

The impact Covid-19 had on the marketing industry: Case study- Communications agency X

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<p>This thesis explores how the Coronavirus, which was discovered in late 2019 spread across the world causing a global pandemic. The pandemic had huge ramifications across the globe for both businesses and consumers, and this thesis aims to highlight the impacts on the marketing industry, by taking a closer look at a Helsinki based case study: Communications agency X.</p> <p>The objective of this thesis was to gather data on how Covid-19 impacted marketing communication agencies, and how they managed to stay afloat by changing their strategies to fit the new normal. The research questions were divided into 3 themes, which were also used as the subjects for the qualitative research, conducted in chapter 4.</p> <p>The research questions were the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenges and opportunities during the pandemic - Changes in client relationships - Changes to marketing content <p>To begin with, the subject matter was researched from a theoretical standpoint, which was compiled of articles and posts about the virus itself, the impacts it had on businesses in general and finally how it affected the marketing industry.</p> <p>The consequences the pandemic had on the marketing industry was accumulated over the span of 6 month, collecting detailed accounts and opinions from various sources. The theoretical data shows both the negative and positive effects that the virus caused for the industry.</p> <p>The empirical data was collected using a qualitative research method. The research took the form of semi structured phone interviews with 4 members of staff from who work or have worked at the case study company during the time of the pandemic. The recorded and transcribed interviews were conducted during the first quarter of 2021.</p> <p>The research findings confirmed that while the pandemic hit the industry hard and forced many to adapt to changes and needs of both client and consumers, the pandemic also paved way for new opportunities, such as an increased use of digital marketing, which opened doors for new jobs. Remote working was also seen as a blessing as it removed unnecessary micro- management and allowed industry staffers to be more creative.</p>	
Keywords Marketing, coronavirus, business, marketing content, pandemic	

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1 Introduction

In late December of 2019, a new virus was discovered in the Chinese province of Wuhan. The respiratory disease was classed as a virus and given the name Coronavirus. The virus led to a full blown, global pandemic, as the virus spread quickly from country to country. Large efforts to contain the spread of the virus were conducted by authorities in every country, but due to misinformation and slow calls to action by governments the virus kept spreading.

The actions authorities took to combat the spread of the virus caused a host of problems for local businesses, as people were advised to only go out for essential products and services. This of course caused a loss in customers for a lot of companies, putting them at risk in an already unstable economy. To top it off many businesses were told to shut down completely to avoid people coming into too close of contact with each other.

During the first wave of the pandemic, I was interning at a medium sized marketing agency in Helsinki, Finland. I saw, first-hand how the agency and its clients were affected by the global pandemic, and how quickly the agency had to react to the changes. If they were to survive.

I sought out to research how marketing agencies cope with hardships of this proportion, and how well they are able to react and recover from the losses the pandemic has caused. But not only did agencies themselves have to adapt, but advertisement on a whole had to be changed to fit the “new world” where customers avoid going out for more than the necessities.

1.1 Thesis objectives and limitations

The objective of this thesis is to gather data of how Covid-19 has impacted marketing communication agencies, and how they have dealt with the changes that it has brought. Lockdown enforcements changed consumer behaviour and caused companies to either pull their marketing budgets or change it drastically; this forced marketing agencies to re-vamp to hold onto their clients and keep their doors open.

The thesis will also explore how the pandemic affected the sale of their marketing services to their client base and how their client relationships changed, as well as how they had to change their advertising content to fit the new normal.

The thesis will solely focus on A Finnish marketing communication agency to analyse how the staff and their decision makers reacted and adapted to the changes Covid-19 has introduced. The thesis is not a guide of how a marketing communications agency can survive during a global pandemic, rather it is just a window to how this one marketing communications agency dealt with the situation and how their work and content changed.

To an industry that is ever changing, it is important to collect data on what works and what does not, so that we can learn from mistakes and be better equipped for the future.

This case study is research oriented, which is a method used to clarify and define a specific problem. The research is built by collecting data and analysing it with the subject in mind. This research of this thesis uses the qualitative method, which consists of the theoretical framework and the empirical part, which includes a semi structured interview. (Haaga-Helia 2020.)

The research questions are stated below. These questions were also used as guiding themes for the interviews which are found in chapter 4, the empirical part of the thesis.

- Challenges and opportunities during the pandemic
- Changes in client relationships
- Changes to marketing content

1.2 Communications agency X

The Helsinki based agency is a medium sized communications and marketing agency, which operates in communications, PR and marketing. The limited liability company was founded in 2009. The company offers various services including producing adverts for different media, hosts PR events and provides internal communications services for businesses. (Communications agency X 2019.)

The turnover for the agency in 2018 was 2,5 million euros and rose to 4,2 in 2019(Finder 2019.) The company has also grown exponentially bigger over the past 3 years, as there were only 15 employees in 2017 and sits currently at 31.

The agency offers marketing communications services for companies operating both business-to-business and business-to-consumer. Some of the agency's biggest clients include

a Chinese tech company, a Finnish sports watch manufacturer as well as a well-known Japanese games console manufacturer (Communications agency X 2020.)

The case study agency has also been a frontrunner in the coveted “vuoden toimisto”(office of the year) competition, and has won the title of best communications agency 3 years in a row. CEO Mr. Z told in an interview with Markkinointi & Mainonta that winning the titles has earned the agency a great reputation and has garnered major new clients. (Markkinointi & Mainonta 2020.)

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is exploratory in nature, meaning it explores a phenomenon. In this case how the Coronavirus affected a marketing communications agency and thereafter how it affected the industry on a whole. The conducted study has been research oriented and was carried out by implementing semi structured interviews which were later analysed with a content analysis.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for the whole thesis by introducing the research ideas and methods as well laying the limitations and delimitations for the research. The chapter concludes by introducing the case study.

The second chapter of this thesis summarizes the origins of the Coronavirus itself and how it became a global pandemic. The subchapters centre on how the pandemic affected the world during its first year.

Chapter three is a deeper insight of how businesses managed pandemic, with a heavy emphasis on the marketing industry, and its various components.

The empirical part of the research is found in chapter four, where the interviewees and data collection methods are introduced.

Chapter five breaks apart the interview answers using a content analysis and summarizes them in three distinct themes, ranging from how the day-to-day work changed to changes in marketing content caused by the Coronavirus.

The sixth and final chapter concludes the research by reflecting of the findings and by answering the research questions, using all of the thesis as a reflecting point. Additionally,

the chapter is a reflection of the authors thoughts of the whole research process and the viability of the methods used.

2 The Coronavirus

This chapter is a summary of the Coronavirus. With the first section centring on the virus itself and where it came from, while the second part emphasises on the how the pandemic affected different countries and the last division focusing on Finland, where the researched communications agency X, is located.

2.1 The virus

The Coronavirus or Covid-19 was discovered in the Chinese province of Wuhan in late 2019, after dozens of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause were treated. A few days later researchers discovered that the cause was a new virus, that had originated from the seafood and poultry market in Wuhan. (New York times 2020).

Health organisations in China assured that they were monitoring the spread of the virus to make sure it would not become a pandemic. However, news broke on the 11 of January that an elderly person has died of the virus in China, soon after other countries were reported having cases of Coronavirus. Among the first were Japan, South Korea and Thailand.

Chinese authorities acted swiftly by closing the city of Wuhan completely, by cancelling planes and trains leaving the city, as well as public transport within the city.

On the 30th of January, the World Health Organisation (W.H.O) declared a global health emergency. (World Health Organisation 2020.) The WHO also proposed the name Covid-19 for the disease, which is an acronym which stands for Coronavirus disease. This was done so that the virus would not have any connotation to any people, places or animals.

The first Coronavirus related death in Europe happened on the 14th of February, when A 80-year-old tourist died in Paris. From there on the virus spread like wildfire throughout Europe, forcing countries like Italy to enforce massive lockdowns. (Wikipedia 2020.)

2.2 Coronavirus around the world

The highest rate of confirmed cases in the world is in the United States, a country with a population of nearly 331 million people. This has been contributed to the squandering of every opportunity to control the virus according to Julia Marcus, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School. Marcus believes that the country had plenty of

time and resources to deal with the threat of the virus but took little action when it was crucial. (The Atlantic 2020.)

Marcus also states that the under-funded public health care had no way to prepare for the massive influx of patients coming in, forcing cities like New York to build field hospitals. Julia Marcus also says the combating of the spread of the virus faltered because of misinformation and social media culture and a dangerous strain of individualism, which means US Citizens do not believe what health care experts are telling them, and rather lean on social media for their information and conspiracy theories. (The Atlantic 2020.)

It certainly did not help that the country's leader President Donald Trump told in press conferences to fight the virus by injecting disinfectant and sitting under a UV-light, both of which are famously dangerous. (BBC 2020.)

Some Americans took this literally and injected Chloroquine into their veins trying to combat the virus. This led to a man dying and his wife ending up in the hospital. (Iltasanomat 2020.)

The United Kingdom has struggled throughout 2020 with both an exit from the European Union and a high infection rate of Covid-19. Which currently sits at 2,65 million cases. The UK adopted a Coronavirus Action Plan in the beginning of the pandemic to try to keep highly infected areas locked down while keeping other areas open. This led to confusion and panic, leading to shops being raided as people prepared to be locked indoors for the first 3-week lockdown. (Wikipedia 2020.)

During the summer, restrictions were lifted, and pubs and restaurants were allowed to operate normally, as well as allowing tourist and travellers from other countries to enter the UK and establishing "travel corridors" with countries that had a lower infection rate than the United Kingdom.

Just like everywhere around the world, the UK saw a surge of cases in the autumn forcing the government to rethink the restrictions and came up with a five-level tier system so that different parts of the country could operate depending on their infection rate. The system thoroughly confused a lot of Britons, as the tiers kept changing on a weekly basis. (Wikipedia 2020.)

On December 1st, the UK became the first country in the world to approve the BioNTech and Pfizer vaccine. The country rolled out An immunisation campaign on December 8 and the first person received the vaccination. (Euronews 2021.)

2.3 Coronavirus in Finland

On the 29th January, a tourist from Wuhan checked in to a hospital in Ivalo and tested positive for Coronavirus, the woman recovered from the virus, but it was reported than an estimated 24 people had also been exposed. More and more people returning to Finland from abroad brough the virus with them and it spread across the country over the next few months.

On 16 March the Finnish Government, jointly with the president declared a state of emergency. (Wikipedia 2020.) The state of emergency brought forth new regulations, which impacted both businesses and people. One of these new regulations was that people could only gather in groups of 10, which meant that schools, bars, restaurants, and other government run facilities such as theatres had to shut down. Many offices were also impacted by these restrictions and were forced to work remotely from home whenever possible.

Some restrictions were lifted in June 2020 as the number of people allowed in the same space was raised to 50, allowing kindergartens, sporting events, and restaurants to open. Travel bans were also lifted at this time allowing people to travel to and from areas with the same level of infections rates.

The infection rates rose at an alarming pace during the autumn months, prompting governments across the world to force their countries into new lockdowns, including in Finland where the government had gotten praise around the world for taking such swift action during the first wave. (Euronews 2020.)

During the last quarter of 2020, the country took more drastic measures to combat the spread of the virus, while still trying to keep the economy alive, allowing businesses to operate normally compared to the first lockdowns. (Yle 2020.) The new restrictions allowed for restaurants and bars to stay open at a 75% capacity and forcing bars to close their doors at 23:00 to avoid people getting drunk and forgetting to social distance. Government run facilities i.e. theatres, swimming pools and sports arenas were forced to shut their doors until further notice. (Yle 2020.)

The infection rates are still growing in most parts of the country, but vaccines have finally been approved and vaccinations have started in many parts of the country, with hospital staff receiving the first batches.

2.4 Covid-19 Vaccine

When the Covid-19 was announced as a new strain of a virus back in 2019, scientists realised that the new virus was a mutation which humans are not immune to, and a new medication had to be invented to combat the outbreak. (Biospace 2020.) The solution seemed like a very bleak option as most vaccines take up to 10 to 15 years to develop and test.

On March 30th, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services made several announcements that a vaccine was going to be created as quickly as possible, promising the vaccine could be ready in less than a year. This proved to be true as pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer took to a new approach in making vaccines and were ready for clinical test in July and August of 2020. (Brothers 3.12.2020.)

During the trials of both companies up to 70 000 people received either the vaccine or a placebo and then sent out to go on about their day and monitored for ten weeks. In Pfizer's Phase III trial, there were 170 total confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 162 of them occurring in the placebo arm. That is an efficacy rate of approximately 95%. (Brothers 3.12.2020.) Similarly, Modernas efficacy rate was 95%.

In December Both Pfizer and Moderna took their research and vaccines to the US Federal Food and Drug administration (FDA) to be approved for emergency use. The green light was given for both vaccines and then sent to both the UK and The EU for approval.

In late December, the first vaccine to be given was the one made by Pfizer and was given to medical staff around the world, with the US and The UK leading the vaccination rates. (BBC 2020.) Both Pfizer and Modernas vaccines were approved by the EMA- European Medicines Agency respectively in late December and early January and vaccinations have rolled out across the EU block. (EMA 2021.)

Both vaccines need to be taken twice for the antibodies to be fully protective against the virus, this has caused a concern as people fear they may receive two different vaccinations, which means that they will not have the correct protection against the coronavirus as the vaccines work in different ways. (New York Times 2021.)

3 The impact of Covid-19 for businesses and marketing

Covid-19 has had a massive impact on the global economy in 2020, and researchers estimate that the pandemic will be affecting the world economy for years to come. While the pandemic has been overwhelmingly bad for the economy in general as well as for many businesses, some companies have managed to turn the pandemic into riches.

The first Section centres on how business in general managed the pandemic, while the subchapters focus on the good and the bad prospectively as well as consumer behaviour during the pandemic.

The focal points of sections two to seven are the marketing industries management of the Coronavirus, ranging from a business point of view to how the actual content had to change.

3.1 Businesses during the pandemic

The Coronavirus pandemic forced authorities to introduce regulations on large gatherings and in some cases lockdowns. This of course has had a major impact on businesses in all sectors. Both good and bad.

Authority regulations in many countries were strict on non-essential businesses, leading them to close their doors during lockdowns in high case locations. While many companies were already struggling to cope with the diminishing customer base, lockdowns were a nail in the coffin for some. Relief efforts were made in many western countries, where a business could apply for a grant to keep their business afloat.

3.1.1 Positive impacts

Despite how devastating the pandemic has been on the economy, some businesses managed to thrive and make a massive profit during the pandemic. Online retailers were the biggest winners, with Amazon being the biggest juggernaut. (Forbes 2020.) The company did so well their stock price had risen by 100% by June 2020.

When working in the same space due to Covid-19 restrictions became an obstacle, businesses moved their conferences online, boosting the sales of many conference call applications. But none rose to prominence more than the Communications technology company called Zoom Video Communications, inc. Which provides a Videotelephony application called Zoom. The application is widely used for business and education.

Hand sanitizers appeared both on the store shelves and in dispenser form in public places during the pandemic, which caused a huge demand for a product that was not readily available to begin with. The outcry for the hand sanitizers caused some alcohol producer to manufacture their own hand sanitizing products.

One of these producers were the Finnish Gin distillery Kyrö, who saw a drop in their Gin sales and decided to change their tactics to supply a demand. (Yrittäjä 2020.)

The switch for Kyrö has been a successful one, as they are now producing up to 5000 bottles per day and supplying the health sector with hand sanitizers. They are looking to expand to grocery store chains across the country but are currently unavailable to do so as they cannot up their production speed.

Grocery stores also saw a huge rise in their profits in the beginning of the pandemic, as people started hoarding goods as if the stocks were going to run out. The Finnish S-group, who currently have the market lead of grocery stores in the country released a statement claiming to have increased their sales with up to 10,5% and saying this is due to people cooking more at home. The company also saw an increased demand in their online grocery delivery system, one which they struggled to manage at the time. (S-ryhmä 2020.)

3.1.2 Negative impacts

Many industries have been hit hard by the pandemic and its regulations, with travel and tourism experiencing some of the biggest losses. According to Alexandre de Juniac, International Air Transport Association's Director General and CEO said that "Financially, 2020 will go down as the worst year in the history of aviation". The expected losses for the industry are up to 84 billion dollars. (France24 2020.)

This has caused many companies to furlough their workers leaving the essentially unemployed for the foreseeable future. Finnish air-travel company Finnair temporarily laid off nearly 6000 workers over the spring of 2020 and many are still being furloughed by the autumn. (Iltalehti 2020.)

In 2019 the tourism industry made up 10% of the global GDP and was worth nearly 9 trillion dollars, this year however the percentage is nearly non-existent as people are not able to travel due to restrictions and unemployment. The tourism industry is not expected to return to normal until 2024. (McKinsey& Company 2020.)

Another badly hit sector is the food industry, that is made up by restaurants and cafes. Many smaller businesses have had to close their doors for good, but those that still stand live in a constant struggle with regulations from authorities, in some countries allowing them to only service up to 50% of their usual customer base (Iltalehti 2020.)

3.1.3 Consumer behaviour during a pandemic

Consumer behaviour refers to the study of how individual customers, groups or organizations select, buy, use, and dispose ideas, goods, and services to satisfy their needs and wants. It refers to the actions of the consumers in the marketplace and the underlying motives for those actions. (Your Article Library 2020.)

During a recession or in this case a pandemic, consumers behave differently due to the different circumstances they are facing. Some have lost their jobs and are therefore tightening their belt. Others are afraid to go out for fear of catching the virus, and then there are those who stockpile on products to avoid going to public spaces less often.

According to McKinsey& Company's statistics show that consumers expect a longer period of economic uncertainty, which has led to consumers spending mainly on essentials such as groceries and household goods. However, online stores have seen a rise in health, beauty and fitness products. (McKinsey& Company 2020.)

Research also shows that consumers have given up on brand loyalty during the pandemic. This is most likely the case because consumers have not been able to get their hands on their preferred products and have therefore branched out. (McKinsey& Company 2020.)

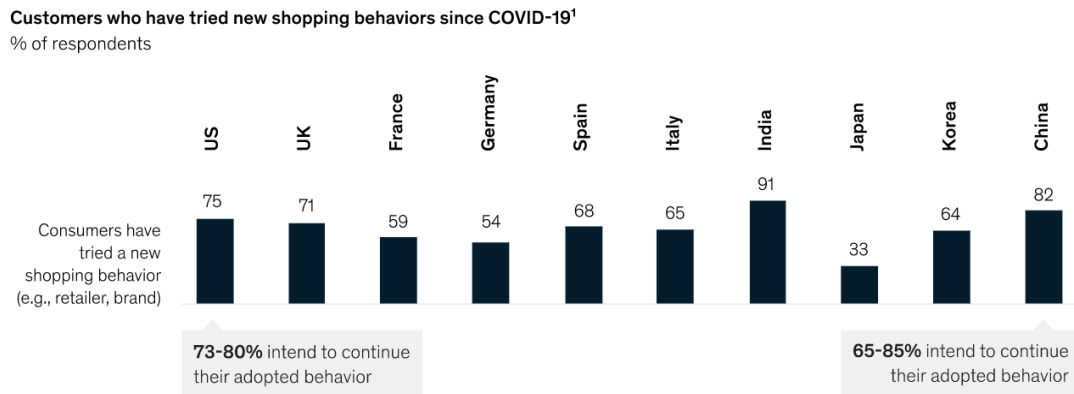


Image 1. Global Shopping behaviour (McKinsey & Company 2020)

The graph shows the percentage of consumers who have changed their behaviour and tried different brands than what they are used to. The numbers clearly state that the majority of consumers have changed their preferences in all the included countries but Japan.

The Finnish market lead in grocery stores; S-group told the Finnish news site MTV uutiset that their consumers behaviour has changed in a variety of ways during the pandemic. An increased demand for baking supplies revealed the more and more Finns wanted to try their hand at baking during the pandemic, The grocery conglomerate also revealed that potatoes, which had seen a decrease of sales in recent years, now had seen an increase of 8% compared to last year's sales. The grocery chain has also noted that alcohol free beer has seen an increase during the pandemic, as well as sugar free drinks which has seen an increase of up to 50%. (MTV uutiset 2020.)

Due to the changes in consumer behaviour some businesses were forced to close their doors, either temporarily or completely. This led to various social media campaigns telling people to support their local businesses to keep them running.

3.2 The impact of Covid-19 for the marketing industry

The marketing industry, like many other industries took a hard hit when Covid-19 started creating problems in the spring of 2020, but according to studies many agencies have managed to keep their head above the water by shifting focus.

According to a survey conducted by the Finnish Customer Marketing Association ASML in association with digital advertising and marketing community IAB Finland and marketing communications agency Avaus: Finnish marketing agencies have had to cut their budget

and to shift focus onto different strategies; the new strategy for most agencies has been to upkeep current client relationships and strengthening loyalty between the agency and the client. (Ylä-Anttila 8.4.2020.) The survey also ranks the most important priorities for the marketing communication agencies, which are: to take care of the staff (76%), helping the client in daily tasks (62%) and lastly is securing turnover (52%) (Ylä-Anttila 8.4.2020.)

The CEO of Asiakasmarkkinointiliitto (Customer Marketing Association) Jari Perko says that, compared to a similar survey conducted in the autumn of 2019 the client relationships and loyalty have clearly become more important during the pandemic.

Marketing agencies have also seen a shift into more digital content during the pandemic, which is made evident by the answers the survey received about what type of content agencies decided to cut from their budgets; Outdoor advertisement, Events and print ads are the ones taking the biggest hits. (Markkinointi&Mainonta 2020.) CEO of Influencer marketing agency "Indieplace" Hanna Johnson told Markkinointi&Mainonta that some clients slashed their budgets straight away, but many clients who sell everyday items gave the green light to go ahead with new social media campaigns, and there has been a plethora of requests from new clients all together. Emma Alftan CEO of Mellakka Management told the magazine "for those who dare, this is the time to do influencer marketing". (Markkinointi&Mainonta 2020.)

Strategist of Asenne Media Noora Kunttu, also agrees that now is an opportune time to try something different, just as long as you pay attention to the sensitivity of the situation during the planning phases. (Markkinointi&Mainonta 2020.)

3.3 Thriving or Surviving during the pandemic

It does not take a genius to understand that a company has to change the way they operate during a global pandemic if they wish to survive but seeing as this is the first global pandemic in centuries it is easy to see why some companies did not get the memo.

Chief creative officer for San Francisco-based ad agency Goodbye Silverstein & Partners Margaret Johnson said that if brands "are acting like business as usual and are still running their same advertising, you immediately feel like that's a brand that's tone deaf." (Time 2020.) Johnson, who works with big brands like PepsiCo said that her ad agency has worked on a fast turnaround for all of their clients.

Author of a business forecast report Rohit Bhargava agreed with Johnsons comments about insensitivity during the pandemic, telling the magazine for brands to “rethink everything, including company websites” Bhargava used the Beers producer Corona as an example of insensitivity as they had not changed their website as of April 2 when the Virus had already claimed over 4000 lives (Google 2020). The site for Corona beer appeared unchanged, displaying ads “that showed sexy people enjoying themselves at the beach in that carefree state of mind”. (Time 2020.)

Many younger consumers have increasingly been looking to companies to be moral leaders that reflect their values (Edelman 2020.) Which means that if a company appears to put profit over people it is risking a tarnished image among younger consumers. According to a survey conducted by Edelman 77% of survey participants say that they want brands only to speak about products in ways that show they are aware of the crisis and the impact on people’s lives. (Time 2020.)

Marketing during the pandemic is tricky but just by making simple changes that show that the brand understands what is going on and how its consumers are affected is enough to build trust during a pandemic.

British clothing retailer Boden wrote a message to its consumers explaining why they are advertising during the pandemic saying “we’ve already made the clothes. We’ve already taken the photographs; we’ve already printed the catalogues. It was too late to stop. We hope you don’t find it horribly insensitive.” (Time 2020.)

However not all marketing efforts during the pandemic are received as well as Bodens explanations. Companies like McDonalds Brazil and Volkswagen made headlines for their gimmicky PR stunts when they companies separated their logos in two to show distancing.



Image 2. 'social distancing' logos (CNN 2020)

The McDonalds social distancing logo sparked furthermore backlash as the company was considered being hypocritical for creating a stunt that emphasizes social distancing and health when the company does not even allow paid sick leave for its workers in the US. (CNN 2020.)

3.4 Changes the pandemic had on content marketing.

Content marketing is a type of marketing focused on creating, publishing and distributing content for a target audience, and this is done to attract the attention of potential buyers. Content marketing attracts potential buyers and transforms them into customers by creating and sharing valuable free content. Content marketing helps companies create brand loyalty and provides information to consumers. This in turn generates a willingness to purchase products from the company in the future. This form of marketing does not directly generate sales but instead, it builds a valuable bond between the seller and the customer. Content marketing can be done in a variety of ways, and they easily blend in with traditional advertising. The difference, however, is that content marketing provides information and is typically free to publish, Traditional advertising tends to focus more on stirring emotions or grabbing one's attention and costs lots of money for the company. (Youtube 2020.)

As the pandemic rolled around, many people were forced to spend more time indoors, this led to a huge surge in internet hits, which have grown by 50-70% (Branscum 12.9.2020.) Which is very ideal for companies who have taken advantage of content marketing during this time. Content marketing can be as simple as writing blogposts about products or providing an online cooking class for potential customers to attend to. (Branscum 12.9.2020.)

As Zoom became the leading video conferencing tool during the pandemic, many companies provided their customers with premade background to be used during conference calls. Furniture manufacturer West Elm provided professional looking backgrounds, showcasing their furniture, while entertainment conglomerate Disney provided its fans with background of iconic Disney film locations.

Content marketing does not always have to provide something physical to customer, but rather a reminder of what to appreciate during the tumultuous times we live in. This is exactly what the Spanish marketing division of Ikea did. The Swedish furniture giant released an advert remind people to love their own home. The marketing team created an

advert that shows people social distancing at home and enjoying life. This was done to remind people of the comfortable homes Ikea has created. Marketing director for Ikea Spain Laura Dúran explained that Ikea wanted customers to get a different perspective of their own home, where they can experience life and enjoy it. (Think with Google 2020.)

According to Think with Google, marketing communications agencies had to change their content marketing strategies drastically. One of these methods were to address the customer: in which the company in question addressed customers concerns and reassured them that there is enough stock for everyone. (Think with google 2020.) The example given was Cottonelle, one of the world's largest toilet paper manufactures, who created a campaign to try to ease customers worries about toilet paper running out by discouraging panic buying and telling people to stock up on generosity. The campaign used the hashtag #ShareASquare.



Image 3. Share a square (Adweek 2020.)

3.5 Changes for paid marketing

Paid marketing had to change drastically to fit the new consumer behaviour, as many adverts could be considered insensitive or harmful during a time when people are advised to social distance. (Moorman 7.6.2020) This of course meant that showing adverts of people partying or being in close contact had to be pulled and new ones had to be produced.

Many companies changed their advertising to a “stay at home” suggestions, while still staying true to their brand and image. The Swedish furniture manufacturer Ikea advised their Israeli customer to stay at home by creating a clever “Stay Höme” advertisement which resembles Ikeas iconic assembly instructions.

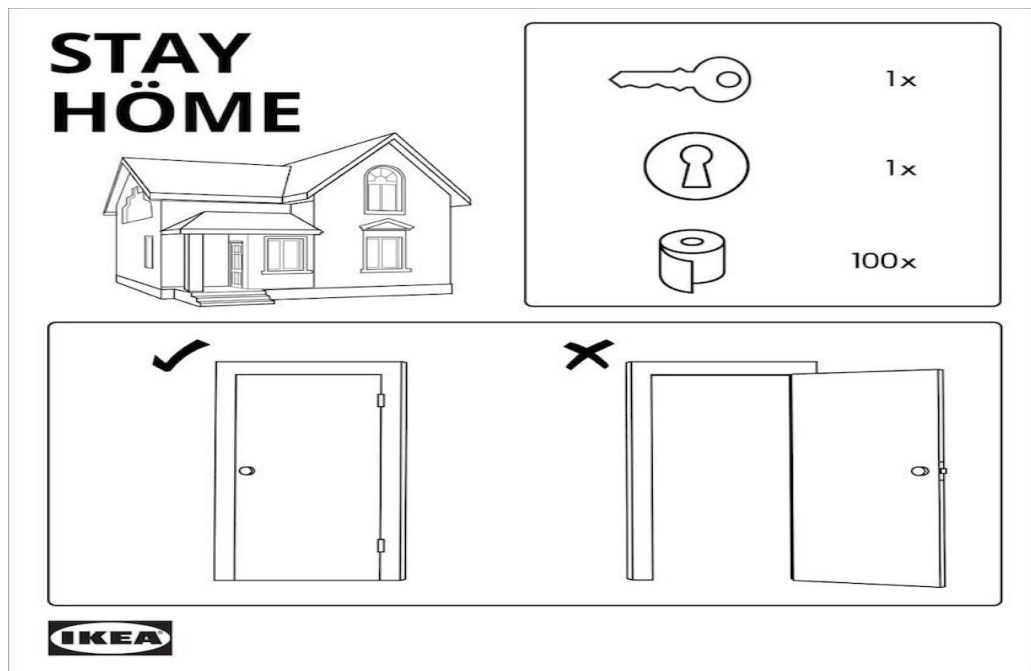


Image 4. Stay Höme (Espotnik 2020)

Sportswear manufacturer Nike created a similar campaign, urging their customer to come together and protect other by playing indoors. The campaign was spread by the hashtag #playinside

**IF YOU EVER DREAMED OF PLAYING
FOR MILLIONS AROUND THE WORLD,
NOW IS YOUR CHANCE.**

Play inside, play for the world.



Image 5. Play inside (The Drum 2020)

Within hours of the release of the campaign, many famous athletes chimed in on social media with their version of the advert.

3.6 Resourceful strategies

As previously established; marketing during a global pandemic is no easy feat, and the chosen marketing strategy can either make or break a brand. London based Branding Agency Fabrik wrote an article of what brands and marketers should focus on if they intend to survive the pandemic; focusing on the target audience is key. (Fabrik 2020) The article states that trying to pinpoint what the average, bored at home consumer wants to see is the key to getting their attention and that doubling down on digital promotions is the way to go, especially as new consumers find their ways onto the online shopping in lieu of walking into shops to browse. (Fabric 2020.)

According to Fabrik the other key factors for marketing during lockdown is to focus on using the right search words and implementing them to your products. This of course always applies but changing the keywords to more searched terms can be a matter of millions of new customers. The article even suggests using search words like “Covid-19” as it is a very searched for topic, however for some consumers it may be perceived to be inconsiderate. (Fabrik 2020.)

Another big strategy Fabrik suggests is to pay attention to your campaign, using the car manufacturer Ford as an example, as the company delayed a big announcement of bringing back the Bronco car, as the company felt consumers were not “in the mood for a new vehicle”. (Fabrik 2020.)



Image 6. Finger licking good (BBC 2020)

Another example was the fast-food conglomerate Kentucky Fried Chicken or KFC who received complaints about their “finger licking good” slogan in the beginning of the pandemic as consumers felt the slogan was irresponsible. The company pulled the slogan from their products and packaging but promised the iconic 70-year-old slogan would be back when it is appropriate.

The last tip Fabrik gives is to update your company’s communications, telling, that consumers want to know their favourite brands stance on things and that staying silent and not addressing concerns about Covid-19 safety could prove tarnish a brands image and label them ignorant and detached. (Fabric 2020.) The article suggest that if a company does not have the capacity to handle inquiries and responses to comments on social media, additional help should be hired. Leaving consumers questions unanswered is a red flag for the brand loyal consumer.

3.7 Successful marketing campaigns during Covid-19

During 2020 many companies struggled to stay afloat, and some tarnished their brand image by creating irresponsible or downright offensive marketing campaigns. (Klingmarketing 2020.) But then there were those that took advantage of the unusual circumstance and turned it into their favour. The American marketing agency Wieden + Kennedy created a simple, yet effective marketing campaign for the technology/delivery company Uber called “Thank you for not riding” in which consumers are shown coping with Covid-19 lockdowns and are encouraged to stay at home to help those who cannot leave their homes. This

type of advertising can hurt the sales of the company, but it builds a brand image which displays that Uber cares about its consumers health and safety more than filling its pockets. (Wieden + Kennedy 2020.)

UK grocery store chain Tesco had quite a bit of notoriety during the lockdowns for its inventive and informative advertising. (Marketing week 2020.) The grocery store chain released a “keeping you safe” advert which was filmed overnight at a retail location where the employees of the store introduce the safety measures consumers are advised to take, with everything from safe distance to paying with cards. The advert is simple, informative and most importantly; shows that the company takes care of its consumer and employees. (Marketing week 2020.)

Another hit for the grocery brand was their “no naughty list” Christmas adverts, where consumers are pondering if they deserve any Christmas treats after doing naughty things during the lockdown, such as giving a bad haircut or buying too many toilet paper rolls. Essentially saying Tesco forgives your bad actions as the year has been tough on everyone. The intent of the ad was to start of the Christmas season with a bit of harmless joy according to Tesco chief customer officer Alessandra Bellini. (Jahshan 16.11.2020.)

Lager producer Budweiser cashed in on the pandemic by re-releasing their classic 1990s “whassup” advert with a new voiceover about “quarantining, drinking a bud”. The advert was captioned “whassup, quarantine version” which spawned a lot of other brands to follow suit with making their own quarantine version. (Marketing Week 2020.) The company was heralded for its practical creativity and finding a “unique solution to the challenge of keeping a brand relevant in such testing times”. (Kantar Group 2020.)

Music streaming service Spotify took a good look at its consumers and created feel good adverts that speak their consumers language and utilized memes. Memes are a internet phenomenon where a picture or a video of something is used with a clever caption. In this case Spotify utilized the classic “Me, but also Me” format to capture how their consumers moods are reflected by their music tastes.



Image 7. Spotify- Everywhere Campaign (Muse by Clio 2020.)

The adverts got a very a positive response from its audience as it plays on people's moods during the pandemic in a simple but creative way. (Let's Go Social 2020.)

4 Research

This chapter is about research methodology which was used to determine a definitive conclusion of how the company managed during the Coronavirus crisis. The first section explains which method was used and why, while the second part introduces the interviewees as well as how the interviews were conducted. The third section explains how the collected data was analysed and how a conclusion was reached.

4.1 Interview

The research method chosen for this thesis is a semi structured interview, which is a varied and flexible method to gather data as the interviewer does not strictly follow a formalized list of questions and instead asks more open-ended questions, which allow the interviewee and interviewer to have a discussion about the topic. (The Balance Careers 2019.) This interview method emphasizes that, the interviewee is a subject who can freely bring forth topics and views that are important for him or her.

The semi structured interview was chosen as the method for this research because it is one of the most common methods for gathering information and is highly adoptable, which encourages two-way communication. This conversational tone will make the interviewee more comfortable expanding on the topics that are being discussed as the interviewer can engages in the discussion with his or her own opinions. (The Balance Careers 2019.) The greater goal is to give the interviewee the opportunity to spontaneously explore topics relevant to that interviewee. While other research methods would have been suitable, the author felt that semi structured interviews had a better chance of getting honest opinions on the research questions, and thus this method was selected.

However, a semi structured interview does require planning and a good knowledge of the discussed topic as interviewing without a plan can lead to misunderstandings. The other disadvantage of a semi structured interview is that the actual interview might go on much longer than planned, as the discussion is open ended. (Fuel Cycle 2018.)

The interviews followed 3 pre-determined themes: Challenges and opportunities during the pandemic, changes in client relationships and changes to marketing content. These themes were selected due to their importance throughout the theoretical framework.

These interviews were conducted individually with four employees who work in different roles at Communications agency X to establish how the company managed the Covid-19 crises and how projects were affected by the changes. The interviewees were also asked

to analyse marketing material that the agency has produced during the pandemic, to determine if the agency took the Coronavirus into account when advertising. The detailed questions can be found in appendix 1.

4.2 Interviewees and collection of data

For the purpose of this thesis 4 employees who all work in different positions at Communications agency X were interviewed individually in the first quarter of 2021. The candidates title, date of interview and duration of the interview have been listed in the table below.

The interviews were conducted over the phone due to government suggested social distancing. The phone calls were also recorded with the consent of the participants.

The names of the interviewees will be kept anonymous due to request from the participants themselves. And will be referred to as Person 1, 2, 3 and 4. All interviewees work or worked in different positions at Communications agency X at the time of Covid-19.

Table 1. Interviewees

Title	Name	Date	Duration
Junior Communications Consultant	Person 1	21 January 2021	1 h 35 min
Administrative Assistant	Person 2	4 February 2021	32 min
Communications Consultant	Person 3	8 February 2021	26 min
Project Manager	Person 4	11 February 2021	55 min

The interviewees were selected on the basis of their varying roles within the company, to give a broader view of how the company actually managed during the pandemic. Their work ranges from PR to digital and social media to administrative work.

4.3 Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed, after which the transcribed text was analysed using a content analysis, which is a method used to highlight the meaning of the text from the original material. (Spoken 2020.) This research tool is often used to determine the presence of certain words, themes or concepts within the collected data and can be utilized for anything from interviews, articles, discussions and so on. With this method the aim is to gather a compact overview of the analysed data. (Columbia EDU 2018.)

The transcripts consisted only of the essential information that was gathered from the interviews and all idle discussion was cut from the transcribed text. The recorded phone interviews were erased after the completion of the transcripts. The data was deemed essential based on direct answers to the research questions. The data was transcribed into a few different categories for easier overview of the similarities and differences between the answers. This method could have also been used to create statistics based on the answers but due to there only being four participants this method was scrapped.

4.4 Challenges and opportunities during the pandemic

On the 16 March 2020, the governments restrictions to combat the Covid-19 outbreak took place and it had an immediate negative effect for the company. Only 10 person gatherings were allowed, which meant that the staff had to work remotely, but these restrictions also affected Communications agency X many clients who pulled their resources as they did not deem it viable to market their products during a lockdown. The senior staff had to slash their operating budget starting with the immediate sacking of staff members who were on probation, leading to a bigger workload for those who kept their jobs.

The workloads kept getting bigger as staff had to be furloughed to save on further costs, this however was deemed necessary and well-handled as the senior staff were constantly in touch with the rest of the staff, helping them cope with their new workloads and keeping them up to date who was on furlough and who could help with different tasks.

Person 1, who primarily worked with PR marketing and Showroom management before covid-19 felt that her skillsets were no longer valued in the bigger picture as she believes her talents had been boxed into this small category, despite having vast knowledge of digital marketing, which was the bread and butter for marketing during the pandemic.

The new challenges were tough but were seen as new opportunities to work on projects they had little to no experience on, giving them a wider range of challenges to tackle. The staff also felt that remote working suited them better in most instances as it was easier to focus on the task at hand rather than be distracted by other co-workers but felt that a lack of daily routine of going to the office affected their performance at work.

4.5 Changes in client relationships

As mentioned in the previous chapter the beginning was tough as many clients pulled their budgets and froze any upcoming projects out of fear to advertise during a lockdown. A handful of clients stayed but wanted to shift the focus of their upcoming campaigns, as to better reach their target audience. Many clients were understanding of the remote working situation and had no issue with remote meetings, but the staff at the X felt that it was harder to form a proper working relationship with new clients over conference calls, despite the agency having a “camera always on” rule for conference calls.

The showroom and PR side of client relationships did however suffer, as no events or viewings were held due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This also caused issues with seeding of products to influencers, as they used to come in and try on the product they were asked to promote, but now they had to guess the sizes and multiple products had to be re-shipped due to this issue, causing a bigger bill for the client.

New clients were also found during the Pandemic as the company assembled a small team who reached out to struggling companies, offering them marketing communication solutions. Communications agency X also gained new accounts via direct contact from clients who had seen blogposts written by the staff at X about how to successfully survive and market during Covid-19.

4.6 Changes to marketing content

Marketing changed quickly and drastically, the clients that remained asked the staff at X to rethink many of their ideas, to fit the situation as to not offend anyone or encourage customers to do something that was becoming impossible i.e. travel abroad.

A big client for X at this time was a leading travel agency. Large scale changes had to be made to the marketing content as people were encouraged to stay at home. Customers had to regularly be informed about the cleanliness and precautions taken to combat the spread of the virus in both hotels and spas. Once the initial lockdowns were over staff at Communications agency X came up with the idea of advertising local travel, which was a big success for the travel agency.

The travel agency management was not happy the whole way through, as they deemed it unprofessional when a few newsletters went out with either pictures of pools during a time

when pools in Finland were closed or the use of clear images of alcohol in the background of some pictures.

The Finnish government owned railway company also received changes to their marketing content; advertising travel in Finland. The content showing a variety of places the train tracks can take the consumer within the country. The company also committed to a PR stunt with the famous Helsinki railways statues wearing facemasks during the height of the pandemic telling consumers to take care of themselves and other.

Finnish sports watch manufacturer Z also received a shift to different marketing tactics during the pandemic, as they encouraged their consumers to take up exercises that were possible while still obeying to the lockdown restrictions, this was done through live workout videos and blogposts. Person 3, who worked on these accounts said it was quite difficult to come up with new ideas for the various blogposts, as she did get the general consensus of what the client wanted but the writing was up to her.

4.7 Summary

All the interviewees agreed that Covid-19 had made things more difficult at work, with clients and staff members leaving, but felt that once the first wave of stress and shock of the situation it had been a bit of a blessing in disguise.

While the workloads were challenging, as there were less people to deal with specific things, all the interviewees felt that working from home felt much more relaxed. Gone were the days of pointless meetings and micromanagement. Working from home did however start to affect their work after some time as it became increasingly difficult to stay focused on the task at hand. This is where it became handy that senior staffers checked in more regularly to make sure workers were on the right path and keeping to their deadlines.

A member of staff who worked primarily with public relations marketing, felt that their work became unappreciated as PR events and stunts became virtually non-existent event though they had the skillset to work on more current projects during the pandemic. This was however not reflective of the views of the other, who felt that more opportunities opened up, both for themselves and for new workers.

Most of communications agency X's clients were understanding of the situation and just adjusted their approach to how they want to market to their consumers. Some companies outright left the agency, while others were just too afraid to make any moves during the

pandemic, which in retrospect has damaged some of their brand image and certainly their sales. Brands that actually took the risk of advertising during the pandemic have fared much better and are now seeing the rewards for their risks. This was also confirmed in the theoretical portion of this thesis, where industry professionals advised brands to keep working through the pandemic, rather than quitting.

The interviewees also said that the agency gained new clients and contacts during the pandemic through the use of inbound marketing in the form of public blogposts, in which the agency gave free advice on how brands could grow their business during the pandemic.

Marketing content did see a bigger shift towards digital, which has led, to the hiring of new staff members who are better versed in digital advertising. This of course is a good thing as the industry on the whole is moving more and more towards digital marketing.

The workers did however say that they struggled coming up with new and interesting content, as clients were very careful not to offend anyone, nor make any offers that were against the current government given instructions.

The agency managed to stay afloat during the pandemic due to competent management, who took quick action to combat the company going under, when clients froze their ongoing/ future projects. The agency has now almost fully recovered and have both new staffers and new clients.

5 Reflection

This chapter is a reflection on the thesis itself. The first chapter will be focused on comparing the theoretical portion with the research results and what conclusions can be drawn by comparing the two. The second chapter is an evaluation of the research method to conclude if it was a viable one, and the third chapter will measure the success of the thesis process and what its author has learned while working on the research.

5.1 Conclusion

The research questions for this thesis were how Covid-19 affected the agency and in turn the marketing industry on a whole? As well as how the marketing content changed. Answers to these questions were found from various sources or varying degrees and a conclusion was reached.

The theoretical information that was found does match up well with the data collected from the interviews. Covid-19 has been tough on the industry in many ways but has given it the shakeup it needed by removing unnecessary micromanagement and has opened new opportunities for both agencies and the staff.

Covid also paved way for working from home, a trend that is very likely to continue as businesses have started to realise that a company no longer needs a shared office space for work to operate normally. The rise of rentable working spaces also means that a company can operate from anywhere and if need be, they can rent a meeting room in many of the upcoming rentable workspaces. The interviewees also saw the benefits of working from home but felt that it made some aspects of the job more challenging. Perhaps a half week at the office and half week at home could be a solution for the future.

While marketing content has changed during Covid, it is very likely that it will return to normal, all be it in a more digital form. This was a common theme which was found in the theoretical framework as well. The industry is moving quickly towards a fully digital path, and the pandemic has shown the industry that digital is where to invest.

The pandemic did however highlight a trend of consumers wanting to know a company's stance on social issues, as consumers want to know if their favourite brands share their own views. (Sprout Social 2020.) Companies have a risk of losing a client base by taking a stance but by not addressing issues, the brand will damage itself more. This was also spotlighted in the theoretical part of the thesis.

5.2 Evaluating the research method

The method used to gather information for this thesis was a semi structured interview, which creates a relaxed conversation between the subject and the interviewer and provides a more rounded image of the topic, while allowing the subject to answer more sensitive topics. (BMJ Journals 2019.) A semi structured interview falls under the umbrella term: qualitative research.

The author believes that the semi structured interview worked well for this research, as the subjects were able to be in the moment and answer the questions freely without having to give the topic too much thought, meaning that the answers were raw and were not negative things that were spun into positive idealisms, which can be the case when using a structured interview. The interview answers were then analysed utilizing content analysis, in which the answers were grouped up into themes and a conclusion was drawn within each theme by comparing the answers to each other.

The content analysis worked in this instance as there were only 4 subjects with similar answers. The same method would however not have worked if there were more subjects with varying views, as grouping many different views into a compact analysis would have been difficult and possibly unfair as someone's views would not have been taken into account.

While qualitative research is generally considered reliable and trustworthy, it also has four major drawbacks:

Credibility - Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants' meaning?

Authenticity - Are different voices heard?

Criticality - Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?

Integrity - Are the investigators self-critical?

(University of Miami 2013.)

In this case the interviewees answers could be clouded by their own feeling towards the case company; If the interviewee has a bad history with the company, he or she might speak more negatively about the company in general.

The same can be said about the author who interprets the interviews; If the author feels a certain way about either the interviewee or the subject at hand, they might skew the data by not being objective.

This of course means that any qualitative research is a representation of the author. No matter how objective the author may be, the data is always subject to the authors whims.

5.3 Evaluation of the thesis process and authors own learning

The subject of the thesis was a completely new topic, as nothing of this scale has happened in a century. The topic was personal and important for the author as he interned at Communications agency X at the time of this crisis and his future at this company was shattered due to the tough no hiring restrictions the company laid out. The personal agenda was however put aside as the author wanted a fresh perspective from people who had a long history at the agency and had a knowledge of how the industry could react to a bad situation.

The topic was not a first choice, but once it was established it was easy to get into the theoretical part, as by that point there was already a myriad of information available on the

situation. It was also interesting to see how the views and information changed over the eight months that this was written, as the industry changed as quickly as the coronavirus itself.

The interviews were only planned after the theoretical part had its mainframe, as the interview themes developed based off the theoretical information that was found. Once the interview questions were done, they were tested on a colleague and thereafter tweaked to fit the thesis better.

The interviews themselves were straight forward but analysing the answers took longer than expected as it was tough to break them down and write a cohesive text. The interviews also gave way for new theoretical parts.

This thesis was supposed to begin in the spring of 2020 but for some reasons it did not, and that was a blessing in disguise as information about covid-19 and its effects on the marketing industry were not clear yet, so information gathering would have been sparse. The plan would have been to finish the thesis in 5 months but it ended up longer, which again was a good thing as more information came to light about the virus and how the industry and Communications agency X bounced back.

On the whole, the research for this thesis has been beneficial for the author, as he is now much better equipped with the trends and do's and don'ts of the industry during a global pandemic. This has also been an eye opener to the complexity of the marketing industry and of how a marketing communications office can survive a massive decline in projects. This thesis has been a benefit for the author and hopefully will be beneficial for anyone who is researching the benefits and hurdles of the pandemic for the marketing industry.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Challenges and opportunities during the pandemic

How did Covid-19 affect your job?

Did your daily tasks change?

What opportunities did you come across?

What challenges did Covid-19 pose?

Did the company do well with the challenges of the pandemic?

Changes in client relationships

How did the pandemic affect your clients?

How did your relationships with your clients change?

Did the company find new clients during this time?

How did clients react to the changes the office faced?

Changes to marketing content

What changes did you see in the marketing content?

Did you notice a change in consumer behaviour?

Did the company work on some really good content during the pandemic?

Did you receive any backlash for any content that was produced during this time?