Have you changed your media mix, investing more on platforms like Digital since a few other mediums like OOH/Print have been suffering due to the lockdown?

Now more than ever, consumers are using digital platforms not only for recreation but also from an awareness and knowledge-building standpoint. Therefore, we opted to emphasize our owned platforms, like our website, email marketing, push notifications and social media platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram.
We used this opportunity to drive a shift in our messaging to make it more relevant, interesting and engaging. We continued with our consumer-focused conversations, aimed at addressing their challenges and interests like tips for furniture maintenance, DIY interior décor, safe ways to rearrange your furniture and so on. We have seen an increase in consumer engagement, through these themes. Additionally, in line with our brand personality of being pioneering, intelligent and conscious we looked at content that helped the audience get up to date with the latest in lifestyle choices with a focus on home through a series of expert interactions, we use interesting formats such as quizzes, trivia to keep the curiosity alive and to achieve high engagement levels.

Q. A lot of brands have started doing webinars, have you joined the bandwagon? What kind of response have you seen around it?

Being a B2C brand that enjoys a strong consumer connect, we have actually focused on hosting fun live masterclasses on our social media platforms with our design experts, as opposed to webinars that are better suited for B2B brands. These masterclasses have been curated around consumer-facing content like interior design, making the right furniture choices, selecting the right mattress, creating home–office set–ups suitable to one’s profession, etc. and have seen a very healthy engagement rate.

Q. Have you seen any changes in consumer behaviour?

With work from home now emerging as the new normal, we have certainly witnessed a rising interest and disproportionate growth in some categories. Home–office related items – desks, chairs etc., items that address ergonomic needs as well as products like beds and mattresses (as several people end up working on their beds) have seen a lot of traction.

There has also been an increase in engagement on our website. We have seen an upsurge of 40–50 per cent in the time spent by consumers on the site and page depth. This indicates that visitors are now far more indulgent – they are not just browsing but are taking the time to do their research well, which can result in conversions post the lockdown.
Q. How are you utilising this time to upskill your employees? Have you introduced any mental health awareness and/or health care programs?

We have used this time to expand our training and knowledge-building measures, not just vertically within teams but also cross-functionally between departments. Our in-house subject matter experts have been hosting sessions for employees across categories like marketing, logistics, category management, supply chain and others. This cross-functional training has helped everyone within the company gain a much stronger understanding of our product propositions, customer profiles and marketing strategy to give our consumers the best possible experience.

Our leadership team has also been hands-on throughout this insight process. Our CEO, Ambareesh Murty, has been brainstorming with our marketing team to understand how we can improve our social media strategy in particular and overall marketing approach in general.

Q. How are you preparing yourself for when things come back to normal? Because we think it will not be the same.

Being an agile and flexible organization, we have introduced several changes in our way of working in order to adapt to the evolving situation. Working remotely has shown benefits - increase in productivity and reduction in travel time. Members have quickly adopted technology and applications like Slack and Zoom, among others, which have enabled us to conduct effective meetings, share documents and maintain a steady workflow. We have developed and strengthened our ability to operate in a distributed fashion in the last few weeks, making this new approach a great choice.

From a consumer perspective, we see a definite shift in behaviour and inclination towards digital consumption. We believe they will come to rely heavily on e-commerce, especially given the apprehensions around safety in entering physical markets. We have always been a digital-first brand and we plan to fortify our online strategies further to cater to this change.

Q. What are some of the key learnings you have picked up in this unusual period?
We have learnt that we can function with great efficiency, even remotely – our teams have been just as productive as they were while working together in office. Furthermore, while we have always been well-prepared with a knack of planning for the week, the month and the quarter, the teams have now translated this into effective planning for the day.

We’ve spent more time in analyzing and understanding consumer behavior on our platforms. We plan to accelerate the usage of this learning and data to approach customers with more targeted offerings. In an evolving consumer and business environment, we aim to leverage sharper and automated targeting to drive both engagement and conversions.

**Q. How do you think the retail industry will shape up after this period?**

The change in consumption patterns and behaviours will lead to considerable changes in the industry. The way we view a customer journey is going to evolve from singular funnels of online or offline to a truly omni-channel funnel and added to it will be newer channels such as telephone and video consultation with collaborative tools.

For instance, for a complex need like modular furniture, consumers would typically visit the store, try out different designs and items. Today, they may still continue to do so but in a reduced capacity. Consumers would rather opt to use collaborative tools for virtual sessions to view features on their laptops or other devices.

These newer channels are likely to become much more relevant and important. This is where the new wave of disruption will arise.
The pandemic has made me believe that while marketers need to stay relevant, they cannot be opportunistic: Manasi Narasimhan

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Manasi Narasimhan, VP and Head, Marketing and Communications, South Asia, Mastercard tells us how the brand has been communicating with its target audience and letting them know about the benefits of contactless payments.

With the Covid-19 lockdown, there have been innumerable ways in which consumer behavior has evolved and adapted. One of the most prominent things to have happened is a consumer’s need for contactless deliveries and payments, to ensure the virus is not passed on.

A recent report by PwC revealed that while digital payment volumes declined in sectors like aviation, tourism, hospitality, hotels, entertainment, e-commerce (non-essentials) and restaurants, there was also an uptick in areas like online grocery stores, online pharmacies, OTT players (telecom and media), EdTechs, online gaming, recharges and utility/bill payments.

Another survey of 42,000 respondents conducted by consultancy firm Local Circles revealed that the lockdown benefited digital payment platforms with 42% of Indians having increased the use of digital means during the first few weeks of the lockdown.

With an increase in overall digital payments, contactless payments are also seeing a surge and Mastercard has been working on educating consumers about the benefits and importance of contactless payments, Manasi
Narasimhan, VP and Head, Marketing and Communications, South Asia, Mastercard tells us.

Excerpts:

Q) Owing to the lockdown, digital transactions have seen an uptick. How have things been for Mastercard in the period following the lockdown? What kind of impact has the lockdown had on you?
We are living in uncharted times. Balancing the need to protect ourselves and maintain our daily lives is the challenge facing everyone around the planet. Due to the uncertainty that lies ahead, people are learning that they must make different choices. This includes how we pay. At Mastercard, we remain committed to accelerate digital payments throughout.

With the lockdown we’ve all become conscious about our health and sanitation habits and are avoiding crowded places. Online shopping is becoming the new way of buying essentials. Under normal circumstances, contactless cards would provide an easier and safer way to pay. In unusual times like these, the benefits they provide are even more valuable.

Contactless cards are also safe and secure. They work with EMV secure chips and each contactless transaction includes a unique code that changes with each purchase to ensure that your details and transactions are secure. Even if you tap your card more than once for a single purchase, the transaction only takes place once, keeping you covered from unintended usage. You also get instant alerts for every transaction always keeps you notified of your card’s usage. While transacting through contactless cards, you are always in control as you don’t need to hand over the card at the payment counter. This contactless technology also empowers some of the most financially vulnerable with a safe and secure way to make and receive payments. Hence, we continue in our endeavor to educate the customer on the benefits and importance of contactless payments.

Q) Have there been any interesting consumer trends you have observed in the lockdown period?
In the current environment, it is relatively safe and easy to do online shopping. Hence this is one trend that I see picking up. In physical stores, there is an uptick in contactless payments as well. In fact, a report by Local circles mentions that 42% of Indians have increased digital payments during the lockdown, bringing a lot of first-time users, who were not tech savvy, closer to
the digital payment’s ecosystem as well. Consumers are aware of contactless deliveries and are availing such doorstep delivery for their essentials. There is also an increased focus on health, hygiene and well-being.

Q) As a marketer, what has your priority been in these last few weeks?
My priority remains to be in touch with my teams and agency partners and I have done this effectively through virtual meetings. Even when life recovers post Covid-19, I think these virtual sessions will be here to stay, ensuring business continuity in the new normal.

I am also focused on how our business can serve our customers even during these times. We continue to educate the consumer and merchants on the benefits of contactless cards and digital payments. We also continue to educate the consumer on safety of digital payments and are committed to creating innovative payments solutions that deliver enhanced safety and security at every touchpoint, to enable simple, frictionless consumer experiences. I believe that once consumer and merchant behavior changes, it will transform the ecosystem.

Q) How have you been engaging and communicating with your consumers during this period?
We have undertaken various initiatives to engage with our consumers in this new normal. We are now comfortable with virtual meetings and calls and are constantly brainstorming on ways in which we can connect with our stakeholders. For us collaboration is key and we are working closely with all our stakeholders including banks and merchants to promote safety of using cards to shop online. We are educating customers through social media campaigns and use of various celebrities and influencers on contactless technology. It works best since there is no physical touch that is required ensuring personal safety along with minimizing the risk of payment fraud. We also continue to work with small businesses to offer them free tools that will help them better track and manage expenses and help them digitize which will be a requirement in the new normal.

We have also come out with various campaigns during this time. Our campaign #ThankYouVyapaariyo was developed specially to thank small merchants. This campaign was an extension of our strategic goal of enabling 10 million merchants with digital payments acceptance infrastructure and financial literacy by end 2020. Similarly, we are exploring new ways of
engaging with the audience with snackable content like listicles, videos and webinars.

Q) How did your media mix evolve during the period? Most brands are digital and TV heavy right now. Is it the same for you?
Our focus continues to be Digital & TV. With any campaign that we undertake, the objective is always to first create awareness, comprehension and then behavioral change. Television has the best track record of behavior change, of salience and brand recall. Digital is also something that is part of the mix especially seeing its growth and reach during the lockdown. We are also open to use influencers to spread our message. I always say that the media mix really depends on the objective. We are open to anything as along as it works for the audience, works for our message and delivers us return on investment. Those are the only three criteria that one would have.

Q) What have your key learnings been from this experience so far?
The current situation has made me believe more than ever that while marketers need to stay relevant, they cannot be opportunistic but seek more to serve the customer. Brand and corporate reputation while hard to measure becomes an asset in times of crisis. At such times customers turn to what they know and it is critical to maintain the trust of our customers. This will help them to stick by us in good times and bad.

Q) There is now hope that things will slowly go back to normal now. How are you, as a brand, preparing for the post-Covid world?
I believe this is an opportunity for us as a brand to show that we genuinely care about our customers and stakeholders. We will continue to extend our expertise to all the stakeholders we work with including banks, merchants, retailers, those in the e-commerce industry and help them to transition smoothly to the new normal.

Since more than 80% retail transactions in India are below ₹2000, we will continue to educate the consumers that contactless cards are the best way to make super quick, safe and secure payments. We will work towards helping merchants optimize their consumer experience, especially regarding queue management, cashier throughput, cash handling and associated logistics. We will also communicate consistently with timely updates and information on our business continuity plans. This will help us as a brand to evolve and endure during these difficult times.
Q) How have you made sure that your marketing communications during this period did not come across as opportunistic?
I have been especially focused on this and as a brand I feel we need to continue to support our customers. Consistent communication with a humane approach is the need of the hour. Customers can see through opportunistic communication that only seeks to sell. During these times, every action you take could be good or detrimental to your brand. However, by using empathy to craft an informative social media campaign or internal communication campaign, you could reach your audience in an authentic way and build trust.

Q) What are a few things that a marketer should be careful about and keep in mind during times of crisis?
As a marketer, one needs to always be vigilant about protecting their brand reputation and more so during times of crisis. While everyone is adjusting to the new normal there are many risks that can arise. This includes brand reputation risks, brand safety risks, privacy risk, cybersecurity risks, financial risk, all within the context of marketing. Moreover, I feel that intelligent brands will realize they need to activate their purpose now. If brands start communicating authentically, they will be perceived as trustworthy and this will help them gain in the long term. Consumers will have less patience for brands that are looking for immediate gains. Brands that understand their customers in a crisis and stand by them will significantly increase affinity for themselves.

And as everything goes online and there is a rise in the number of interconnected devices, another thing we will need to keep in mind is the importance of data privacy. There is an imperative and opportunity to protect the digital ecosystem. As a financial brand we recognize the importance of earning and maintaining the trust of our customers, cardholders and consumers and we need to be even more vigilant now.
Chyawanprash as a category has grown across brands and markets during the lockdown: Mansoor Ali

In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

Mansoor Ali, Chief Sales and Marketing Officer, Hamdard India tells us which sub-brands are delivering right now, its increasing focus on e-commerce

Hamdard India, that is home to 500 employees and home-grown products like RoohAfza, Safi, Chyawanprash, Sualin, to name a few, has been around for 113 years. It is using its old mantras and new-age marketing to sustain in today’s unusual environment. It is also one of the few companies that hasn’t resorted to salary cuts or lay offs yet. In fact, for Hamdard India, Ramzan is a peak period for its RoohAfza. Due to increasing focus on health, the immunity booster Chyawanprash has also seen an increase in demand.

We caught up with Mansoor Ali, Chief Sales and Marketing Officer, Hamdard India to find out the brand’s marketing strategy and how it is distributing its products amid a nationwide lockdown.

Excerpts:

Q. Can you give us a perspective on how Hamdard is operating right now? Which sub-brands are you delivering and how?
We have been able to get our manufacturing and supply chain aligned to the market demand. Since it is the beverage season, we are producing and supplying RoohAfza and other essential items to the market with considerable efficiency.

Q. How many employees work with Hamdard India? What kind of measures have you taken to keep them safe?

We have over 500 employees working at Hamdard Laboratories India. All the employees, including sales teams have been on WFH mode from the time the lockdown was announced. Advisories on safety for employees and their families have been sent out constantly. A COVID insurance policy has also been taken to support employees in the event that anything unfortunate happens.

Q. How are you dealing with the economic slowdown, what does this quarter for you look like? Hamdard flourished even after demonetization and GST. However, when so many companies have resorted to laying off employees or salary right now, how do you see your brand taking the brunt?

This quarter started off slow due to the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. But slowly we have managed to assimilate resources and establish our product value chain from manufacturing to supply. Although it is not up-to expectations as per our quarter objectives, we have been able to sustain a sizable part of it. Hamdard, as the name suggests symbolises compassion for everyone. We have not resorted to any layoffs or salary cuts as of now.

Q. Considering how people are becoming more health-conscious, have you seen an increase in demand for Chyawanprash?

Yes, Chyawanprash as a category has grown across brands and markets.

Q. What does your larger marketing strategy look like right now?

Our marketing strategy, for the short term is in adaptive mode, wherein consumer behaviour during lockdown, and changed media consumption habits are important drivers in deciding campaigns and inputs to market. Media mixes have been tweaked, and digital/social media marketing has taken a much larger chunk of our marketing spends. Influencer marketing and user generated content is driving engagement and brand salience in consumers.
Q. TV viewership and digital engagement continue to increase, where are you betting your money?

As explained in the previous question on our marketing strategies that is where we are spending. In addition to on TV campaigns, we have aligned our media mix to focus more on genres like news, movies etc which have taken the centre stage amidst this lockdown.

Q. How have you seen consumer behavior change in the past month?

Consumers have been induced into a new normal. The initial focus was on filling up on essentials, driven by the panic of not having enough at home. Once that was achieved, consumer emotion has shifted from structured, everyday routine to indulging in family oriented themes, back to natural concepts, and a unique sense of self awareness in terms of health and mental well-being. Consumers have focussed their energies on enhanced interactions on the digital space, with OTT platforms and online media taking prime share. Work as a concept has taken on new meaning, with WFH being as effective (if not more) in many sectors. This will have an overarching impact on people’s priorities in making choices on lifestyle and consumption.

Q. How do you think retail will function once we resume normalcy? Will you continue betting more money on e-comm even then?

Structured retail (modern trade) will take a hit for some more time. A lot of first time users have interacted with, and seen the benefits of e-commerce, and that will continue to grow. Covid-19 has in many terms been an inflection point for Indian consumers to adopt digital media, e-com and cashless transactions. Our focus on e-com will continue to grow.

Q. As a brand who is a 'companion in pain' and specializes in health and wellness, do you plan on launching new health care products such as sanitizers, fruit wash or hand wash with a 'Hamdard' touch?

We will continue to invest in categories that are close to our core.
As folks go about reviving life and business, we will scrub our spaces and protect them: Mayur Hola, OYO Hotels & Homes

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Mayur Hola, Head of Global Brand, OYO Hotels & Homes voiced his optimism about the future with us as he told us all that OYO will be doing to make things safer for all its stakeholders.

The world is slowly opening up, trying to get back to a normal routine. With cities opening up, so are businesses.

Travel has been an industry that has impacted massively. With people stuck at homes, many travel-related businesses came to a complete standstill.

However, with flights slowly opening up, people are still cautious. People are still only travelling if there is an absolute necessity. We are probably still some time away from people getting comfortable with travelling for leisure, things are definitely moving in that direction.

In an attempt to understand how things have been for an organization which has its core businesses closely wired with the travel industry, we caught up with Mayur Hola, Head of Global Brand, OYO recently. And we are glad we did because he gave us just the right dose of optimism that we need during these bleak times.
Hola not only told us how the organization has been coping all this while but also shared some really quirky learnings from the lockdown experience.

Edited excerpts:

Q) The world as we knew it has perhaps changed forever. The post-Covid world will be very different, and so will be the consumer’s expectations from different brands that have been a part of their lives. As a brand, how are you prepping up to meet these uncertain expectations of the future?

The world isn’t in a great place right now (figuratively). But it’s not all bad. I’ll try and inject a few mg of optimism here.

Women leaders are managing their countries brilliantly. The world needs more of them. Doctors (and the entire healthcare system) are helping hundreds of thousands of people make a full recovery. Millions of people are speaking up for issues that matter and not sitting on the fence. There are countless sensitive and caring souls willing to help each other and our fellow creatures in the real world. Billions of dollars are being donated. Amongst it all, SpaceX has sent a manned space flight to the International Space Centre.

People are people and while the worst amongst us get seen and noticed, it is the best within all of us that will bring the world back to being the imperfect little rock we know and love.

The same is true for brands. We do the right things to support our universe and sooner than later they come back to support us. We’ve been helping our hotel partners reopen and sanitise their spaces. We are informing our customers about the efforts we are making together to welcome them back and keep them safe. And today many are returning to us.

Q) How have the past few months been for the brand? Since hospitality has been one of the worse affected, what is your expectation from the rest of the year?

We’ve been set free! Free from office, from 9 to 5, from conference rooms and belts and creased trousers, from blow dried hair and appropriate attire. We can live in PJs, work from wherever!
So we will actually see more domestic tourism coming our way than ever before. However we aren’t a tourism-dependent hospitality brand. We get a huge number of same city and business travel bookings. We’re seeing a lot of our pre-lockdown booking patterns make an encouraging comeback and are fairly positive in the long term. We might see a lot of work calls being made from hilltops and beaches later in the year, but that’s a whole other matter.

Q) How did you, as an organization, deal with this dynamic situation? How did you ensure you kept the morale of your teams high?

Being optimistic and helpful gets one past a lot of the doomsday theories. When you focus on hosting those who need to quarantine, on feeding the hungry and contributing monetarily and in all ways possible for you including housing Lucy the beagle and her doctor father (they were pushed out by their society, we helped), then keeping morale high is not a challenge. Our job was to stay open, help and communicate with those who needed help so they knew where to come. We did that.

Q) As a marketer, what have your key learnings from this experience been so far?

In no particular order, here are some learnings that may or may not help market stuff.

1. Mahabharat over Netflix.

2. Ludo over PS4.

3. Daru over dawa.

4. Motiyon waaley masks over motiyon waaley daant.

5. Binge wash over binge watch.

6. Namaste over shake it baby.

7. Sonu Sood over Akshay Kumar.
8. Ghar ki daal over bahar ki murgi.

9. Air India over hot air.

10. Kirana store over app store.

**Q)** How difficult was it to figure out your communication strategy during these adverse times, considering it is easy for consumers to misread marketing communications as opportunistic?

Difficulty is relative. Here’s what was easy. Working together became super easy, as everyone realised that we need to help each other. Deciding to be empathetic and sensitive was easy. Making sure that all our acts and our communication about those acts, was designed to be helpful and not tactical. All this was easy.

**Q)** Going forward, what is your marketing strategy going to be for the next few months, which from where we are now, is still shrouded with uncertainty? Do you think, marketing as we know it, will also change in the post-Covid world? Will your priorities as a marketer change?

As a country we need to get back to work, get the economy going, get life back on track. This is what we know and it is what we will do. Every single brand’s strategy has to be to support that. So as folks go about reviving life and business, we will scrub our spaces and protect them.

‘Sanitised Stays’ is our strategy to build consumer trust and meet their expectations. We’ll focus our efforts to deliver this on-ground and convey the same via all channels and mediums to our partners and guests. This will include some key partnerships which we’ll announce soon. We will play our part in helping India reopen. Finally, the world will find a way to recover, we just will. I don’t know if that is visionary. But it is the vision OYO has.
We have seen a 50% increase in cheque size on delivery orders during the lockdown: Neha

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- As Pizza Hut starts offering contactless takeaway, we catch up with Neha, Marketing Director, Pizza Hut India to find out what else the brand has planned for this month.

Signing for deliveries is a thing of the past now. Contactless delivery and distant dining are becoming the new normal. Brands are trying to come up with new innovative ways to deliver their products to consumer’s doorstep. One such brand is Pizza Hut that has started offering Contactless Takeaways across all its operational stores in India.

After Contactless Takeaways, Neha, Marketing Director, Pizza Hut told us that the brand is now preparing for the future when consumers start stepping out. They are equipping all restaurant staff with gloves, masks and installing sanitizers in all stores to deploy a contactless dining model.

The brand has also seen an uptick in the demand for group deliveries. To make sure its consumers continue relying on them and to help them remain optimistic, Pizza Hut launched a campaign called #QualityTimeNotQuarantine.

Neha further shared with us a few measures they have taken to ensure the safety of their employees and consumers, what kind of tone a brand should go for to help their consumers trust them, where they should put their marketing monnies, and how Pizza Hut is contributing to society in these unprecedented days.
Q. How have the past few weeks been for the brand, considering the country has been in a lockdown?
Pizza Hut has been a trusted brand for over 24 years in India, and we have spent the past few weeks ensuring that we retain that ‘trust in every bite.’ Hence, we have upgraded all our existing stringent safety and hygiene processes across India. We have stringently implemented all regulatory protocols and guidelines issued from time to time by the government, WHO and FSSAI, such as thermal screening of employees and visitors, mandatory use of face masks, gloves, washing hands every 30 minutes and sanitizers and disinfecting all kitchen surfaces, food packing boxes, delivery bags and bikes. Our pizzas are baked at over 240 degree celsius for a minimum of 6 minutes which eliminates all viruses and bacteria. We have also put in place an oven-to-home Contactless process, wherein the cooked food is packed directly from the oven into disinfected boxes, without being touched by hand. The box is sealed with tamper-proof safety stickers. A Contactless Delivery system is then followed, wherein the Pizza Hut delivery executive places the packed food on a clean surface, near the doorstep of the customer and waits at a distance of 6 feet to make sure that the customer has picked up the order and no direct contact is established at any point ensuring safety of our customers and employees.

We have also launched Contactless takeaway option, which will allow our customers to place orders on the Pizza Hut app/m-site/website or visit us at our stores and order via menu board or disposable leaflets. The staff will place their order on the designated pre-sanitized Contactless Takeaway tables from where the customers can pick it up and exit. Our packaging includes sealing of every food box with tamper proof stickers which has become so relevant during these times. No direct contact will be established at any point in this process, ensuring safety of customers and employees.

With entire households being confined to their homes, we have seen a significant increase in cheque size on delivery orders, especially on orders meant for groups of people living together – in response, we have introduced great Value deals and combos on our delivery channel.

We are also taking this time to gear up for servicing consumers across dine-in, takeaway and delivery once the lockdown lifts. We are expecting a surge in deliveries and will introduce some new combos and deals on the delivery channel. Dine-in will pick up too as consumers will want to
experience the sheer joy of eating out after a long time. In preparation, we are equipping all restaurant staff with gloves and masks and installing sanitizers in all stores at key touch points. Contactless dining model is also under consideration. Our long-term focus is on delivering a modern pizza experience to our customers by making our brand relevant, easy and distinctive.

Q. How are you training your employees to fight the current challenges?
We have a sizable training team which is using several in-person and digital tools to train employees as per the upgraded Safety and Hygiene norms. In addition, daily checks by store leads and quarterly inspection by area coaches are done to ensure that food safety, restaurant hygiene and brand standards are understood and implemented by all working staff.

Q. What kind of changes in demand have you seen lately?
As mentioned, we are seeing an uptick in delivery orders, especially on orders meant for groups of people living together. Consumers are aware of new best practices like Contactless Deliveries. They are relying on trusted brands like ours to offer them an oven-to-doorstep contactless process, right from placing the order digitally to receiving it at their doorstep, while ensuring the highest levels of Safety and Hygiene throughout.

Q. What is your marketing strategy right now? How have you been trying to continue building a connect with your audience?
These are uncertain times and consumers are expecting their concerns to be echoed in a relevant manner by brands that they rely on. We want consumers to uphold their trust in Pizza Hut, hence our marketing strategy is to be open about the safety and hygiene protocols being followed by the brand. We have been transparent about how the food is prepared, packed and delivered via our oven-to-doorstep Contactless Process, which in turn gives much needed assurance to customers that the food they are consuming has not been touched by any other hand.

We have also been running our #QualityTimeNotQuarantine campaign since the start of the lockdown to communicate the importance of staying indoors and urge people to look at the brighter side of being at home for an extended period. We even launched pizza-themed wallpapers to make video chats even more delightful and memorable.
Q. How is your brand making a difference in terms of spreading awareness? Have you taken any initiative to help the community?

Pizza Hut is committed to serve meals to medical and frontline staff at government hospitals across cities as part of COVID-19 relief initiatives in India. We have taken end-to-end responsibility of sourcing raw material, preparing, and delivering meals directly to 3 renowned government hospitals every day in Delhi, Pune, and Bangalore. We are exploring possibilities to expand the free meal service at government hospitals in other parts of the country. We have also been working in a similar way with on-ground authorities in a few cities to provide fresh and hygienic food to the frontline workers and people in need. Contributing to the society is not just our responsibility but we also feel joy when even our smallest contribution brings a smile on everyone’s face like recently Pizza Hut staff was delivering meals at hospitals in Bangalore, a few kids infected with COVID19 also requested for pizzas. Pizza Hut staff then took permission from supervising doctors and surprised the kids with their favorite pizzas. Seeing those kids smile gave us a sense of accomplishment.

Q. TV viewership and digital engagement continue to increase, where are you betting your money?

Our focus is going to be entirely on digital channels as currently, millions of people are confined to their home and are craving to have the meal of their choice from their trusted brand. We have seen a 50% increase in cheque size on delivery orders, especially on orders meant for groups of people living together. We are geared to handle that surge with technology upgradations, oven-to-home contactless processes and delivery centric value deals. Given the situation, we have also enhanced our technology handles- Pizza Hut’s official website, M-site and the Mobile app.

Q. What are a few key learnings for you as a brand in the last few weeks?

We have seen this microbe levelling the playing field like never before, and irrespective of where your brand was placed in the pre-pandemic consumer perception curve, the quest to earn back the loyalty of consumers will start from ground zero. The big question, therefore, is how do we implement business models and communicate in a way that makes our customers feel safe, valued, and heard during this critical time and beyond. In my opinion, the answer lies in understanding and responding to the changed priorities of consumers, ensuring that our communication is sincere and not superficial or tone deaf, and most importantly, proving that we as a brand have adapted to meet the new expectations, and new ideas that will define the meaning of trust for the consumers of tomorrow.
This is not a time for ‘Buy me’ but a period for ‘I’m there for you’: Prathyusha Agarwal

- In our latest interview series, we talk to organizations to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.
- With people confined at home, television viewership has seen a massive surge, pushing broadcasters to think out of the box.

Prathyusha Agarwal, Chief Consumer Officer, Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd tells us how things have panned out at the organization in these past few weeks, and all that it has been doing to ensure their viewers get the best content.

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has led to unprecedented changes in our lives. We are all confined at home and that is leading to a huge change in the way we consume content, media or even everyday things in our lives.

While a lot of industries have suffered, coming to almost a complete standstill, there are some sectors that have seen a spike, due to our changed routines. Television and OTT viewership is at an all time high as people are trying to find engaging content. News channels are also observing a huge spike in viewership as people are constantly trying to stay abreast of all that is happening around them.
However, while TV viewership has seen a spike, the challenge has been to offer viewers fresh content that will keep them hooked to a particular channel. GECs that are heavily reliant on daily soaps, however, have had to innovate, considering production has been stopped completely since the lockdown.

We thought it would be interesting to understand how things have been for one of the biggest broadcasters in India, Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL), and understand how they've been tackling the crisis, and prepare for the future. We got some interesting insights from Prathyusha Agarwal, Chief Consumer Officer, ZEEL who told us how the organization quickly adapted to the evolving situation while also ensuring production of content remotely over mobile and professional cameras by using video and audio production technologies to support broadcast, digital & social platforms to make sure they can offer something fresh to their viewers.

Edited excerpts:

Q) While the lockdown has come as a blessing in disguise for the broadcast industry, how have things been for ZEE as an organization, in terms of working remotely and business continuity?

The current COVID-19 situation has triggered an unprecedented shift in consumer sentiment and behaviour, which has impacted the way businesses are functioning across the world. Confinement at home has families turning to their trusted TV set and dependence on television as a source of entertainment has seen a surge, reflecting in the viewership data. Our channel teams geared up to this surge in viewership since the lockdown came into effect and have been customising content to cater to this changing consumption need of the viewers which ensured that ZEE strengthened its leadership further in a growing category. As an organization, we were always agile and as teams, strongly connected, so the transition to WFH operations was both swift and smooth ensuring minimal disruption to our viewers and complete business continuity. ZEE ensured business as usual for its in-house operations and transmission functions by leveraging technology and implementing various solutions across its key functions.

Our Broadcast Operations team developed remote clients through which systems could be operated remotely, including from home, which is a first in the industry. Initially, continuing studio activities such as editing, graphics, audio, and online applications was a challenge. But within two weeks, we
implemented a WFH edit capability using proxy-based workflows with edit-over-cloud solutions. Moreover, to ensure a continuous flow of entertainment to our viewers, the teams have also enabled remote production of content over mobile and professional cameras by using video and audio production technologies to support broadcast, digital & social platforms.

For the Silver Jubilee celebrations of ZEE’s singing reality show SaReGaMaPa, we have taken an industry-first initiative - ‘Ek Desh, Ek Raag’ summoning our network strength with a 25-hour Fund Raiser Music Concert with over 350 performances across the network’s social assets, culminating in a pan India music concert on TV featuring the most notable talent from SaReGaMaPa across 19 ZEE channels. This mammoth initiative will be completely executed using remote WFH solutions by teams and artists.

Q) There are different sets of challenges for GECs and news channels right now. While GECs are trying to come up with innovative ways to keep audiences engaged, news channels cannot really work remotely. How did ZEE as an organization react to these challenges?

The lockdown has led to more people consuming content on TV. The habit of TV viewing has never been stronger, with 46% of the viewers watching TV all 7 days a week, an increase of nearly 50% from the pre-COVID period. Rather than challenges, we viewed these as opportunities. To cater to this demand surge, we have customised the best of content across our channels taking into consideration specific shifts in consumption behaviour.

The viewership trends over the weeks have indicated the surge in daytime viewership. To address that, we’ve brought back some of the all-time favourite shows that enjoy a strong consumer connect across channels. For instance, Zee TV extended its on-demand nostalgia band in the afternoon featuring popular shows. We have also seen higher viewership among males and kids with the entire family now at home and as a strategy, we’ve enhanced our weekend offering which sees high affinity amongst these audience segments. The viewership growth is also being driven by nearly 60-70% growth in the Movies genre through the lockdown period and as people look to keep themselves entertained, our movie portfolio endeavors to maximize the experience for every movie aficionado.
Our agility has helped us emerge as the leading entertainment network during the challenging and dynamic lockdown period, with a 15.1% share (sports & news not included), widening the gap between itself and its next competitor to nearly 1%.

Q) What is your objective when you communicate with your consumers in adverse times like today? How are you ensuring consumer stickiness when the competition is fierce and you are not able to produce fresh content? As a medium, people place a lot of faith and trust in television and as a brand, we need to meet and further that expectation. Therefore, even in our communication, we need to build and maintain our consumer’s trust with unambiguous authenticity. While our communication is deeply seeded in customer-centricity, during times of crisis, historically, brands that have connected with the consumer are those that communicate with empathy and relevance to the need of the hour. ZEE being a responsible media & entertainment organization came to the forefront by employing its network strength and outreach, to launch several pioneering campaigns to promote social distancing and generate awareness for maintaining adequate hygiene. From providing a behavioural trigger to its audience to wash hands for 20 seconds through our #BreakTheCoronaOutbreak initiative; uniting the country to pause and applaud the essential services’ workers during the Janta Curfew to deploying the strength of our network to encourage every viewer to not venture out and stay at home with their families through #HumAndarCoronaBahar initiative, we have stayed focussed on our role as a media platform and not just an entertainer.

The need of the hour is constant innovation and adaptation to the rapidly changing consumption patterns driven by a shift in content preference of different consumer cohorts throughout the day. During the lockdown, we are seeing a higher affinity for light-hearted, comedy shows, stories that reflect hope, positivity and patriotism and can entertain the entire family together. We have curated our content offerings across different genres of channels whether it’s through one hour comedy specials on &TV, or inspirational movie premieres like Saand ki Aankh on Zee Cinema, to serve these evolving needs and content preferences.

Q) What have your key learnings from the past few weeks been? Do you think you are better prepared now to face unforeseen challenges in the future?
Agility, Adaptability and Empathy have been our biggest learnings during this period. Being nimble about understanding the changing viewer behaviour
and adapting our content offering to the same helped us to continue to lead as a network through this period. There will be a lasting impact of this extended period of behavioural change in the consumer’s mind and we are gearing up to service this changed mindset. As broadcasters, this uncertain situation has taught us the need to innovate the way we create content and maximise its potential, pushed us to leverage technology solutions quickly and collaborate as teams. It has changed the way we communicate to our consumers, even leading to innovations through our first of its kind filmed from home campaigns. I would certainly say we are better prepared to deal with any type of situation in the future.

Q) As a marketer, what are a few things that one must keep in mind while communicating with consumers?
First and foremost, brands should think of consumers as fellow humans as we all come together to fight this pandemic. Empathy and compassion will go a long way. This is not a time for ‘buy me’ but a period for ‘I’m there for you, irrespective, and this is how I can make your life better/ easier to deal with what’s happening’. It is essential to be meaningfully salient through this time and say something only if you have something useful to say to the consumer. Especially for non-essential and currently out of consumption categories, connecting is critical as those who are present for the consumer now will be in their consideration sets during the revival phase when consumption opens up.

Additionally, the definition of value for people is changing and it will be critical in the short term for brands to identify what is valuable for their consumers right now and then find ways of fulfilling that value and communicating that proposition effectively. In the long term, marketers must anticipate the big shifts in consumer attitudes and plan their role in consumer’s life accordingly as this is a once in a lifetime experience for everyone and people are likely to completely rethink their mental models.
Most important learning for brands in this crisis is that they can make a positive impact in society: Puneet Das

- Tata Tea’s Jaago Re, over the years, has awakened people -- pushed them a little to care about important social issues and inspired them to take action.

- Under its latest leg, Tata Tea aims to remind us to take care of the elderly, who are the most vulnerable to the virus due to their decreased immunity.

- We caught up with Puneet Das, Vice President Marketing, Beverages - India, Tata Consumer Products, to further understand how they have tweaked the brand’s marketing strategy and media plan amid a nation-wide lockdown.

Remember how your parents would weave fictional stories to convince you to stay indoors or to make you eat your food when you were little? “Bhoot uthakar le jayega?,” they would say in a child-like voice. Now, it is our turn to remind them that it isn’t safe outside and this is exactly what Tata Tea’s latest campaign tells us.

With a lot of anxiety and uncertainty around, we need wake up calls now more than ever. Tata Tea has taken this opportunity to encourage us to support the most vulnerable group of society right now -- senior citizens. Due to their decreased immunity, they have a larger risk to fall victim to the virus than us, which can also affect their mental and emotional health.

It’s latest edition of #JaagoRe #BaadonKeLiye, therefore, targets millennials and reminds them to take care of their elderly members during these tough times. They have partnered with influencers such as Mandira Bedi, Rannvijay Singh, Dia Mirza, Milind Soman, to name a few.
Over the years, Tata Tea’s Jaago Re campaigns have nudged us towards social awakening and the brand has used this property to catalyse change around important issues like women safety, representation of women in sports, voting, corruption, etc.

We caught up with Puneet Das, Vice President Marketing, Beverages-India, Tata Consumer Products, who looks after Tata Tea, Tetley, and Tata Coffee Grand to further understand what the past few weeks have been like for the brand, discuss its latest campaign for Tata Tea and a few things Das has learned in this time.

Excerpts:

Q. How have the past few weeks been for the brand, considering the country has been in a lockdown?
The past few weeks have been about following all local administration guidelines and taking precautions to ensure safety of our employees & teams while trying to also ensure supplies to trade, and meeting demands of consumers affected due to the lockdown.

We have also utilized this time to work towards spreading awareness and facilitating change for the cause of the elderly who are the most vulnerable during these times, through our social initiative, Tata Tea – Iss baar #BadonKeLiye #JaagoRe.

Q. What is your marketing strategy right now? How have you been trying to continue building a connect with your audience?

In wake of the novel coronavirus, it becomes important to stay relevant to our consumers by facilitating and inspiring genuine change. And that it is our endeavour with our social Initiative “Iss Baar #Badon ke liye Jaago Re” which aims to spread awareness and sensitize youth to support the senior citizens during this time.

The initiative involves spreading awareness about the need to support the elderly, providing relevant tips, tying up with NGOs and providing a common platform for people to connect with them, and share stories of volunteers to inspire others to act.
It encourages individuals to connect with senior citizens next door or in their neighborhood and help them overcome any challenges they might be facing during this crisis and restricted lockdown period. A simple action like checking on them to see if they need anything and taking steps to help them will make a big difference (Of course, all this needs to be done keeping in line with the COVID-19 guidelines, as provided by the local administration).

We’re also tying up with NGOs and providing information so that people can reach out to them and volunteer, in case they want to further make a difference in supporting this cause of the elderly.

**Q. Has there been a change in your media mix?**

The endeavour is to spread awareness amongst the youth and drive genuine change for the cause for supporting the elderly. Considering the current consumer behaviour of increase in time spent online and on social media, the initiative is also largely focused on leveraging these mediums to drive awareness on our latest campaign.

The initiative is also being supported by influencers, NGOs and experts in senior care management.

**Q. If the lockdown is further extended, will you be tweaking your marketing strategy further?**

Right now, our efforts are to ensure that we spread the message and drive genuine change with our social initiative. Since it is aimed at supporting the elderly, who are most vulnerable due to their decreased immunity, this initiative will remain relevant irrespective of the lockdown conditions. In fact, if the lockdown is further extended, then it is even more important to understand and address the medical, psychological and social needs of the elderly whose routine life will be far more disrupted leading them to be most prone to confusion and helplessness.
Q. What are a few key learnings for you as a brand in the last few weeks?

The most important learning for brands during this crisis is to do something that can genuinely make a positive impact to their consumers/society. During times like these, it becomes important to consumers on ‘how you make them feel’ and whether you can genuinely make a difference in their lives in a meaningful manner.

The other learning is to be agile and adapt to changes in consumer patterns which has drastically changed due to ‘restricted lockdown’ conditions but may also continue to evolve and become the ‘new normal’ (even when the lockdown restrictions are eased).
Our current focus is to create educative and engaging content than to advertise and hard sell: Sagar Boke

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Sagar Boke, Head – Marketing, Tata Consumer Products – Foods shares how the last few months have been for the brand and how things are slowly getting back on track with each passing day.

- He also tells us all that the brand is doing to stay connected with its consumers.

More than 2 months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the nation-wide lockdown to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, we have now entered its fourth phase. However, this fourth phase has come with some relaxations wherein e-commerce firms have been allowed to deliver essential and non-essential products in red zones along with orange and green zones.

While things are slowly getting better with delivery platforms also getting used to this new normal, the initial few weeks turned out to be pretty challenging. While issues around supply chains are slowly getting smoothened, there is now a stronger adoption of digital across the value chain, higher efficiency in utilising the resources, and stronger collaboration across partners – be it logistics, distributors, MT chains, etc, shares Sagar Boke, Head – Marketing, Tata Consumer Products – Foods.
The products under Boke’s portfolio that include Tata Salt and Tata Sampann are all essential items and therefore as a marketer, he had an interesting experience and a few important learnings in the last few months. He shares with us all that the brand is doing not only to ensure there is no disruption in supply chain but also to make sure they are connected with their consumers. In terms of communication, the brand’s focus has been to create educative and engaging content rather than on advertising and hard sell.

Excerpts:

Q) Products under your portfolio are essential items. However, how challenging has it been to maintain the supply chain during the last few weeks of the lockdown?

It has been quite a task to ensure supplies during the lockdown. Just like the police, medical professionals & bank employees, the people involved in the supplies of essential items have done a commendable job. It’s a truly heroic effort. After the initial lockdown where everything was slower, the situation now is improving each day. However, it has definitely altered how marketers sell and consumers buy across the nation. There is a stronger adoption of digital across the value chain, higher efficiency in utilising the resources, and stronger collaboration across partners – be it logistics, distributors, MT chains, etc.

Q) As a marketer, what has been your priority in these days of lockdown?

Staying connected to the changes in the Indian consumer landscape and their buying patterns is a top priority for us during as well as post the national lockdown. In addition to this, there are a few more things which are critical:

The Relevance of Advertising: Post COVID-19, the question that every marketer was having – whether to advertise or not; if yes, what should be the communication. Our stance is to advertise only if we are able to add relevant value to the consumers’ lives. Being in the middle of a global health and economic crisis, empathy with consumers is more important than ever. The brands which have forged meaningful relationships with consumers would seldom hard sell and instead look at offering genuine solutions that add value to their life. We have shifted our focus towards more content-driven communication and acts vis-à-vis the regular advertising during this time.
Innovations to meet emerging Consumer Asks: This global health crisis has pushed every business to rethink their offering to the customers. There is a definitive change in the way consumers buy and the way companies sell. We too are focused on creating offerings that address this new shift and new consumer needs. Our focus currently is to innovate our product offerings, channel strategy and go-to-consumer models to become a truly customer-centric organisation.

Q) What kind of communications have you been putting out? How have you been ensuring that whatever you put out is relevant to the times we’re living in right now?

Our communication strategy during this time has been to partner the consumers during these hard times.

For Tata Sampann, Indian nutrition backed by science is at the core of the brand. We always aim to provide ‘Sarvagunn Sampann’ i.e. wholesome nutrition to our consumers. The conversations around physical, mental, and emotional well-being during the on-going lockdown are critical to helping consumers remain unscathed. With digital becoming a primary medium to connect with consumers, we launched two digital-first communications for our consumers during the lockdown. The first, ‘Beat the Lockdown’ was aimed at helping consumers stay fit and nourished throughout the lockdown help of a nutritionist, yoga coach, and psychologist. This was a three-week digital forward campaign for us, with expert lives almost everyday around issues people are facing during lockdown related to nutrition, mental and physical health, and giving out simple remedies to it.

Our second campaign was ‘Har Din Haldi, HarGhar Healthy’ that focused on helping consumers building Immunity through the everyday Indian spice—Turmeric. We created cool, new ways of using turmeric every day. This was followed by around 375+ recipes curated from user-generated content. We also sampled Tata Sampann Turmeric with Pride of Cows mil in Mumbai. Idea was to stress the importance of haldi—doodh for immunity. The response has been terrific— with over 6.7 crore engagements on various social media platforms for Tata Sampann.

In these changing times, we understand that parents are constantly looking for interesting ways to keep their children engaged and productive at home.
Hence being ‘DeshkaNamak’, we launched Tata Salt IQL (India Quizzing League) – a daily format quiz to keep kids mentally active and helping them learn more about ‘Bharat’ positively. This initiative met with success as we on-boarded 350,000 participants in a span of just seven days.

While these campaigns were our mainstay communications during the lockdown, we will also be launching further communications for Tata Salt and Tata Sampann alike in the coming months.

Also with sanitation being one of the key focus across, we have amplified conversations on products like Tata I-Shakti Cooking Soda that helps in cleaning fruits and vegetables thus aiding hygiene.

Our focus is to create educative and engaging content than on advertising and hard sell.

Q) Have you witnessed any interesting consumer trends during this period?

With the growing concerns over food safety and quality, there is a revival in the traditional Indian food wisdom. Be it haldi doodh, home-cooked meals, etc. There is a higher awareness about food safety and hygiene. We are also witnessing a consumer shift towards products that are not just convenient and easy to store but also healthy and nutritious.

Q) Did you tweak your media mix during the lockdown? Have your digital investments gone substantially up during this time?

The proportion of investments on digital has significantly gone up during this time. Digital plays a key role in Tata Sampann specifically, as it is an important growth medium for us. Post COVID-19, our focus will continue to be able to connect with our consumers across digital platforms but in newer and more experimental ways. Tata Nutiker is our nutrition platform that talks about Indian ingredients and their nutritional value through expert voices in the food and health arena. Television again is a platform that is making a strong comeback during this time and is a definite watch out when it comes to the consumption of brand communications.

Q) How are you preparing yourself as a brand to function efficiently in the new world?
Adapt and Adopt: With the situation changing almost every day, the ability to be agile and adapt will be crucial for a brand.

Hygiene and safety above everything: As for the consumer’s safety, nutrition, health, hygiene, and value for money will be a deciding factor when making any purchase.

Rethink the Go-to-market strategy: Though e-commerce has become the preferred choice for buying even your essential items, your neighbourhood retail stores will still play an important role. Hence, collaborating with the Government to train the neighbourhood kirana stores to improve the level of sanitization is going to be equally important.

Q) Will the way you market your offerings change in the future?

Definitely, the trends and learning during the times of pandemic cannot be ignored and will continue to impact for the next couple of years. We think, given the current market scenario and the fear of this pandemic, the products that focus on nutrition and immunity will be in high demand over regular offerings. Demand for products built on traditional Indian wisdom will increase and as said earlier, consumers will take to more of home-cooked meals.

In the last two months, e-commerce has grown to the level it would have otherwise taken at least five years, in many markets. India will be no exception. E-commerce and direct-to-home distribution models will get more prominence over the traditional retail stores due to deep-rooted safety concerns. New-age options, such as selling through AI bots/teleselling, will get more prominence. Human intervention would be encouraged only where it is indispensable. Many of these things were unthinkable in the past, but will become the new normal for many brands.

Q) What have your key learnings from this experience been so far?

Declutter and focus on what matters: One of the starkest but obvious revelations for us has been how consumers have begun de-cluttering their lives and focusing on only what matters. I think even when it comes to information, consumption of information might be high but I believe they are retaining only those information that matters to them.
Safety and Hygiene ruling the roost: In terms of the way they consume products in the post-lockdown era, we expect safety, hygiene & immunity to rule the roost as social distancing has made these factors almost a part of everyone’s daily lives.

Acing the digital life: We also are seeing stronger & faster adoption of digital in our lives be it for work or personal needs. Digital will continue to play a critical role for us in the coming days and months.

Q) What kind of impact did you see in sales during this time? Any interesting stats to share?

Sales have been influenced by how consumer consumption patterns have shifted in the past eight weeks or so. Consumers want to move to the brands that they can trust. We have also seen a significant spike in demand for both Tata Sampann and Tata Salt. Tata Sampann Products like Turmeric and pulses which are high on nutrition and essential in nature have seen a very significant spike during this phase. There is also a stronger demand for nutritious ready-to-cook products too and we have seen sales for those from our portfolio increase in accordance as well.
We anticipate an increase in demand for more portable hand hygiene products as people start stepping out: Unilever’s Samir Singh

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Samir Singh, Global EVP, Skin Cleansing at Unilever tells us what kind of demand it has seen for its flagship brand Lifebuoy and how the organisation has increased its production to meet the increasing demand.

- The global monthly production of Lifebuoy hand sanitizer increased by 56 times and liquid hand wash by three times compared to a typical month in 2019, Singh shares the challenges they faced and brand’s marketing strategy.

The global threat from Coronavirus is continuing to grow, and at a rapidly accelerating rate. This has made even slackers wash their hands at least four times a day. As a result, FMCG brands that manufacture hand sanitizers and liquid soaps have seen their sales swelling up. Furthermore, the increase in awareness about personal hygiene and care is also driving the market’s growth.

According to Technavio, Market Intelligence Agency, the hand sanitizer market in India is poised to grow by USD 405.31 million during 2020-2024 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Its analysts estimate the market to grow at a CAGR of 61.02% till 2024.
To meet this increasing demand, the global monthly production of Lifebuoy hand sanitizer increased by 56 times and liquid hand wash by three times compared to a typical month in 2019. And now, as people start stepping out, Unilever’s Lifebuoy is expecting a higher demand for its hygiene products.

“We have obviously seen an increase in demand for hand hygiene products. Handwashing has never been more important, and, at Lifebuoy, we believe that we have an important role to play to ensure that people can get hold of the products they need. As people start venturing outdoors and returning to work, school and other aspects of their lives, we anticipate an increase in demand for more portable hand hygiene products such as hand sanitizers,” shares Samir Singh, Global EVP, Skin Cleansing at Unilever.

Telling us how the brand managed to meet the ever-increasing demand in the past three months, Singh said, “Throughout the pandemic we have been working hard to ensure continuity in our operations and supply chain to help meet demand and ensure products reach the communities we serve. We have achieved this by prioritising production of hand wash, soap and hand sanitizer on lines across Unilever’s factories; setting-up new factories; and working with manufacturing partners.”

A lot of companies like RSH Global, Nivea, Emami, Cipla Health, Dabur have made their maiden entries into the hand sanitiser market to ride the demand and to help people stay safe. Lifebuoy will also continue to look for newer opportunities and innovate to help its consumers.

“At Lifebuoy, we continue to explore opportunities to help our consumers feel protected and safe. For example, we anticipate that as countries ease out of lockdown, many people will be looking for more portable, ‘on-the-go’ formats such as hand sanitizers and wipes to help maintain good hand hygiene,” said Singh.

**Moving beyond competition**

The pandemic has also made brands to keep competition aside and remind its consumers that everybody is in this together. Globally, brands like Nike and Adidas joined hands to protest against George Floyd’s murder. Closer home, brands like Dunzo, Dettol and Lifebuoy have left competition aside for the moment and are thanking each other for their services in marketing campaigns.
Spilling its marketing strategy, Lifebuoy’s Singh said, “We’ve been working quickly and flexibly to ensure we’re advertising in the places where it will help to inform consumers. As a brand and as part of our purpose, we use a variety of methods and channels to promote and inspire good hand hygiene practices. In response to the pandemic, we are using the power and influence of our media reach to improve handwashing behaviours by rallying millions of people to #dothelifebuoy in an engaging and ‘sticky’ manner. We’ve launched this global challenge across Instagram and Tiktok, with about 50 billion views and counting, across India, Indonesia, Singapore, South Africa and the Gulf.

On mentioning competitors, he said, “When the pandemic first emerged, we launched a public service campaign which encouraged the use of all soap – not just Lifebuoy but competitor brands too – with the line ‘Please use the soap nearest to you. Not just Lifebuoy but any soap like Dettol, Lux or Hamam.’”

**Coronavirus is the biggest teacher**

This highly volatile market, Singh said, has taught him the importance of being authentic, responsible, and consistent in communicating with your consumers.

Elaborating on the lessons he has learnt lately, he said, “Authenticity, because your brand purpose has to be in the DNA of your brand, it can’t be invented artificially during the time of crisis. People see through that kind of purpose washing. Responsibility because people expect especially at these times for brands and institutions to do the right thing, even if it is not immediately business apparent. That’s why we have advocated the use of even our competitors’ soap brands since January, and that’s why we continue to direct people to official sources of information from reputed government health bodies. Consistency, because otherwise brands won’t have impact at scale. Brands need to do tangible things on the ground that make a difference, rather than only talk about things in communications and advertising.”

The need for hygiene products has never been higher, which has made Lifebuoy realise how important a role it plays in consumer’s life.

“Never before in history has a consumer goods category played such a central role in the future wellbeing of the world – that is a huge responsibility for everyone who works in this industry, and that’s what drives us every day to make a small difference, one soap at a time,” concluded Singh.
How Shopify is helping MSMEs and SMEs sail through the lockdown by helping them strengthen their online presence

- Things have been challenging for small and medium scale businesses that are bearing the brunt of the lockdown due to low consumer spending and disruptions and delivery and production.

- Canadian e-commerce company Shopify has been working closely with MSMEs to help them strengthen their online presence and to future-proof their business.

- Sandeep Komaravelly, Director of International Growth, Shopify walks us through all that the platform has been doing and how that has helped support these businesses during these adverse times.

The lockdown has hurt most businesses and sectors across the world. Most are now working on ways to weather the storm, to come out of it with minimal damage. However, the Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) have had to face massive losses.

It is no surprise that the MSMEs have been the focus of the government’s relief packages because without external assistance, it will be difficult for most of these businesses to sail through.

This is where Shopify, a Canada-based e-commerce company comes in. Since its inception, the company has been working on empowering entrepreneurs by helping them create and develop their businesses by removing the barriers that exist in selling online.
While it has been helping power businesses in around 175 countries around the world, in India, it has worked with brands such as Nush by Anushka Sharma, Raymonds, Blue Tokai, WoW Cosmetics, Starstruck and John Jacobs eyewear, to name a few. The role of Shopify is to help these organizations operate and grow their business across their own direct-to-consumer website, online marketplaces, and social networks, while remaining in full control of their business.

As a part of their efforts to support these MSMEs during the lockdown when many of these businesses have been adversely impacted, Shopify came up with a range of offers to help small and medium businesses across India adjust to the new normal and to help them increase efficiency while selling online. The aim of these offers was to make it easier for businesses to get back on their feet by helping them offer their customers with a good shopping experience, while also helping reduce monthly costs. According to the platform, merchants using the platform can save over Rs 1 lakh in partner credits through Shopify’s eCommerce solutions from industry-leading service partners.

We recently caught up with Sandeep Komaravelly, Director of International Growth, Shopify, who told us all about the platform and its efforts towards supporting MSMEs.

Excerpts:

Q) MSMEs have had to face the brunt of low consumer spends. What has your priority as an organization been in these last few weeks to make things easier for these businesses?

Shopify helps entrepreneurs as they transform an idea into a business. We offer a platform so easy to use that merchants are free to focus on developing their products rather than overcoming technical limitations. Analyzing the impact of the pandemic in India and an in-depth analysis of how consumer behavior has changed, we have created solutions for merchants looking to set up and grow their online business. Through our network we are extending attractive offers from partners across categories. Over Rs 1 Lakh in partner credits can be saved with these offers from leading technology, solution and service partners such as Razorpay, PayTM, Shiprocket, Adyogi and Delhivery to name a few. We also hosted our first-ever
virtual Reunite session in May to introduce our latest innovations on Shopify to help merchants from across the world future-proof their businesses. We have introduced a number of new features, such as Shopify Email, Pick-up, Express themes, etc for merchants in India.

Q) What kind of impact has there been on SMEs and MSMEs? Have you come across businesses that have had to shut shop due to the Covid impact?

Even in usual circumstances, SMEs and MSME’s are more vulnerable to competition or the slightest change in the market. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has impacted the growth of their business. They have been facing major challenges like lack of financing, delay in payments, paused production and fall in consumer demand. Having shared this, in spite of the hurdles it has been inspiring to see the strong resilience showcased by the SME community. They have been agile and quick to adapt to the new normal of digitization. We have seen SMEs taking their business online and setting up e-stores to reach out to their customers in the fastest possible manner. There are some who are also selling masks and protective equipment addressing the need of the hour of their customers

Q) What were some of the major challenges that these merchants faced during the lockdown days? How have you been able to help?

The most immediate challenge for a merchant has been to be agile in moving online to safeguard their businesses and facilitating local delivery. In an immediate response to the challenges faced by merchants we have released a new one-page theme called Express that enables merchants to get online quickly. As of March 20, selling gift cards has been available to all merchants, and Shopify has seen more merchants utilizing this feature than ever before. We also introduced Shopify Email that helps merchants build more meaningful relationships with their customers, and to make email marketing easy and accessible to businesses who are new to digital marketing. Shopify also offers merchants flexibility to enable pickups, they can set up the option for customers to pick up their online orders at your retail store or any location that they choose.

Q) You work with a lot of partners. How has this integration and collaborative model helped you strengthen your offering?
Shopify’s partner ecosystem acts as a moat to the company. Developers build apps (plugins) for merchants that act as an extended feature set and help in greater product market fit across the world. Developers sell these apps globally through the Shopify app store and have built million dollar businesses out of India. India has always been the biggest export hub for software services. Service partners on Shopify help merchants build a website, design, do digital marketing and every possible service that an ecommerce merchant needs. This ecosystem helps merchants use Shopify in a Do-It-For-Me manner, and focus more time on their business and growth. We are presently working to grow our influencer network in India like we have in the US. Bloggers, You tubers, educators et al help new entrepreneurs learn the specifics of ecommerce and how Shopify can be a platform that supports their business end to end.

Q) What kind of business impact have you faced as an organization during the lockdown?

One of the key trends that we have seen during this period is the demand for shopping locally. More than ever, merchants need efficient ways to connect with their local customers today and in the future. Globally, average daily local orders on Shopify for the six weeks ending April 24, grew by 176%, compared to the prior six weeks, coinciding with the introduction of physical distancing measures. As of April 24, 26% of brick-and-mortar merchants in Shopify’s English-speaking geographies were using some form of local pickup and delivery solution, compared to just 2% at the end of February. Shopify is accelerating and shipping products that will help merchants future proof their businesses. Historically, necessity breeds innovation. By making it easy to start and maintain a business, we continue to help merchants bring to life the innovations spurred by this unprecedented world event. We remain committed to removing the barriers that exist for merchants starting new businesses.

Q) As we are slowly coming out of the lockdown, what were your learnings as a leader?
We realize even more that preparedness is key and this refers to multiple scenarios. It is important that as organizations and business leaders we are quick to adapt to any given situation. It is also important to dedicate time and effort towards keeping employee morale high especially in situations like this. A dedicated and highly motivated workforce will strengthen any organization and ensure a joint effort towards meeting organization goals even during a downfall.
Our current focus in communication is on product knowledge, correct usage, building right investment habits: Sandeep Walunj

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Sandeep Walunj, CMO, Nippon Life India Asset Management shares with us a few advantages of selling a digital product, why there is a need to change the marketing strategy to help consumers through these unprecedented days, and the importance of empowering your employees to be prepared for a crisis.

- He further helps us understand how the mutual funds industry has been shaping up in the past two months, how long it will take to recover and what its future holds.

COVID-19 has altered the way we walk, work, communicate with people or shop. It has pushed us to accept digitalisation at a rapid pace. Companies that offer digital solutions have seen an accelerating growth due to this sudden shift in consumer behaviour and nationwide lockdown.

Being associated with a virtual product, Sandeep Walunj, CMO of Nippon Life India Asset Management has seen this trend emerge up close. The company was equipped well in advance to face the crisis and smoothly shifted to the work-from-home format. Now, after doing some social listening, it changed the course of its conversation to offering long-term solutions like securing long-term wealth, focusing on children’s education, well-being products and upped its short-term recovery-linked solutions.
It has also seen an uptick in engagement on social media and consumers are reaching out to the company with their queries, not the other way round. As a result, Nippon Life Asset Management has doubled its content pieces to help them choose the right product in a crisis that is thrown in our way.

Walunj further shared with us how the BFSI industry is bound to change after the pandemic, why the brand continues to invest more in television and digital mediums, and how the companies need to do their bit to help the society in this tough time.

Excerpts:

**Q. How has the last month been for you? How have you observed the consumer behaviour changing?**

Thankfully, we design and market a virtual product that can be propositioned remotely, explained over audio-video and easily traded digitally. Being always ahead of the curve on digital readiness (be it as a social forum for explaining the products, a transaction platform for buying and selling as well as digital customer care solutions for post-purchase service) we have been seeing more and more investors interacting with us digitally; over the last 5-6 years. So, in a way, I can say that we were prepared for this – we just had to scale up fast. Key changes I observed in investor behaviour are three: much higher traffic on our social and digital assets due to anxiety as well as curiosity, deeper interaction at almost every social touch-point (as a result of more time at their disposal) and a change in product mix towards both opportunistic short and very long-term products. As I said, some of it we anticipated and were ready for and a good part of it was down to quick and thorough adaptation by the team and the ecosystem.

I must say a few words about the intermediaries – the mutual fund distributors/ advisors. We call them partners. They have been adapting very fast to digitization. Adoption of our digital transaction platform Business Easy, attending various training sessions to upskill/ refresh themselves as well as engaging very meaningfully on social media with their investors; they have been quick, comprehensive and positive.

**Q. In these uncertain and stressful days, how are you communicating with your audience?**

They are finding us rather than we finding them!
Our social handles are buzzing with an unprecedented number of conversations, our partners are sharing almost double the usual number of content pieces with their investors and our sales teams are strengthening our distribution partnerships with stronger and deeper content integration. The focus is on product knowledge, correct usage, right investment habits in a situation like this and innovative products that address some opportunities that this crisis has thrown up.

On another note, I want to talk about a very successful and deeply appreciated initiative, ‘Wealth of Talent’. This is aimed at our distribution (channel) partners and their families. We have encouraged them to shoot videos or photographs of themselves (or their family members) singing, dancing, drawing, exercising, cooking etc and upload the same on FB page called Wealth of Talent. We have an overwhelming number of videos on the page but more importantly, very grateful partners who are happy that their hidden talent (as well as their sons’ and daughters’) was recognised by the world; thanks to Nippon India Mutual Fund!

**Q. Have you introduced any new tools to empower your employees to deal with consumer queries?**

We were digitally-enabled to a large extent. Our IT team was quick to roll-out robust video interaction solutions that could easily handle larger number of participants. Our partners across social listening, ORM as well as marketing solution development were quick to scale up to higher volume, frequent reporting and higher output. We also rolled out many internal initiatives aimed at team bonding, connect and relaxation. All this ensured that our response, as an organization, has been as good as ever, if not better than ever!

**Q. Are you using this time to upskill them?**

Yes, there’s suddenly more time on everyone’s hands. In a city like Mumbai, where a large number of us are based, one easily saves between 3–5 hours everyday due to work from home. Add to that less time wasters like extended lunch hours, and there is more time on everyone’s hands. Hence, even the regular work reviews are deeper, with concepts explained patiently, doubts asked freely and more data analysed. Add to that the very pertinent training sessions curated by the HR team and various vendor partners, and we have a
rich menu of options to choose from. We also encouraged teammates to enroll for outside certification programmes (many institutions and universities have offered a wide range of courses) and many have opted for those too.

Q. How do you see the BFSI industry shaping up after the lockdown?

Parts of it like insurance – which will have the least impact – will actually benefit from better appreciation of life’s uncertainties and increased saving/reduced spending. They will be ready with innovative products, go-to-market processes and impactful communication solutions.

Investment Services like ourselves will have to wait a little longer before the recovery is apparent before the volumes are back but then, in the meanwhile, we need to adapt quickly to changing consumer behaviour like securing long-term wealth, focusing on child education and well-being products and short-term recovery linked products.

Asset financing and NBFC related business have a longer road to recovery but I am sure keeping in close touch with consumers and being on the toes for quick adaptation will help the more agile ones recover faster.

Q. Tell us a bit about your partnership with business channels. What role do you play there?

Television is a medium with the largest reach as well as considerable impact. We have been successfully partnering with them to get the right solutions to investors which are tailor-made for the current market scenario. I played the matchmaker here between the channel editors that wanted appropriate, relevant content to guide their viewers (in terms of right products to invest in) and our business team that wanted these products to be presented well and made visible. So briefing the editorial teams, liaising with them to shape powerful content and developing appropriate ads to leverage the association; were the key tasks, apart from the media buying and spot scheduling part.

These partnerships are now growing beyond television and towards quality, respectful print publications that want to bring the cutting edge, more relevant products to their readers.
Q. What does your media plan look like? Which medium gets your lion’s share?

Digital and Television, quite understandably. However, we keep observing, evaluating all media alternatives and deploy the most appropriate one given the communication and business task.

Q. How are you doing your bit to help the society in these certain times?

Nippon Life India AMC was the first Mutual Fund and amongst the first BFSI companies to donate a sum of Rs 5 crore to PM CARES as well as CM Relief Fund. Apart from our CSR funds, each and every employee contributed a minimum one day’s salary towards this. Many of us still proudly display badges on our social media profiles that show how proud we are for having achieved this feat.

As mentioned above, we are among the first BFSI companies to fully enable our partners to work from home (digital platforms and scaling up) and also among the most resourceful ones in terms of marketing materials that help them to generate and fulfil leads. We have been regularly putting up useful and impactful communication to facilitate healthcare workers. We have also trained our employees (when our branches reopened) in guiding our investors properly about COVID-19 control measures and we actively called them ‘COVID Warriors’.
SANJEEV MOHANTY
MD – South Asia, Middle East & North America, Levi Strauss & Co.

We believe that during a crisis, strong brands will emerge stronger: Sanjeev Mohanty, Levi Strauss & Co

- With a 167-year legacy, Levi Strauss has outlived a Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression and the Great Recession. And it is confident it will come out of the current crisis even stronger.

- We talk to Sanjeev Mohanty, MD – South Asia, Middle East & North Africa, Levi Strauss & Co who tells us what the brand has been doing to minimize business impact and how it is adapting and preparing for a new retail experience for the post-Covid world.

As lockdown norms are slowly getting relaxed across the country and malls and showrooms are slowly opening up, people are feeling a semblance of normalcy. While the last couple of months have been difficult for businesses across the spectrum, people are now working on strategies to minimize the impact.

For retail brands, things will be very different. With a lot of safety guidelines in place, players will need to wait and watch how consumers behave in the post-Covid world. There is still a lot of uncertainty about when people will finally feel confident about visiting physical stores.

So in such a scenario, how are retail brands preparing for this uncertain future? We recently caught up with Sanjeev Mohanty, MD – South Asia, Middle East & North Africa, Levi Strauss & Co who has been heading the 167-year-old brand in India. We tried to understand how the brand has been handling the crisis and how they are preparing for a changed world. He also talks to us about Levi’s’ recent Circles campaign and how it was aimed at spreading a
sense of togetherness at a time when we have lost that personal touch with people.

Excerpts:

Q) Levi’s Circles campaign has been gaining a lot of traction on social media, thanks to a lot of known social media influencers being a part of the campaign. How important are influencers in your entire marketing mix? How did your marketing mix evolve during the lockdown months?

COVID-19 has changed the world around us and, due to lockdowns or social distancing, in a way we have lost our sense of togetherness. It reminded us of our Circles campaign which we released back in 2017, a campaign that celebrated our human connection. The campaign was a reminder that our differences unite us and if we hold on to all that we share in common, we can find our way back to each other. We’ve adjusted the message slightly for this new moment. We felt it would ignite hope and show the strength of human connections and to bring people to believe that One Day Soon We Will All Dance Together Again.

Our fans are spending more time online amidst the lockdown and that is where we wanted the conversations to happen. We are hopeful that the campaign will be well received.

Q) The world as we knew it has perhaps changed forever. The post-COVID world will be very different, and so will be the consumer’s expectations from different brands that have been a part of their lives. As a brand, how are you prepping up to meet these uncertain expectations of the future? Will you focus more on your online presence now considering demand on e-commerce sites might get a larger push?

As we continue to work hard to stay connected digitally — we have started the next phase, reconnecting and the reopening of our stores. We are rolling out new processes and social distancing and cleaning policies across all our stores. We are seeing a great response on e-commerce and our recent launch Levi’s® X SuperMario™ has been a hit, our fans have loved it. Every crisis is an opportunity and we are taking this time to accelerate our e-commerce capability.

Q) What kind of changes do you anticipate in the retail world once the
lockdown is called off completely?

There will be significant changes to the landscape and every day is an opportunity to learn, to adjust, to adapt and then to learn again the next day. As we reopen, it won’t be “business as usual.” Shopping and buying behaviors will be different, and the full impact on retail is still a big unknown. That’s why we’re accelerating our efforts to becoming a leading, world-class omni-channel retailer. It will be on us to continue to evolve to meet consumers where they are, while continuing to deliver products that are stylish, built to last and sustainably made.

Q) What is your contingency plan for the possible revival of the business in the post-COVID world?

Levi Strauss has a 167-year history – we have outlived a Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression and the Great Recession. We believe that during a crisis, strong brands will emerge stronger. We have seen situations of extreme distress and have made it out because we have been financially disciplined, and we are geared up to do it again. While E-commerce will play a larger role now, we are constantly learning and adapting, doubling down on things that are working for us.

Q) How do you anticipate consumer behavior will change, and how are you working towards embracing that change and working around it?

The brands that are going to win are going to be the ones that have deep connections with consumers. We are making sure our stores are clean and focusing on ensuring that our consumers feel safe while shopping. Our staff has been prepared to wear masks and gloves and we ask that you wear face coverings when you come to shop with us so that everyone can enjoy a safe environment. Our stores are cleaned more frequently, and high trafficked areas are cleaned more deeply. Fitting rooms are one area that we pay particular attention to cleaning thoroughly and often. We are taking all the precautions and implementing tools for contactless payment. We will limit the number of people in our stores based on local guidelines and are using a quarantine process for items that shoppers try on before being returned to the sales floor. We are also depending a lot on technology, implementing tools for contactless billing, etc. to ensure that our fans feel safe shopping in
Q) As one leading the organization, what were your top priorities during these last few months of the lockdown? What were the key lessons you learned from the experience?

Our main priority is to keep our employees and our consumers safe. The pandemic has hit us all hard, but we believe that every crisis is an opportunity and with a strong brand, right processes and an outstanding management team ready to take of the challenge and has shown tremendous courage and resilience, we are confident we will emerge stronger.

Q) How will you use marketing as a tool to bring consumers back to the brand? Will you use traditional media channels or become more digital-heavy?

We have always endeavored to be where our fans are and over the last few months, owing to the numerous restrictions, we maintained a close digital connection with our audience. The focus is on being agile, respond to situations quickly, and most important being relevant to our fans.

For instance, on May 20, we celebrated the birthday of the blue jean i.e. 501 Day online and realized that the 501 Live music program, entertainment, and interviews from some of our favorite artists brought a lot of joy. We also saw some of our fans and brand friends posting pictures from our past 501® Day events reminding us that the love for the brand is still strong.
We expect demand to be back by Q4 buoyed by a resurging customer sentiment: Santosh Iyer, Mercedes-Benz India

- While the last few months have been difficult for the brand, it has been witnessing continuing consumer enquiries for its offerings on its online sales platform.

- Owing to this interest, the brand also recently launched its latest offering, Mercedes-Benz GLS.

- Santosh Iyer, Vice President Sales and Marketing, Mercedes-Benz India shares his optimism about consumer sentiments turning during the festive season.

Luxury car company Mercedes-Benz, like most other auto brands had a difficult few months. Even before the lockdown, the auto industry had been facing headwinds due to a slowing economy and negative consumer sentiments.

However, one thing that the brand noticed even during the lockdown was the consumer’s interest in its cars with continuing enquiries about its offerings on its online sales channel.

Perhaps that’s why Santosh Iyer, Vice President Sales and Marketing, Mercedes-Benz India is hopeful that demand will be back during the festive season. To understand how the brand is gearing up for the post-Covid world where the retail experience will be very different, we spoke to Iyer, who told us that Mercedes-Benz dealerships will be luxurious in the next few months but with additional safety protocols.
Q) While retail is slowly limping back to normalcy, you just launched a new offering. How different is the entire process of launching a new offering during these adverse times?

We have seen new products always excite the customer and brings some momentum in the market. A new product from Mercedes introduces new features and technologies that customers usually wait for and these make them excited. That is the reason we have decided to continue our product introductions for 2020 and not cancel any of them.

For existing products, we have introduced value-added financial programmes through WishBox 2.0 campaign which are very innovative and customized and cater to individual requirements of customers. This way we ensure financial commitments are offset and customers do not postpone their purchase.

We launched the new GLS in a unique digital format which was live telecast across Mercedes-Benz’s social media handle and the audience reach we achieved was quite overwhelming.

Q) How have the past few months been in terms of business?

We restarted our operations from May 6 and the production is ramping up in a graded manner. The dealership and the service centres have also started resuming operations following all local authorities directives. Business has been picking up slowly and this is just the beginning – we expect sales to peak during the Q4, when we will also have the full availability of all our volume products.

Q) How important was it to stay connected with your audience despite the closure of showrooms?

Mercedes-Benz is a customer centric organization and it is imperative that we stay in continuous touch with our customers, even during the lockdown period when dealerships were shut. We expanded our digital footprint during the lockdown, which we launched in October 2019. We call this campaign ‘Merc from Home’ and this enabled a 360 degree online journey for a
customer, starting from selecting a car, customizing it, applying for a loan, approval process and even a home delivery of the car. We already have a good response to this online sales platform with more than 100 bookings secured. Mercedes-Benz will always be available to a customer anytime, anywhere and our digital initiatives have only further strengthened this

Q) Were people still enquiring about cars during the lockdown?

Amidst the lockdown, one of the bright spots for us has been the continuing enquiries from customers and prospects through our online sales channels. This only shows there is a lot of pent-up demand already in the market and customers are taking their time to decide for a high ticket purchase like a luxury car. Clearly our market introductions and new initiatives are creating interest and curiosity in the market and we are confident this will convert to sales in due course of time. We expect demand to be back by Q4 - buoyed by a resurging customer sentiment and backed by complete portfolio availability

Q) Was there any interesting consumer behaviour insight from the lockdown days that you would want to share?

An emergence of gradual shift in the customer mindset towards digital consumption is an interesting trend we are witnessing. We firmly believe that online sales platform have huge potential and with the entire ecosystem starting from our products, production, retail, service all becoming digital- online sales is the obvious outcome. Saying that, the role of the dealerships and sales executives will become more productive as they now have customers both online and at dealerships. I would like to call this ‘Physidigital’ as the biggest trend that emerged out of this crisis

Q) With the slow unlocking of the country, how are you gearing up to function in this new post-Covid world? How will a Mercedes-Benz showroom be different from the one we saw before the pandemic?

We are adopting and getting adapted to the New Normal post-COVID 19 world. Though our plant, our offices and dealerships have gradually opened up, we are all operating with half of our capacity following social distancing and government guidelines.
The health of our people are of utmost importance and we are taking all measures to ensure that. The look and feel of a Mercedes-Benz showroom is not going to change— it will continue to remain the luxury destinations for all customers and brand enthusiasts. However, whenever a customer walks in to a Mercedes dealership, it will be a safe and secure one where all social distancing norms and all safety and sanitization measures are strictly implemented.

Mercedes-Benz dealerships hence will be luxurious but now with additional safety protocols implemented.

Q) As a brand, what is your priority going ahead?

Our priority as a brand remains to ensure our people are safe and we provide them with a safe and secure workplace – this also applies to our dealerships and also for our suppliers and visitors. It is also our priority to ensure that our customers have their vehicles road ready after the prolonged lock down and hence we have rolled-out various customer service programmes that would aid them.

We are also expediting the deliveries of cars to customers who have ordered them before or during the lockdown. Overall, we are slowly but surely getting back to business and we understand that we need to also create some market excitement and boost the customer confidence.

It also remains our priority to affirm our consumers and the entire ecosystem that as a fundamentally strong brand, we stay invested in our customers and assure them that our strategy and market outlook remains firm and planted.

Q) Has there been any change in your marketing strategy, considering OOH and Print are important mediums for you. How did you communicate with your consumers in the past few months?

During these unprecedented times, our marketing strategy has been to support our customers and spread the message of staying at home and focus on health. During a crisis like this, it is very important to foster the society’s trust in our activities.
Post lockdown, as we shift to unlock 1.0, we are now focusing on communicating from survival to the revival strategy, as we gradually launch new products, online services etc based on graded ramp-up that we have undertaken. Regarding the spends, we monitor all spends carefully and adjust to current circumstances. We are focusing on our digital sales channels and shifting spends accordingly.

Going forward we will certainly give more emphasize on digital as we see a gradual shift towards digital happening. Even before COVID-19, we have been adopting a more data and audience based marketing to reach the most relevant target audience, and we continue to do this.

**Q) Are you recalibrating your targets for the year? What are your expectations from the rest of the year?**

2020 has already turned out to be a challenging year and we have to re-calibrate our targets. This is obvious, as we have a complete wipe out of a quarter of sales from the calendar. Our sales has been affected from three perspective a) Ongoing macro-economic headwinds b) COVID related challenges and C) unavailability of volume models in Q1 and Q2. It will be very difficult to compensate the loss of a quarter of sales from here onwards.

**Q) Do you anticipate a change in consumer sentiments this year?**

Right now the customer sentiment is subdued and we expect it to gradually warm-up in coming month leading to the festivities. The customer sentiment revival is also highly dependent upon how the current unlocking unwinds, and how firmly and swiftly business is back to normal.

**Q) What kind of changes do you anticipate in your consumers now and how are you as a brand preparing to meet those dynamic expectations?**

We see a shift in consumer mindset towards online consumption. This trend has emerged and it is going to increase even as the lockdown gets over and normalcy resumes. In an overall digital ecosystem, we have taken quite a few
decisive steps so that we, as the foremost luxury automotive brand, offer our customers best of products, services and experience that deepens our brand connect with the consumer.

Our online sales platform under the ‘Merc from Home’ umbrella has set the trend of online sales in the automotive industry and we are already seeing the early results. There has been quite high number of enquiries and also the conversions in sales are happening gradually. Our new initiative of ‘Mercedes Consultation Studio’ has already taken off with good customer response and feedback. Similarly our ‘Online Concierge’ has been rolled-out and has been adding tremendous value with more than 1000 online consultations already completed.

Apart from sales, our online channels are equipped with seamless service booking, service billing, accessories sales etc. In all these initiatives we have integrated all our dealers who are now connected and integrated into our online ecosystem that adds value to a customer.
It’s extremely important for brands to be agile and responsive to changing consumer behaviour and dynamic external factors:

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- With retail outlets under a complete shutdown and e-commerce only delivering essentials, electronic brands are facing a roadblock too.

- Shivam Ranjan, Head of Marketing, Motorola India however, shares his optimism with us and tells us all they have been doing during the lockdown to ensure the relevant messaging goes out to its customers.

As we enter another week of India’s lockdown, the world as we had known it seems to have changed completely. People have been indoors in India for close to 1.5 months now. It has had a huge impact on our economy, and on the way we conduct business.

While it is still too early to predict what the post-Covid world will look like, there are constant conversations around the best ways and strategies organizations can employ to effectively navigate these unprecedented times and the uncertain future.

While there have been many industries that have seen a complete shutdown, there are many that are optimistic about the future and are confident that they will bounce back once things start coming back to normal.
We recently caught up with Shivam Ranjan, Head of Marketing, Motorola India who shared his optimism about the post-Covid world and also spoke about how meaningful and relevant messaging through digital media and CRM has helped the brand stay connected with its target audience during the lockdown.

Edited excerpts:

Q) Considering all retail outlets are shut and e-commerce is only delivering essentials, how challenging have the last few weeks been for you as a brand?
These are unprecedented times and are challenging times for all brands and businesses alike. However, as a technology brand, we are still relevant as enablers of connectivity and are optimistic that consumer demand will bounce back in the long run for mobiles and technology products.

Q) What has your marketing strategy been during the lockdown weeks? Have you changed your media mix, investing more on platforms like Digital since a few other mediums like OOH/Print have been suffering due to the lockdown?
Our strategy is to stay genuine, relevant yet engaging during the lockdown. We have been doing this successfully by sharing information, technology tips and engaging on topics that are useful and entertaining.

In terms of media, Digital and TV have clearly gained during the lockdown whereas Cinema, Radio, OOH and print are virtually non-existent. However, in the recent past, we have been a digital-heavy brand and hence for us, the media mix does not change significantly.

Q) How have you been ensuring you stay connected with your target audience?
Meaningful and relevant messaging through digital media and CRM has helped us stay connected with our target audience.

Q) What have your key learnings from this experience been?
Change is the biggest constant in this dynamic and unpredictable situation. It is extremely important for brands to be agile and responsive to the changing consumer behaviour and dynamic external factors. ROI will become more important than ever for marketers across brands and consumer behaviour as well as media consumption patterns will continue to evolve till external factors stabilize. I feel it is too early to give any concrete learnings at this stage since the situation is still evolving.
Innovations to meet emerging Consumer Asks: This global health crisis has pushed every business to rethink their offering to the customers. There is a definitive change in the way consumers buy and the way companies sell. We too are focused on creating offerings that address this new shift and new consumer needs. Our focus currently is to innovate our product offerings, channel strategy and go-to-consumer models to become a truly customer-centric organisation.

Q) What kind of communications have you been putting out? How have you been ensuring that whatever you put out is relevant to the times we’re living in right now?

Our communication strategy during this time has been to partner the consumers during these hard times.

For Tata Sampann, Indian nutrition backed by science is at the core of the brand. We always aim to provide ‘Sarvagunn Sampann’ i.e. wholesome nutrition to our consumers. The conversations around physical, mental, and emotional well-being during the on-going lockdown are critical to helping consumers remain unscathed. With digital becoming a primary medium to connect with consumers, we launched two digital-first communications for our consumers during the lockdown. The first, ‘Beat the Lockdown’ was aimed at helping consumers stay fit and nourished throughout the lockdown help of a nutritionist, yoga coach, and psychologist. This was a three-week digital forward campaign for us, with expert lives almost everyday around issues people are facing during lockdown related to nutrition, mental and physical health, and giving out simple remedies to it.

Our second campaign was ‘Har Din Haldi, HarGhar Healthy’ that focused on helping consumers building Immunity through the everyday Indian spice—Turmeric. We created cool, new ways of using turmeric every day. This was followed by around 375+ recipes curated from user-generated content. We also sampled Tata Sampann Turmeric with Pride of Cows milk in Mumbai. Idea was to stress the importance of haldi—doodh for immunity. The response has been terrific— with over 6.7 crore engagements on various social media platforms for Tata Sampann.

In these changing times, we understand that parents are constantly looking for interesting ways to keep their children engaged and productive at home.
Q) Do you foresee the future of retail seeing a sea change in the post-Covid world? Are you as a brand, ready to adapt to that change?
In the post COVID-19 world, every business and industry will have to adapt, including retail. It will be important for retail to incorporate processes and norms that promote social distancing and hygiene thus evoking trust in consumers. As a brand, we are absolutely committed to the channel and will support them in every way to ensure a sustainable and mutually beneficial outcome.

Q) Marketing during times like these could be tricky as a lot of times brands can be blamed of being opportunistic. How have you made sure that your marketing communications have stayed relevant and not come across as insensitive?
Consumer sentiments are heightened as we deal with this unprecedented situation. In these times, it is extremely important for the marketing communication to be sensitive, meaningful and relevant. At the same time, communication from brands cannot be product-agnostic. It is important to find the right balance between them. Business continuity is important, not just for the brand, but also for consumers and overall economy to recover. We have simply tried to do a healthy mix of both promotional as well as helpful and relevant messaging to ensure that we come across as genuine yet responsible and empathetic.
How OnePlus pulled off the global launch of the OnePlus 8 series in the midst of a lockdown

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Siddhant Narayan, Head of Marketing – India, OnePlus tells us all that went into making sure that the launch was a success and how the experience taught them to think innovatively in an attempt to stay connected with its user base even during the lockdown.

Before the Coronavirus-induced lockdown hit the world, India had been one of the fastest growing smartphone markets in India. However, owing to supply chain disruption, the industry grew by 4% between January and March this year, according to CMR’s India mobile handset market review report for Q1 2020.

With India in its fourth phase of lockdown, things are slowly inching towards normalcy. With a few cities opening up, retailers are opening up shops. E-commerce players are also slowly restocking on products and starting to deliver, giving hope to smartphone players of things getting back on track soon.

However one brand that pulled off a rare feat was OnePlus when it launched its latest OnePlus 8 series of smartphones right in the middle of the lockdown. Everyone associated with the brand knows the fanfare involved with every launch. However, how were things different this time? We tried to find out from Siddhant Narayan, Head of Marketing – India, OnePlus who also told us how the current situation gave the brand an opportunity to think out of the box.
and further enhance its consumer engagement through owned channels and social media.

Excerpts:

Q) While the entire country is under lockdown, OnePlus has carried out something amazing, you have launched a phone. What were the challenges of putting everything together amidst a lockdown?

For the first-time ever, we launched our latest series through a global digital-only launch event. It brought together community members from across the world to witness the unveiling of the OnePlus 8 series and was a truly wholesome moment for us as a brand.

It involved working very closely with over 2,000 people spread across time-zones and ensuring we remained connected and in-sync with all the developments so we could work towards ensuring a seamless event. Moreover, it was crucial to be flexible and adapt to changing scenarios while striving for the best outcome. As Pete Lau had mentioned earlier, our launch date was pushed back three times out of concern for the current situation until we decided it was time to move forward with the hope for a better future.

Q) Phone launches usually happen with a lot of fanfare, especially for OnePlus that is so connected with its community. How was the launch of OnePlus 8 different? How did you create the hype around the launch?

Community engagement through offline activities and events has been central to our engagement efforts. However, given the current scenario, we were presented with an interesting opportunity to think differently and further enhance our engagement with users using owned channels like the OnePlus Forums and Red Cable Club as well as social media in order to create meaningful user experiences.

In the lead-up to the launch, we unveiled our Hypertaskers campaign to celebrate our community, a generation that seamlessly switches between a diverse range of roles, while attuned to performing tasks at incredible speed enabled by the cutting-edge technology on the OnePlus 8 Series. Once the launch happened, our community was yearning to get a hands-on experience of these flagship series. But due to the current circumstances, that
would have not been possible. Therefore we created a digital initiative wherein our community received first-hand opportunity to unbox the phones virtually using the Instagram’s customized AR filters. This led to a highly positive brand engagement with our community and consumers at large, across India. We achieved nearly 98 million impressions online. We ran an online contest for the most creative AR unboxing ideas and received over 1000 entries within 2 weeks.

**Q)** Since you could not hold an event, did all your marketing monies go to Digital, not just for the launch but also in general?

OnePlus has predominantly been a digital-first brand and that has served as an advantage as we evolved through the years. The new norms have definitely led to a spike in content consumption online so there has been a natural lean towards digital platforms with more people spending their time on the web and on social media. However, we’re taking the time to understand and analyze the patterns in consumption and identify relevant channels such as search, social media, or email, in order to effectively communicate with our target audience.

**Q)** Apart from the launch, what are the things you have been communicating with your consumers about? As a marketer, what has your priority been in the past 1.5 months?

It has been our main priority to remain closely connected with our community during this time. We are constantly exploring different ways to curate meaningful content and experiences that our users will connect with as we all navigate this new normal.

For example, we recently launched OnePlus Domi8, a unique PUBG MOBILE tournament for our community that will also allow them to virtually interact with pro gamers and Indian cricketers and compete in a one-of-a-kind exhibition match series.

For our Red Cable Club (RCC) members, we have introduced ‘Summer of OnePlus’ which allows them access to special activities and first-hand access to sales announcements, exclusive updates, contests and much more.

Through the above-mentioned initiatives and even our seemingly simple campaigns like #IndoorsShotOnOnePlus, we hope to reassure our users and let them know that we’re all in this together.
Q) The retail sector might still take a long time to see a lot of footfalls post-Covid. I know you have been pushing your offline presence but will the current situation now make you pause on your offline expansion and bring the focus back on your online presence?

For OnePlus, the focus has always been to craft world-class user experiences—be it through the online retail space or through offline store presence. This continues to hold paramount importance for us even in the current situation. Also, being a digital-first brand since inception, there has never really been a question of shifting between online or offline platforms. The intensification in the brand’s offline strategy is only to complement the existing online business model. We have expanded our retail footprint in order to create more offline touchpoints for users to physically engage with the brand and better understand the product. Our experience stores have not just morphed into a community hub but also a strong network where customers can share their positive experiences to assist prospective buyers. This has greatly enabled us to gain more visibility and trust among offline audiences.

Q) Due to the lockdown, will there be a limited number of phones available for the Indian market?

While there was an initial slowdown in smartphone manufacturing, we are expecting an uptick in momentum given the recent government directives hinting at relaxation for the manufacturing sector. With commercial functions regaining pace, we are hopeful of things getting back to normal in due course of time. Also in the new norm, smartphones have reinstated their importance as the focal point driving our virtually driven lives. So customer demand for smartphones might be delayed, but they will never be completely halted.

OnePlus users can look forward to accessing the latest OnePlus 8 Series from the end of this month onwards. The latest flagship will be available across channels.

Q) Why did you not consider launching the phone once the lockdown was lifted?

Community is at the core of everything OnePlus does. We are constantly listening to our user and fan base to innovate, engage and create meaningful experiences for them. We were cognizant of the growing anticipation around
the OnePlus 8 Series. Keeping in mind this sentiment as well as the overall expectations from the brand, we went ahead with a global, online launch of the OnePlus 8 Series. This event was also a manifestation of our efforts to adapt to the new norm and stay relevant to the times, undeterred by current circumstances.

Q) What have your key learnings from this entire experience been? Has it helped make you more agile as a brand?

The current circumstances have only reinforced our focus on the community. It is their feedback and expectations which hold the most value for us as a global technology company. The new norm that we all are living by at present is heavily reliant on online services. People are invariably spending more time with their gadgets—be it their smartphones or smart TVs. The ways in which people connect, consume, create, and compute have undergone considerable changes. Therefore staying connected with consumers has never been more important than now.

OnePlus has used this time to strengthen its ties with the community and curate experiences aligned to their expectations. It has helped us stay attuned to their needs and continue with our pursuit of achieving excellence in technology.

Q) Will we be seeing any high decibel campaign around the new launch? How are you going to market it?

Our OnePlus 8 series received an immensely positive response globally including the US, Europe and China markets. In India, the initial assessment of the OnePlus 8 series is very positive, and we are expecting it to transition into robust sales in the coming months.

Irrespective of the format or channel, word-of-mouth continues to remain the crux of our overall marketing strategy. Over the years, we have earned the faith and trust of 5 million community members in India. The OnePlus community has always been actively promoting our flagship products by constantly sharing their positive experiences as well as feedback and on how our products have meaningfully changed their lives.
As a brand, we want to ensure that all our channel partners are adequately taken care of in terms of cash flow and supply of goods: Sunil Narula

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- In today’s interview, Sunil Narula, Vice President, Marketing, Panasonic Life Solutions India, walks us through all that the brand has been doing to stay relevant during the month of the lockdown.

- He tells us that the company is doing all in its might to not only ensure the safety of its employees and stakeholders, its is also making sure there is no retrenchment, and employees and vendors are paid regularly.

March and April usually are critical times for businesses because traditionally organizations have their sales closing during this time. However, this year, everything has been turned on its head due to the unprecedented spread of the Coronavirus and the resulting lockdown.

While a few states are slowly easing restrictions and shops are opening up again, it will take a long time for things to get back to normal. Retail might take an even longer time to bounce back.

However, with the gradual relaxation of lockdown norms, organizations are slowly limping back to normalcy and devising ways of ensuring that there is business continuity without endangering any of the stakeholders involved.
We recently caught with Sunil Narula, Vice President, Marketing, Panasonic Life Solutions India, who spoke to us about all that the brand has been doing to stay relevant during the month of the lockdown. He also tells us how the brand has been communicating with its influencer community that includes electricians, architects, specifiers and helping them upgrade their skills during the lockdown period. Moreover, the brand has been doing everything that it can do to ensure that its employees and stakeholders are taken care of. At a time when there are job and salary cuts everywhere, Panasonic Life Solutions India has made sure that there are no retrenchment, that they pay not only their employees regularly but also that their vendors are paid on time.

Edited excerpts:

**Q) As the country has been in a lockdown for more than a month now, how have you been tackling this unprecedented event as an organization?**
March is a very critical month for us because that’s when we have our annual sales closing. Because of the sudden lockdown, our top-line and bottom-line got impacted as our dependence on the month of March is traditionally high. Whereas, a lot of our sales depends on the demand received in the last 10 days of the month. Our sales in April were zero, because of the lockdown and all physical stores, markets were shut, and there was no financial activity. However, around April 28 and 29, when the lockdown was meekly relaxed, we started observing a slight movement in the market and things are limping back to normalcy.

Panasonic Life Solutions has strongholds in Tier II and Tier IV markets and these regions haven’t experienced the impact as compared to the metros and Tier I markets. With the business continuity in the smaller markets, this has further resulted into restructuring of the business at some level. We are witnessing sales and movement in markets like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Karnataka etc. Besides this, we have seen resumption in sales of Indoor Air Quality products like fans amidst the on-going summer season in contrast to the Air conditioner or a cooler. Reopening of hardware retailers selling fans has slowly contributed to the sales.

**Q) For consumer-facing brands, it’s critical to stay connected with your audience. How have you done that during the lockdown?**
Amidst the current global situation, consumer sentiments are of utmost importance. It has become a fundamental aspect of the marketing communications team to stay connected with relevance.

Connecting via social media platforms with our consumers is an ongoing effort, however, our focus also has been to engage with our electrician community and channel partners who are influencers to us. We have conducted 35-40 training sessions talking about our varied products to ensure that our stakeholders, namely electricians, distributors and dealers, are adequately trained and their skills are upgraded. We haven’t tapped mainstream mediums like television or print media to communicate since the lockdown announcement but we are highly active on social media. Apart from our trade business, a big portion of our business comes from construction and renovation. Besides this, our consultants, architects and others have been constantly engaging with us via platforms like e-mails and LinkedIn as well.

**Q)** What are the mediums you have used over the past few weeks? Have you moved marketing monies from other mediums to digital? Do you think as a brand you’ll continue to be digital heavy in terms of marketing even after the lockdown is lifted?

We have reduced our dependence on conventional marketing media, our ATL spends have been considerably reduced for this year. We are evaluating various media for marketing this year, this would include leveraging the digital, social and e-comm channels. The way consumers would consume the content would change and with this our strategy of reaching them.

Apart from this, we are also looking at influencer programs. Our main influencers are electricians, architects, specifiers etc. We are also planning and running targeted marketing programs for them in both online and offline space.

We would develop the skills of our electrician community with an ACE (anchor certified electricians’ program), alongside also educate them on our products. This way we would reach the masses across the country.

**Q)** As a marketer, what has your priority been during this crisis situation?
Covid-19 has impacted the economy majorly so far, the uncertainty of normalcy looks at a distance. We are concerned regarding the safety and well-being of our employees, stakeholders, dealers and distributors. At Panasonic Life Solutions, customer centricity has been pivotal and over the years we have built robust trust amongst them. We have stayed connected with our consumers, stakeholders, employees and distributors via digital and social media platforms as constant communication is the key. This will not only revive the customer relation but will also boost their morale in staying together in this. In times of crises, it is imperative for people to get right, credible information, especially with fake news and information rampant spreading on social media. It has become increasingly important to communicate the accurate information that affects the company and employees during a crisis period transparently and in a timely manner.

Q) What have your key learnings from these past few weeks been?

Consumers are looking for trust in these challenging times and they would not experiment even if they must pay a premium. The consumers would not experiment in such a time and want to go with trusted partners and brands.

It should be noted that in this Covid era, social distancing being the key, production costs are due to rise of at least 30-40% across segments and industries. While time will say how much of the increased costs can be absorbed by the companies and industries themselves by bringing in some efficiencies, but the end consumer would need to pay more in times to come.

Q) You are present in a segment that might not have been very relevant during the lockdown as these are products the purchase of which can be pushed. However, how have you made your communication relevant to the consumer, to continue to stay in their minds?

You are correct, the purchase of our category products can be pushed, but if you look at it another way, switches and switchgear can burnout and need replacement, lights can blow out and the fans might also need replacement during the summer season, and that’s when these products become essential.

Wherever the lockdown has relaxed, we started seeing sale of our products across verticals, which testifies our assumption above. Furthermore, we have also been active on social media and through mailers, webinars and virtual events to reach out to our focused group.
Q) Do you believe effective communication strategies during a time of crisis can help cement a brand’s place in a consumer’s life?

Yes, it is vital to have effective and transparent communication strategies in place during times like these in order to ensure smooth and consistent communication at all levels and different stakeholders. At Panasonic Life Solutions, we are consistent in practicing and following empathetic communication with our consumers in order to add value and assure them security in crisis situations.

As a one of the leading market players, we are monitoring market trends, consumer behavioral patterns which are important in driving relevant conversations with the consumers. During this lockdown, we have witnessed that most consumers engage via social media platforms to communicate their concerns and queries. We have rapidly adapted to this change by channelizing our resources through digital and social marketing mediums. The digital space has been dominant and we are actively involved in staying connected with our customers.

Q) Did brand purpose become more important for you as a brand during these last few weeks?

Both Anchor and Panasonic are brands that have always stood for the community, people and the nation. In the last few weeks, the purpose has come to the forefront even more. We have stood by all our employees, vendors, suppliers and dealer / distributor community.

Our MD has very clearly spelt out that there would be no retrenchment, we have been paying all our employees regularly. Apart from this, all our vendors have been paid on time and additionally, we have offered enhanced credit terms to all our dealers/distributors/partners’ community.

Q) What will your strategy be towards bouncing back once the situation starts getting to normal?

There will be umpteen numbers of challenges in terms of market stability and on the financial front post the COVID-19 era. We will aggressively prioritize our focus on the safety of our employees and their families. Post resuming offices, we will observe and take precautions before opening up our workplaces, including proper sanitization of our work spaces, maintaining social
distancing and wearing masks. For some of our offices, we might continue to work from home even after the lockdown is over, and only ask the employees to come in when it’s necessary.

Also, along with our employees, it is necessary to take care of our channels of distribution. We have a strong network of nearly 3,600 dealers and distributors across the country, and they are an essential part of our business. We will do our best to support them, though supplies and logistics is a major concern at the moment.

As a brand, we want to ensure that all our channel partners are adequately taken care of in terms of cash flow and supply of goods. We have ensured that the suppliers get their payments despite the lockdown, and have arranged for soft copies of documents which are required to facilitate international shipping. In addition to this, we have got additional permissions to ensure that our warehouses can operate.
Marketing is a dynamic subject, it should be relevant to the market needs: Tarun Garg

In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

Tarun Garg, Director – Sales, Marketing and Service, Hyundai Motor India. He walked us through the brand’s experience during these adverse times.

He spoke about all that they have been doing to make sure they stay connected with their audience and make consumer journeys more seamless for the future.

The past year hasn’t particularly been easy for the automotive industry. Even before the Covid-19 induced lockdown hit the economy, the auto industry had been witnessing a slowdown. And things became more difficult due to the lockdown, owing to the complete shutdown of retail outlets.

However, this also became a time for brands to reflect about the future, on how to become more agile and better-prepared to face such adverse situations in the future. It also taught a lot of brands how important it is to put out effective and relevant communication, it taught them the importance and sensitivity and empathy.

Moreover, with gradual relaxation of the lockdown in this fourth phase, businesses and outlets are slowly opening, giving brands hope that things will slowly get back on track.

To understand how it has coped with the last two months and what the next few months and quarters will look like, we caught up with Tarun Garg, Director
Sales, Marketing and Service, Hyundai Motor India Ltd. He walked us through the brand’s experience during these adverse times and spoke about all that they have been doing to make sure they stay connected with their audience and make consumer journeys more seamless for the future. He also talks about the lessons he as a marketer learnt from the Covid-19 experience.

Excerpts:

Q) The auto industry had been witnessing a slump even before Coronavirus hit the world. While it is difficult to predict right now, do you have hopes that the second half of the year will bring some relief to the auto sector?

The automotive industry has been witnessing challenges in recent times, due to current situations it is hard to predict the market response, however we are positive that once the situation normalizes, the second half of the year may bring some relief in comparison to current situation. We have seen some positive movement after partial lift in lockdown and in areas where our dealerships are now operational.

Q) Since showrooms and malls have seen a complete shutdown, how have auto brands like yours been conducting business? Are people still enquiring about cars? How have things been in the past month for you?

Hyundai introduced India’s first online automobile sales platform- ‘Click to Buy’ earlier in January for a seamless, convenient and safe end to end car purchase journey. During this period of national emergency as well, Hyundai is fully geared up to cater to the needs of its new-age digital customers for purchase of new Hyundai cars. All Hyundai models and the recently launched CRETA and Verna are available on the ‘Click to Buy’ website and this would act as an additional sales channel for over 500 Hyundai dealerships. The platform is connected in real-time across India to fulfill the needs of the millennial generation.

A few studies showed us that people are still enquiring about cars and consuming content about automobiles. We have activated all our digital channels to interact with customers through the digital medium and have started promoting our online car buying platform. We have initiated both online and offline measures for customer enquiries and are witnessing a good response on both platforms.

Q) In adverse times like these, should a marketer stay away from communicating with consumers or should communicate only if he has
something relevant to say?
Marketers should always be relevant to the time and customer needs. Our recent campaign ‘Hyundai Cares’ was aimed at promoting messages around maintaining social distancing, staying home and staying safe. The campaign also delivered our message that Hyundai is always standing by India through its ups and downs. We also communicated about our service initiatives and told customers how we could assist them in case of any emergency. We believe that in such adverse times, it is always better to stay relevant while communicating with customers. However, at the same time, the role of a marketer is also to see the future and promote content which can drive positivity.

Q) What has your marketing strategy been in the past one year? Did you have to tweak that further once the pandemic and lockdown came into being?
Marketing is a dynamic subject, it should be relevant to the market needs. Yes, we have tweaked our marketing strategy because of this pandemic with respect to creative, content, media mix and scheduling.

Q) What kind of changes has your media mix seen? Is Digital taking the biggest share now? And do you anticipate yourself sticking to this spending pattern even after the lockdown is lifted?
The most consumed media during lockdown has been TV & Digital. While we stayed away from all traditional media during the lockdown, we did engage our customers over digital media through our website and social. Moving forward, while we plan to stay active on digital through increased investments, we will still be present on traditional media to communicate with a wider audience.

Q) What have your key learnings from this experience been? Will this, in any way, lead to a change in positioning of Hyundai as the brand in the future?
Hyundai has always been a progressive brand and ready to face any challenge. The learning will help us to plan crisis management in a much better way now as we have worked out many innovative ways of working and conducting business because of the restrictions implemented.

Q) Do you think brand purpose takes center stage at times of crisis?
Yes, Absolutely! Caring for humanity has always been at the heart of Hyundai’s vision. As a responsible and caring brand, Hyundai has always been at the forefront that is in line with our global vision ‘Progress for Humanity’. We believe that customers value brands that are always socially
relevant and contribute towards the betterment of humankind.

Q) How have you ensured that your communication hasn’t been misread as being opportunistic by consumers? Do you think effective communication during adverse times can help win consumer trust?

We, as a brand have never utilized these unprecedented times to push our products. Our endeavor in these trying times has been concerted towards the betterment of the society. Various CSR initiatives taken up by Hyundai include:

• Contribution to PM CARES Relief Fund and to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Relief Fund
• Hand Over of Imported COVID-19 Advanced Diagnostic Test Kits to ICMR
• Strategic Partnership with Air Liquide Medical Systems to augment production and supply of ventilators
• Distribution of Dry Rations, and donation of PPE Kits, Masks & Sanitizers

Further, Hyundai is also proactively bringing ease in all ways possible to our customers’ needs, ensuring safety and welfare of internal teams and extending support and guidance to dealers and vendors through sanitisation programs.

We truly understand our responsibility towards the society and our customers and have reflected the same through our communication during this time. It has been heartening to see that several customers have appreciated our efforts and solutions in these times of critical need that stands testimony to the love and trust India has in us.
As people adapt to social distancing and move away from public transport, demand for personal vehicles is expected to go up: Tata Motors

- In our latest interview series, we talk to brands to understand how they are coping with the new normal and their strategies towards navigating these difficult times.

- Considering the auto industry has seen a huge impact, we spoke to leaders from Tata Motors including Vivek Srivatsa, Head – Marketing, Passenger Vehicle Business Unit, Ashesh Dhar, Head – Sales, Marketing and Customer Care, Electric Mobility Business Unit and UT Ramprasad, General Manager, Marketing Communications, Commercial Vehicle Business Unit.

- The three leaders told us about all that is happening at the organization and how they are preparing for an uncertain future.

The Indian auto industry has been having a tough year. It was struggling with negative consumer sentiments and a drop in sales even before Coronavirus hit the world, bringing it to a standstill.

China accounts for a whooping 27% of India’s auto part imports. However, if reports are to be believed, experts expect things to get better closer to the festive season. Having said that, how consumers react to the situation is something that we will need to wait and watch.

To understand how the auto industry has been reacting and coping with the current situation, we reached out to Tata Motors. Vivek Srivatsa, Head – Marketing, Passenger Vehicle Business Unit, Tata Motors, Ashesh Dhar, Head – Sales, Marketing and Customer Care, Electric Mobility Business Unit, Tata Motors and UT Ramprasad, General Manager, Marketing Communications, Commercial Vehicle Business Unit, Tata Motors gave us a sense of all that has
been happening at the organization and how the brand will adapt to the changing times and consumer needs.

Excerpts:

Q) The auto industry had been witnessing a slump even before the Covid lockdown came about. With showrooms closed for over a month now, how have you modified your marketing strategies during these times?

At Tata Motors, we have been constantly working towards staying in touch with our customers during this difficult time. Since the lockdown was announced, our business units have been actively engaging with our customers on various platforms. For instance, our call centre executives, product specialists and dealer staffs are constantly engaging with potential buyers through phone calls, WhatsApp video calls, messages and emails to provide them with essential information during these times.

Similarly, we have launched Click to Drive, which is an end-to-end digital sales initiative by us, that has taken our entire passenger vehicle product sales online. This initiative will help customers buy cars from the safety and comfort of their homes. It has been integrated with all Tata Motors dealers from more than 750 outlets across the country and will also offer vehicle home delivery for our customers at a later date.

We are also providing our customers with attractive, limited period offers on their purchases in addition to facilitating up to 100% on road funding on our entire range of cars and SUVs. Customers can also take advantage of the long tenure EMI schemes (up to 8 years) thus lowering the amount of their monthly EMI payment. The option of customising EMI payments every year in line with their cash flows offers additional convenience and enhances benefits. Additionally, to thank and support the brave COVID frontline warriors (doctors, healthcare professionals and police), we have special offers as well.

Tata Motors has virtually launched some of its BSVI models from the commercial vehicle portfolio, using digital platforms. Additionally, the sales teams are also engaging with the customers all across the country, via digital communication apps, to disseminate information about the newly-launched products and also accept bookings.
To recognise the efforts of truck drivers and acknowledging their role on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tata Motors has launched a #ThankYouIndianTruckers campaign. Through this campaign, Tata Motors aims to uplift the morale of the truck drivers. Tata Motors has also been providing various facilities across the country for the truck drivers through its dealerships, workshops and Saarthi Aaram Kendras, while also engaging with the ones that are on highways by offering free food, sanitisers and masks.

On the aftersales front, we have extended our warranty and free service period for all our PV and CV owners, whose expiration date falls within the dates of the lockdown.

Q) The way retail works might see a complete overhaul. People might not want to come to showrooms for a while now. How are you preparing for the future which right now looks pretty uncertain? Auto is a big spender on mediums like OOH, Print and Experiential. Since these three mediums have been really impacted, lots of brands are now shifting marketing dollars to other mediums. Are you doing this too, and will you stick to this strategy even after the lockdown?

The online model will not completely replace the traditional model of purchasing. However, the digital model is aimed at minimizing the amount of physical contact that the traditional model requires. As of present day, customer interaction takes place right from the first step till the end. A customer starts searching for a product 6 months before he/she actually purchases it, thereby making the overall process last longer as compared to the previous process timeline, which was 3 weeks. Therefore, the digital sale process is more detailed and customer focused.

Furthermore, digital product demos will play an important role in making product exploration more experiential for the customer.

Q) A lot of the appeal for consumers when wanting to buy a car comes from the touch and feel factor. Now since that isn't really happening, how have you been innovating to reach out to consumers with the help of technology?

Our PV customers can explore and discover our products with the innovative digital brochures that we have made available on our Click to Drive platform.
The video brochure helps customers discover each car and its features in great detail. Furthermore, the test drive is also a touch and feel element of the car-buying process. Therefore, we will provide test drives for customers who ask for them while following social distancing and basic hygiene guidelines. Potentially, only one customer will be able to drive the test vehicle, while a dealer staff member sits in the rear seat, in order to follow the social distancing norms. We will also ensure that the test drive vehicle is sanitized along with putting protective covers on interior parts that come in contact frequently with the customer.

On the CV front, Tata Motors has been using its social media channels to reach out to its customers to educate them on the profit-potential-increasing value adds and upgrades to the BSVI-compliant range of commercial vehicles. The series of videos are being released on the company’s social media platforms. The benefits – which are extremely customer centric – can be easily communicated to all the stakeholders in the commercial vehicle ecosystem through the videos, as well as other forms of content and with easy access to the internet.

Q) During adverse times like these, people might not think of buying a car and might not want to see ads around that too. So when you come out with any kind of consumer facing communication, what is it that you’re trying to achieve?

We understand that it is important to bring the human aspect of the brand across the channels of communication. Our aim has always been to communicate that we are constantly available for our customers and are more of a permanent resource than just an automotive brand trying to sell vehicles. On the PV front, we are keeping our customers entertained with the help of online puzzles and games and are ensuring that they are taken care of by providing them vehicle care taking tips during the lockdown.

On the social media platforms, our Electric Mobility Business Division changed track from being in active sales mode, treading different paths, to help keep consumers informed and engaged. Leveraged moment marketing at various appropriate occasions, with reasonable success. Also ran a series of campaign, advising our newest customers on Nexon EV Care Tips and the precautions they should take while keeping their newly acquired Nexon EVs in good condition, during the lockdown.
Q) What have your key learnings been so far?

Agility is paramount to facilitate quick problem-solving and easy innovation. We all need to have the foresight to recognise the merits and longevity of new-age platforms and stay ahead of the curve, in terms of adoption. Both these factors will help brands stay relevant in the long run.

Q) Do you expect things to pick up in the second half of the year? Will consumer sentiments change, or will people continue to be careful about their spending?

In the immediate future, I expect discretionary spending to take a backseat as customers will focus more on financial planning for future aspirations. While perception of term insurance has evolved in the recent years, I see customers proactively considering savings plans like guaranteed products, which offer a risk-averse wealth-creation model. In current times of reducing interest rates, wherein traditionally preferred savings instruments like FDs may offer significantly lower returns as compared to guaranteed products, insurance is likely to see a spurt in customer interest.

Q) As marketers, what have your key learnings from these past few weeks been?

The current pandemic has challenged individuals and businesses across the world which has led to the emergence of a ‘new normal’. It has changed the way brands look at conventional marketing techniques. Due to the near complete shutdown of print media, and the implication of social distancing norms, brands are now leveraging digital platforms for product and message positioning. Brands have had to reposition themselves digitally which has now become an indispensable aspect of marketing to their customers.

Q) While it’s difficult to predict at this point, do you expect things to get better for the auto industry in the second half of the year, during the festive months, by when hopefully things will be more under control?

Although the situation is uncertain right now, the pandemic has brought about a significant change in the perspective regarding transportation usage in the minds of consumers. As people adapt to the norms of social distancing and move away from using public transport, the demand for personal vehicles is expected to go up, thereby driving the demand for personal mobility. However, time will tell what the exact outcome is.
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