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The impact of digital tools on B2B marketing

An analysis of North-Italian companies

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It is always wise to look ahead, but difficult

to look farther than you can see

Winston Churchill

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Introduction

During my years in university I had the opportunity to study the marketing process and the strategy behind it. What I have noticed is that most of the literature focused on the analysis of the consumer, from his needs to purchase and actual consumption. This type of approach is known as business-to-consumer (B2C), where the company focuses on people and on what surrounds them in order to understand what they really need. However, I have always asked myself the reason why we had not deepened the comparison between this type of approach and the one better known as business-to-business (B2B). Many say that the former allows a more complete understanding of marketing strategies, ranging from the psychological motivations behind every consumer choice to the post-purchase attitude that allows the establishment of a loyalty relationship with the company. Though, there are a number of characteristics and special features that differ between B2B and B2C that makes it critical to examine B2B separately.

The B2B sector has always had a greater propensity to use technologies and this has allowed it to be extremely responsive to the changes due to the advent of digital. In fact, it has undergone a strong evolution with the transition to Web 2.0, which has led to a review of internal processes, strategies, but above all to a radical change in marketing management. In fact, another innovation was caused by the creation of social media, powerful communication tools, capable of providing great relational value to companies able of making the most of them. These platforms have not only allowed the creation of communities for users, they have led companies to expand their network, creating new commercial relationships and increasing brand awareness. In fact, it is important for the brand to be meaningful, in the sense that companies must guarantee and communicate different types of benefits, not only the ones deriving from the characteristics of the product, but also those of personal and collective nature, demonstrating that they have a positive impact on people's lives. Therefore, product differentiation is no longer enough, as it must be balanced with the diversity of the brand, creating positive cognitive biases that can overcome the distancing between the brand and its customers.

On this behalf, the concept of digital branding has changed the way customers make buying decisions and also the way they perceive the businesses around them, which for their part have become increasingly more transparent about their values and beliefs. In fact, with the rapid evolution of times, nowadays it is important for companies to have something certain and fixed, able to show consistency to their stakeholders, a role occupied by the brand.

Social media has created the biggest transfer of power in a generation, which is now in the hands of customers, who have a crucial and active role in the marketing process. Businesses either embrace this fact or face the prospect of being pushed into irrelevance, this because customer experience is legacy and a bad one could ruin years of investments and efforts.

Therefore, this thesis handles the evolution of the B2B market due to digital innovation, trying to understand if the latter had a positive or negative impact on companies operating in this field. First, in the theory part, the main characteristics of this sector are explained. After reviewing the extant literature on this topic, the dissertation shows how the Internet has influenced marketing communication strategies around the world, marking the evolution from a "One-to-Many" to a "Many-to-Many" marketing philosophy. As B2B customers have specific needs and interests, the general definition of digital marketing is then reported on the specific experience of the sector, looking at the different processes and the different applications of the general marketing principles. Moreover, social media marketing business techniques and their results are assessed to understand the differences with the consumer market. As a part of this thesis, a study was conducted, consisting of an e-mail survey which was sent to a sample of North-Italian companies operating in the B2B sector. The purpose was to present the impact of digital tools on these companies' marketing processes over the years, but in particular with reference to the COVID-19 emergency which has shocked the world in the past few months.

1. B2B Marketing: theoretical framework

The term Business-to-Business has been coined to define commercial transactions between two firms in order to differentiate them from the ones occurring, as for example, between a company and an individual customer. In general, it more broadly refers to the market in which these transactions take place which, in fact, is defined as the B2B market. Its acronym is widely used and even though "B2B" is preferred in the majority of the cases, it can also turn in "BtoB" or "BTB" in some countries. In B2B commerce, the parties involved in the transactions often have comparable negotiating power, and when this does not occur, each of them typically introduces professional staff and legal counsels in the process. Nevertheless, there are still many situations in which large companies tend to exploit their commercial resources and information advantages over smaller businesses.

The economic value of business-to-business transactions is significantly higher than other activities involving customers because businesses are more likely to purchase higher priced goods and services, which are also acquired in higher quantities if compared to individuals. For example, a car manufacturer purchases huge amounts of tires, much more than a car owner would ever consider buying in a lifetime.

Eventually, B2B can also describe marketing activities conducted between different companies, and not just the final purchasing decisions deriving from a properly developed marketing campaign.

1.1 Characteristics of B2B markets

Traditionally, two generic types of markets may be distinguished: consumer markets and business markets. B2B markets are networked organizations operating in a complex environment (Kotler and Keller, 2020). The management target of the companies operating in this field is to build profitable relationships with business consumers by creating additional value. More concretely, B2B markets are about buying goods and services in order to use them in the development, creation and delivery of own products and services or to resell to others (Kotler et al., 2019).

The knowledge and understanding of B2B can be really important from different perspectives, in particular because its market volume is much higher than the one of consumer markets.

Business markets characteristics can be summarised in three blocks, illustrated in *table 1.1*:
- market structure and demand;
- nature of buying customers;
- decision process.

Table 1.1 – Characteristics of business markets

Market structure and demand
Business markets contain fewer but larger buyers
Business buyer demand is derived from final consumer demand
Demand in many business markets is more inelastic
Demand in business markets fluctuates more and more quickly
Nature of buying unit
Business purchases involve more buyers
Business buying involves more professional purchasing effort
Types of decision and decision process
Business buyers usually face more complex buying decisions
The business buying process is more formalised
Buyers and sellers work closely together, building close long-term relationships

Source: Kotler, P., Armstrong, G., Harris, L. and He, H. (2019). Principles Of Marketing. Harlow, United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited.

The business buying process in B2B markets is very complex. It involves large sums of money, together with technical and economic considerations of all the stakeholders involved, including their own interests at different levels of organization. Buyers and sellers are more interdependent and work closely together during all the stages of the buying process, which creates additional value for partners. Therefore, the main features that characterize B2B are the following:
- business customers solely purchase the products they really need, and most of all those that can increase the value of their own;
- orders are in large-scale;
- more people and roles are involved in a purchase;
- the relationship between supplier and buyer is more complex and long-term-oriented;
- professional and deep tones are used in marketing communication;
- purchasing processes are multistage;
- procurement managers buy goods and services not just for the firm they represent but also in order to define themselves, as their personal bonus depends on their negotiation skills;
- focus is on price and cost-saving;

- the number of buyers is lower than the total number of final consumers;
- potential customers are easy to segment.

As a matter of fact, business products can be very complex. Some need to be custom built or retrofitted for buyers. Not only products, but so can be figuring out the buying dynamics of organizations. Many people within an organization can be part of the buying process and have a say in what gets purchased, how much of it, and from whom. Having different people involved makes business marketing much more complicated, and because of the quantities each business customer is capable of buying, the stakes are very high. For some organizations, losing a big account can be financially devastating and winning one can cause a financial boom. Generally, the more high-dollar and complex the item being sold is, the longer it takes for the sale to be made. Due to the complexity of these offerings, buyers are concerned about many factors, such as safety, reliability, efficiency, and they also generally want the offering to be customized in some way. Moreover, a lot of time and effort is needed to close these deals, therefore the main topics to be discussed are especially the buying process and relationship marketing.

1.2 B2B Marketing

At its core, B2B marketing involves building valuable relationships to guarantee lasting customers. The B2B market is the largest of all the markets and exceeds the consumer market in dollar value. B2B marketing is largely employed by companies that make products that consumers have no practical use for, such as steel. However, it is also used by companies selling products and services bought by consumers and other businesses alike. Success in this field comes from embedding the company in the industry and making its product seem like a staple.

In B2B markets, the effective relationship exists between people, not businesses. Thus, the fundamental vector of the final sales between companies is represented by the faith placed on each other by the people involved in it. The resulting marketing strategies are focused on creating opportunities to meet potential customers – hereby considered as those who are given the duty to act in the bargaining – and to establish a bond with them, thus with the company they work for.

There are some general features which differentiate B2B marketing from other approaches. First and foremost, sales are the most important asset because products engage new people and they allow the establishment of the brand. The latter is worth nothing at the beginning because

the importance of the human relationship with the seller is the only interest of the buyer. Therefore, in order to build the brand, it is important to start by focusing on a geographically restricted area, with it possibly being in proximity of the company's headquarters, which benefits from the fact that potential buyers are inclined to trust "neighbours" and small realities much more than they would with multinational suppliers.

On the other hand, anyone can provide excellent services or a quality product, but a well-crafted experience is what truly matters in B2B relationships. For an organization operating in the B2B sector it is important to have a clear vision and core values in order to remain competitive. Strong B2B branding means knowing the company's overall vision and its mission statement. These values serve as the foundation of any organization and define everything related to it. Value must be prioritized over price, as it is important to state what the company is proposing to its customers and what is the real value of its offering.

Then it is fundamental to understand the target in order to better organize the business efforts. Customers must be treated like partners, by allowing them to make suggestions and provide valuable feedback to improve the final result. This takes up the idea that B2B transactions are made up of human and direct relationships, which need to be cultivated over time.

In businesses where the marketing department is present and well-coordinated with all the other areas, the vision, the identity of the company, the values and the objectives are all aligned towards a common strategy. Therefore, a good and shared strategy allows a company to rely on marketing for all the complexity of the decisions regarding, as for example: prices, sales, internal processes, campaigns, and advertising.

1.2.1 Marketing pillars

There are three necessary marketing pillars: value proposition, sales, and communication. The value proposition of a company is a statement that is perfectly able to express why the buyer should choose the company's products or use its services. It is often used as a starting point upon which marketing campaigns can be structured. It helps to communicate the reasons why users should choose the company for their purchase amongst its competitors. It is an important part of a company's branding strategy, as it contributes in the establishment of its presence in the marketplace. In order to create a project consistent with the company's value proposition, a useful tool is identified in the value proposition canvas, a scheme made of two sides: the customer profile, through which the customer is understood and his needs defined, and the value

map, useful to decide how the company intends to create value for the buyer. The fit between these two aspects can be achieved when they meet each other into a shared strategy.

Figure 1.1 – The Value Proposition Canvas
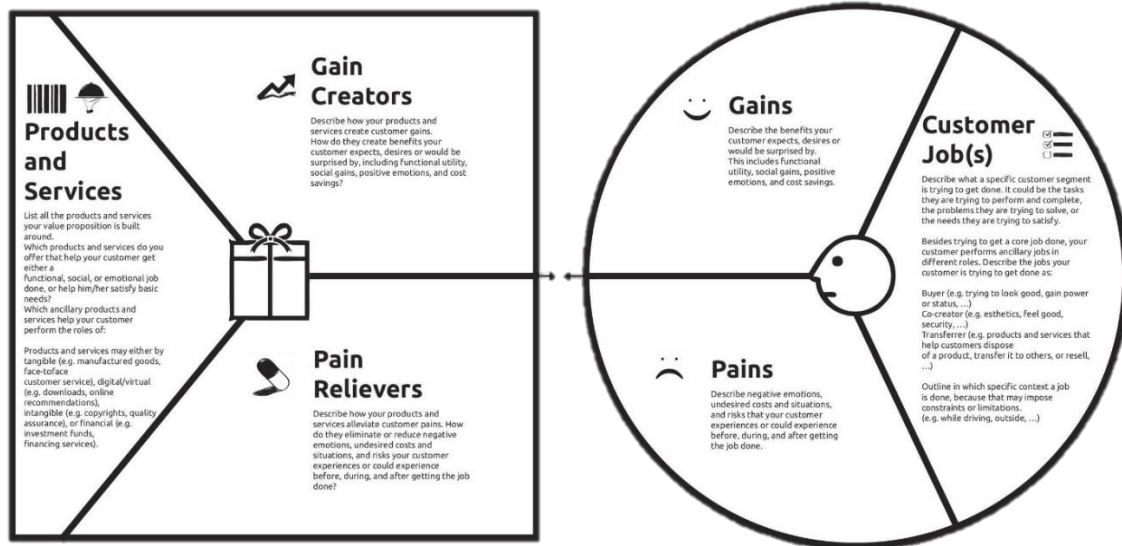
Source: Strategyzer Tools. (n.d.). Business Models Canvas & Value Propositions Canvas - Strategyzer Tools. [online] Strategyzer.com. Available at: <https://www.strategyzer.com/canvas>.

Making reference to *figure 1.1*, the value map and the customer profile result aligned when the company's value proposition addresses the most significant pains and gains arising from the customer profile, by offering products and services which can face specific needs and challenge the competitors.

Regarding sales, B2B companies approach them differently from other sectors, as selling to a business involves many different factors. Selling sometimes requires participating in a bidding process by responding to a purchaser's request for proposals. The company, most of the time, is not represented by a singular person but by a group of co-workers – and often by committees – that have different mindsets, though their intention remains to find common ground. Hence the complexity of the decision-making process, which in this contest could take days, weeks or even months, depending on how the purchasing company works and on the size and nature of the order. The bigger the investment is, the longer the decision will take.

These dynamics have to be taken into consideration when developing a marketing strategy in the B2B sector, a process that requires patience in order to see effective results. Some campaigns could result in being unsuccessful, what makes the difference is the perseverance of these actions and their consistency with the company's values.

In the end, communication is probably one of the most important marketing tools, the one that allows the company to create touchpoints with its target. It includes all the methods through which the company communicates its ideals to the public. These together form the integrated marketing communication, a concept that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan evaluating the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines – for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and public relations – and combines them to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact. Nowadays, it is recognized as a business process that helps companies identify the most effective methods for building relationships with customers and other stakeholders. The final goal is to generate both short-term financial returns and build long-term brand and shareholder value.

Most of an organization's communications with the marketplace take place as part of a carefully planned and controlled promotional program. The basic tools used to accomplish an organization's communication objectives are often referred to as the promotional mix, and are part of six subcategories: advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, publicity, public relations, personal selling, and digital marketing. The latter is a consequence of the evolution of technologies through the years, which has led to the rise of the internet and, thus, of online advertising.

Advertising consists in any paid form of nonpersonal communication about an organization, product, service, or idea by an identified sponsor. The paid aspect of this definition reflects the fact that the space or time for an advertising message generally must be bought – exception to this is the public service announcement, whose advertising space or time is donated by the media, usually to a non-profit organization or cause. It is nonpersonal because advertising involves mass media, such as television, radio, magazines, and newspapers, that can transmit a message to large groups of individuals, often at the same time. Hence, there is generally no opportunity for immediate feedback from the message recipient.

Direct marketing involves a variety of activities, including database management, direct selling, telemarketing, and direct-response advertising through direct mail, online, and various broadcast and print media. One of the major tools of direct marketing is direct-response advertising, whereby the customer is encouraged to purchase directly from the manufacturer.

Sales promotion is generally defined as those marketing activities that provide extra value or incentives to the sales force, the distributors, or the ultimate consumer and can stimulate immediate sales.

Publicity refers to nonpersonal communications regarding an organization, product, service, or idea not directly paid for. It usually comes in the form of a news story, editorial, or announcement about an organization, its products, and services. Techniques used to gain publicity include press releases, press conferences, feature articles, photographs, films, and video news releases. An advantage of publicity over other forms of promotion is its credibility, customers generally tend to be less sceptical toward favourable information about a product or service when it comes from a source they perceive as unbiased.

Public relations is defined as a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations. Relations have a broader objective than publicity, as its purpose is to establish and maintain a positive image of the company. Thus, it involves managing relationships with a number of important audiences, including investors, employees, suppliers, communities, and governments.

Personal selling, a form of person-to-person communication in which a seller attempts to assist and persuade prospective buyers to purchase the company's product or service or to act on an idea. It involves direct contact between buyer and seller, either face-to-face or through some form of telecommunications such as telephone sales. This interaction gives the marketer communication flexibility; the seller can see or hear the potential buyer's reactions and modify the message accordingly. The personal, individualized communication in personal selling allows the seller to tailor the message to the customer's specific needs or situation.

Digital marketing is a communication performed through interactive, digital media, particularly via the Internet. Its practice addresses the research of this thesis, and it will be analysed later in detail, when treating the impact of digital on B2B marketing, in *chapter two*.

This said, integrated marketing in general works if a company's communication strategy is:
- Consistent, other companies and their actors need to see a pattern in the values expressed to facilitate learning and induce action. The exact same persuasive message can benefit from being reinforced in different ways across different communications. A confused communication can cause customers to feel disoriented and to lose faith in the quality of the company's offering.
- Complementary, each communication option addresses a different objective, all of which are needed to successfully persuade consumers and drive sales.
- Cross effect, a sort of virtuous circle is created by communicating a concept and in some ways trying to reinforce another of the company's messages. This is because the

communication effects of the customers' exposure to one communication option can be enhanced when they have had prior exposure to another communication option.

These points are valid for all the companies trying to create a relationship with their buyers and to abate the boundaries given by their role of suppliers. Hence, the relationship with their customers is also characterized by specific peculiarities.

1.2.2 Roles operating in B2B marketing strategies

A B2B career requires marketers to not only have a marketing background, but also a firm understanding of how a business can evolve and its main practices. B2B marketers are often creative-minded individuals who are comfortable working with numbers, statistics, and outcomes. Due to the varied and specific skills required to work in this sector, there are a variety of careers that are involved with B2B marketing, on both the seller's and the buyer's side.

For example, marketing managers have the knowledge and training to manage and effectively strategize a B2B campaign. They have gained the critical marketing eye and the managerial skills needed to understand the specific needs of a niche or industry, and market their product or service effectively to fit those needs.

From a seller's perspective, B2B sales representatives are responsible for implementing the marketing plans that are put into place for their company's product or service. They are the ones who develop and maintain relationships with potential clients. Thus, a B2B sales representative should have strong communication skills and be able to connect with a variety of people. They need to have a strong propension and talent in sales, negotiation and decision making.

Another strategic role is that of B2B marketing coordinators, who organize and implement the daily tasks of building and marketing a B2B brand. This position is usually in charge of communicating with a variety of people, as well as helping produce written marketing materials, client lists and email campaigns. They are generally responsible for the organization of an entire B2B campaign.

All these roles together compose the team in charge of marketing activities within a business. Whether to have them all concentrated in one person or to hire different people for each role, is the company's decision and must reflect the internal organization of business units.

1.3 Differences in customer approach

Starting from the needs of the sector, it is possible to give a definition of the four large categories on which B2B marketers generally focus:

- companies that use the products sold by the organization to produce their own products or services;
- government agencies, the single largest target and consumer of B2B marketing;
- institutions like hospitals and schools;
- companies that turn around and resell the goods to consumers, like brokers and wholesalers.

Having these clusters in mind and knowing their own, companies can start addressing their strategy to the market they operate in. Every marketing strategy needs a hypothetical consumer to be studied, in order to understand if the peculiarities of the product or service offered by the company can meet the consumer's expectations and needs. The process of dividing the market of interest into distinct groups that have common characteristics has been defined as market segmentation. The final outcome of this process depends on the bases of segmentation chosen by the marketers in charge of this research. The bases of segmentation can be characterized by different kinds of variables: geographic, demographic, psychographic, benefits sought and behavioural, which facilitate the division of the target population into manageable groups.

Consumer insights help developing buyer personas that facilitate the planning of effective social media marketing strategies. Personas are archetypal consumers that represent the needs of larger groups of people, in terms of their goals and personal values, they are a fictitious character blending the most common attributes.

From a B2B perspective, the first differentiation is given by the definition of the target customers. In this sector, customers can not be considered as singular entities, but they are companies represented by specific people who are given the responsibility of making purchasing decisions. Thus, personas in this context do not act moved by their personal preferences and decisions, but they are subjected to the vision of the company they work for, and their interests are tied to business pains. Although, they are also influenced – in small part – by their role in the society, for example as fathers or mothers, which can attenuate some of their behaviours and accentuate others. When taking into consideration these kinds of figures, there are many points a marketer should examine. To analyse buyer personas in the B2B sector, the focus must exclusively be on their working life, making assessments about the company

they work for, what their role in it is, how long they have been working in the considered industry, their sources of information, the issues their company is facing, potential problems with competitors' products.

In a bottom-up logic, all these characteristics together help define how the proposition can be improved in order to meet the requests of both the parties. Nevertheless, this information is not easily assessed by marketers, who often have to struggle with the condition of not having a complete set of customers to refer to.

The sales force, customer care and the technical office are the first sources of information. They can provide data helpful to guide a marketer in the research, on which questions useful to defining the buyer persona are built. In this process, data can be gathered also by analysing the database of the already existing customers, from which marketers can evaluate, for example, the number of offers commonly made to reach an order, the average purchase potential detected by the commercial reference of a certain product or service, the demand for specific products or services divided by geographical area. The data obtained from the database make sense if they can be crossed, to bring out certain patterns that were not evident before.

Moreover, B2B companies carefully monitor general economic conditions to anticipate consumer buying patterns. The firms do so because the demand for business products is often based on derived demand. Derived demand is demand that arises from a source other than the primary buyer of a product. When it comes to B2B sales, that source is consumers. If consumers do not demand the products produced by businesses, the firms that supply products to these businesses will suffer big losses.

Fluctuating demand is another characteristic of B2B markets, as a small change in demand by consumers can have a big effect throughout the chain of businesses that supply all the goods and services that produce it.

The powerful influence of consumers leads some companies to try to influence their B2B sales by directly influencing consumers, even though they do not sell their products to them. B2B buyers also keep tabs on them to look for patterns that could create joint demand. Joint demand occurs when the demand for one product increases the demand for another.

Once a generic picture is built, customers are approached in a more direct way, using tools like interviews or surveys. This experience can be positive or negative, and its effect is reflected in the perceived image of the company. The interview is a double-edged tool because it requires

a great ability in data analysis and can be a total failure or even prove counterproductive if it takes place in a delicate negotiation phase with the customer. The personal interview is the most effective tool because a direct contact with the customer can produce much more information and even create new opportunities. It can also be realized through simple conversations, in this regard fairs and conventions are ideal for this kind of contact.

1.4 The digital evolution of B2B

Formerly, marketing communication has always been characterized by a focus on the offering, in a "One-to-Many" model, which is commonly framed as mass communication. It is characterized by the fact that the company creates a communication message, which is conveyed amongst potential customers through traditional media or mass media such as television, radio, press, cinema and so on. Within this model, the roles assumed by the participating actors are different, as companies hold a position of power, and customers play a passive role. Organizations have the power to design, control and disseminate the image to be perceived by others, through advertising and promotional messages. Businesses' approach to the market is centred on push strategies, dictated by a broadcasting communication logic. In essence, the function attributed to marketing in this context is to intercept the consumer during the evaluation phase, in order to direct him towards the purchase of a specific product.

There are five distinctive elements of the traditional communication model: unidirectionality, mass marketing, monologue, focus on the offering, target. Its unidirectionality derives from the fact that traditional communication is transmitted in one way, which starting from the company reaches the users. Mass marketing defines the aim of these communication activities, which is that of reaching a large and poorly differentiated number of firms. The concept of a monologue refers to its form of communication, which is expressed with a narrative value, in which the counterparty is not given the opportunity to interact or intervene. The entire communication activity focuses on the offering, it is determined to highlight its distinctive characteristics, placing the needs of the customers in the background. Users are perceived exclusively as a target, as a market segment to which to turn. Thus, four marketing levels arise: price, product or service, placement, and promotion.

In 2000, four authors published their revolutionary considerations in a book, under the title of "The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual". In this work they expose 95 theses, in which the central idea is that, through the advent of the Internet, «a powerful global

conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter – and getting smarter faster than most companies» (Levine et al., 2000, p.5). In this sense, markets start to be considered as conversations, asserting that the Internet is unlike conventional media used in mass marketing, as it enables conversations amongst customers and between customers and companies, which are claimed to transform traditional business practices. This work constitutes the pillar of the revolution that businesses lived in the afterwards. With the advent of the network and, in particular, of Web 2.0, the user is no longer a passive but an active and interactive actor in the purchasing process, able to influence the purchasing decisions of others. This communication structure evolved together with emerging technologies which led to the rise of powerful tools, such as social media, and new methods to define marketing strategies and evaluate performances. Marketers started to refer to this trend as digital marketing, a topic that will be analysed in detail throughout the next chapter.

2. The impact of digital on B2B marketing

With the advent of digital technologies and social media, the traditional marketing communication model was no longer appropriate for dealing with the emerging challenges the market was issuing to the companies. These new tools were flexible, easily adaptable to market changes and based on completely open platforms, and this facilitated the interaction between businesses. These dynamics have transformed the "One-to-Many" model into a new paradigm, defined as the "Many-to-Many" marketing communication model. It is characterized by its circularity, as all the parties that take part in B2B transactions assume a specific role, maintaining an equal relationship, such that neither the supplier nor the buyer have a privileged position against the other.

It is based on the process by which the supplier company creates a particular content conveyed within the new media and buyers interact with it by exchanging opinions. The exchange of views generates feedback, that is received by the company through the media in which the content was initially published. By the use of these new tools the organization can monitor the reputation of the brand online and change its actions in order to favour specific returns.

Thus, in addition to customers taking on a proactive role, other elements characterize this new marketing communication model, which are exactly antithetical to those seen for mass communication: omni directionality, dialogue, customization, focus on the customer, buyer as partner. It is omnidirectional, in the sense that the communication structure has no specific direction, every user of the network, be it a client, a potential customer or the company itself, can generate content, everyone has the tools to convey information. Omnidirectional communication is made explicit through the form of dialogue, companies are involved in conversations based on the exchange of information and mutual respect. Through dialogue and listening, customers can communicate directly with the company by expressing their preferences, so that the company can configure its product or service accordingly. For this reason, customization is another key aspect of this model, being a consequence of the close relationship established between its actors. The entire communication activity focuses on the buyer's needs. Businesses organize content in such a way that it can be perceived as useful by online users. For example, news within a website are created with the aim of offering real value to users, by emphasizing common problems and implicitly giving solutions that propose the company's products or services. Then, clients are perceived as partners of the organization, which seeks confrontation and feedback, by entering the value co-creation processes.

The digital promotional mix configured in the "Many-to-Many" model, is characterized by activities very similar to the ones that compose the offline model, which however change in their form. It consists of digital advertising, digital personal selling, digital sales promotion and digital public relations. These are all part of a larger category that is digital marketing, and they are in continuous evolution due to the innovations brought up by social media. On this behalf, Taprial and Kanwar (2012) identify five properties that distinguish social media from traditional media: accessibility, speed, interactivity, longevity, and reach.

Digital advertising comprehends all those advertising activities that take place through digital channels. The most popular digital advertising activities are search engine advertising, that takes place through the sapient use of search engines; social advertising, that is realized within social media, such as Facebook Ads; and display advertising, that is represented by banners on websites and online portals.

Personal selling also evolved through digital. Sellers can now take advantage of the information on search engines to refine the sales processes and acquire detailed information on the reference market. The new means of getting in direct contact with customers are business social networks – such as LinkedIn – and mailing, which replace telephones, letters, or personal visits.

Sales promotion takes on new configurations, in a digital key. Good examples of their applications are Amazon Prime or Spotify free trials, discount codes, coupons, and viral videos.

In conclusion, digital public relations is composed by a set of activities aimed at promoting a specific product or service, through the creation of valuable digital relationships, within digital media such as blogs, social networks, forums, websites, and online magazines.

2.1 The rise of Web 2.0

The term Web 2.0 was used for the first time by Tim O'Reilly in 2005 in relation to the evolution of the World Wide Web, consisting in the transition from the traditional concept of web, also known as Web 1.0, to a more dynamic and user friendly dimension of it.

O'Reilly refers to this new phenomenon by defining it as a platform which is constantly updated thanks to the contribution of the users themselves. By transferring and exchanging data and content with each other, they create a network which works in a sort of participative architecture, overcoming the static nature of Web 1.0, and offering an advanced experience to users themselves.

It was 1991 when Tim Berners-Lee proposed the creation of the first website, which followed the birth of the first browser, Nexius, ancestor of the subsequent Safari and Explorer. This revolution led to what is commonly known as Web 1.0, a static web based on the purpose of passively informing readers. The main goal of the websites was to produce and update content at any time trying to increase the online presence of users. There was a detached approach to information, as users limited themselves to visiting websites without making any kind of contribution to their content.

The focus of the innovation of Web 2.0 is the interaction, as the internet diverges from the concept of a simple informative tool by favouring the proliferation of various kinds of relationships. This also derives from the introduction of new technologies that facilitate communication and the birth of virtual communities. This point of view suggests that the approach provided by the new web is the consequence of the progressive rise of a social phenomenon that sees people all over the world breaking cultural and ideological boundaries to share ideas and collaborate, making them become protagonists of the society they live in, making them able to change the reality that surrounds them. Therefore, the main differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 can be schematized as follows.

Table 2.1 – Web 1.0 vs Web 2.0

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
User reads the content	Users can generate content
Personal websites	Blogs
Content management systems	Wikis
Client-Server	Peer-to-Peer
Companies	Communities
Publication	Participation
Directories	Tagging
Stickness	Syndacation

Source: Author's elaboration

As a consequence of this evolution, understanding the potential of these tools becomes fundamental for businesses, so that they can exploit the role of the users. Web 2.0 becomes a medium with which companies have the opportunity to enhance the content created by individuals. Initially web-based services were used to interact with customers or to reach new customer segments, but the participatory nature of the new web has radically changed the rules of communication, favouring the passage from a model centralized on the relationship between company and users to one based on the active participation of the customer, but still focused on

a single platform. At the same time, these last years have been witnessing the birth of a new model of content creation, where businesses play a marginal role in product development or management of promotional campaigns, as these activities can be outsourced and delegated to the virtual community. This results in a new role of companies, who become intermediates in the exchange of value between customers. The use of Web 2.0 applications as marketing tools generates greater results when the involvement of customers is higher, which at a strategic level implies a significant reduction of the information asymmetry existing between the company and its customers and, therefore, a greater transparency in the relationship between the two parties.

2.2 Products and assets

In order to have a coherent structure able to obtain successful results, each company needs to define its own digital marketing toolbox. It is composed of tools which are considered effective assets for the company itself, since they consist of a resource expected to provide a future benefit when the company's investments permit its substantial growth. These assets are created by each company starting by a more general group, which comprehends website, blogs, email newsletters, social media platforms, and the brand. These are applied and customized accordingly to the specific needs of the target sector supplied by the company.

2.2.1 Website and e-commerce

The corporate website is the cornerstone of the digital marketing strategy; it is where the outgoing and incoming traffic of information begins and ends. It is the major touchpoint for B2B companies as 73% of buyers prefer gathering information about products and services by looking for it on search engines. For a website to be well-performing, thus being able to produce new leads and to engage new customers, it needs to differentiate itself from the competitors' ones, establishing the brand identity and enhancing its qualities, underlying the company's expertise.

The website is the first carrier of the company's message and vision, both of which should be consistent along all the contents proposed on it. It is important for it to express the key features which differentiate the company's offering from the one of its competitors. These do not need to be tangible characteristics, but significant and relevant indeed. For example, if an organization can boast several years of experience in its field, it should make it clear and evident

on its website. In particular, many companies do not sell their own products or services, but act as resellers of their suppliers' ones; thus, in order to differentiate from the other resellers operating on their market, they need to leverage on their know-how. Another important aspect to be highlighted on corporate websites is the company's internal structure. In order to convey confidence to the customers, it is fundamental to show a well-organized structure, with defined business units and specialized teams of people. It is important to show to the customers who they will come in contact with, by presenting the CEO and the other managers who address the work. This kind of approach enhances the organizations' ability to respond to customers' needs quickly and lean, characteristics that will differentiate their offering from the competitors' one.

As previously said, people tend to gather information by looking for it on search engines, for this reason the website needs to be supported by Search Engine Optimization (SEO) activities, aimed at increasing the turnout of views and customers landing on the website. These consist in the processes of modifying content, site characteristics and connections to achieve improved search engine rankings, thus, to improve the likelihood that search engines will high rank the website in response to search queries. Each company needs to modify its formula on a regular basis, in order to keep up with search engines' changes in their algorithms. Websites that attract heavy traffic are more valuable because a large number of visitors makes it more likely that the brand will benefit from a higher rate of conversion, thus a higher number of actual purchases – considering both online and offline buyers. Moreover, assuming that the website sells advertising space to other advertisers, the more views are performed, the more advertising revenues the website can generate.

Hence, another topic arises when dealing with online purchases: the e-commerce platform. Many companies choose to provide their websites with it, which eventually has become an increasingly important source of competitive advantage for B2B companies. E-commerce enables companies to decrease their transactional costs by streamlining supply-chain management and distribution. In addition to that, it helps companies keep their costs down by having access to a wider range of suppliers, optimising internal processes, and using it as a new sales channel to target customers (Pelissie du Rausas, 2011).

2.2.2 Blogs and articles

Blogging has been heralded as a paradigm shift in the way companies interact with customers by restoring a human face to a company's self-presentation, thus establishing a personal relationship between the two parties. In the B2B context, the content published on corporate

blogs can establish the firm's expertise in its field, facilitate brand building, cultivate customer relationships, garner feedback, support sales, and encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing. Although, most of the time, articles take the form of news, published in order to keep website visitors and customers informed about the last updates and initiatives the company is carrying on. Besides, having some articles published online does not equal having a blog. The latter requires constant updates, which have to maintain a substantial consistency on the topics analysed and discussed; this specific approach needs to evolve over time.

Blogs facilitate conversations between the author and readers and act as a two-way communications and marketing channel (Weil, 2009). The fact that blogs have been included as a proper tool in integrated marketing communications strategies has facilitated informal and personal interactions between firms and their customers. The two-way nature of a blog enables corporations to engage in conversations with current and prospective customers as well as other stakeholders. In fact, companies which actively use their blogs generate about 67% more leads per month than those not using it.

Credibility is essential in B2B marketing and it has to be established in order to make blog conversations effective. This leads customers to perceive both the explicit and the implicit messaging that the company includes in its articles. Explicit messaging refers to the subject and written words in the posts while implicit messaging reflects the company's tactics, which consist in the actions performed in order to achieve specific marketing objectives, part of the marketing strategy. Compared with other communication tools, the higher levels of conversational voice in blogs lead to higher levels of trust and satisfaction, which allow blogs to be perceived as more credible than traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). This is a consequence of the unlimited information that the internet allows to communicate to all customers, while allowing them to control what they want to see. Thus, corporate blogs can serve many roles in an effort to meet marketing and communication objectives.

2.2.3 Email and newsletter

Email marketing is another important tool that can compose an integrated B2B online marketing strategy which helps nurturing relationships with customers and enhancing customer retention. There are many advantages of using this tool and one of those is its cost-effectiveness. In fact, the creation, production, and delivery costs for an email are substantially low, and these costs also take into account its high level of personalisation. The latter is an important characteristic, which allows the company to easily segment lists based on specific interests and differentiate

the content of each message. Furthermore, a good plan and an effective execution can drive customers to take action and respond to the company's offers.

This strategy can also include a monthly newsletter which offers the company an opportunity to build an ongoing, interactive dialogue with its customers on a measurable basis. If well-designed and structured, newsletters can demonstrate value to the customers and also change their perception of the business. They consist in timely articles that solve actual business problems, or in insights about specific topics of interest. By proposing ideas they build trust amongst customers on the company's knowledge, thus increasing its credibility and reliability. They are the perfect tool for firms which care about their customers considering them as partners and not only as suppliers. The key aspect of providing customers with a newsletter consists in being a resource to them.

One of the biggest challenges in conducting a successful newsletter campaign is generating content able to motivate customers to take action. Newsletters that simply provide a summary of wider topics and a recap of the company's latest products do not have any effect on sales and are commonly read just by the company's most loyal customers. In order to reach and influence all potential buyers, a newsletter needs to provide useful, objective information that can help customers improve their processes.

2.2.4 Social media platforms

Social media platforms could be considered as the most controversial tool in the B2B marketing panorama. In fact, many companies operating in this sector have always feared that the use of social media would not have produced any economic returns, believing that only B2C companies could succeed in their investments. Usually, this belief has derived from a lack of knowledge and awareness of social media, but recent data shows that B2B companies are eagerly investing in these platforms, although still maintaining a focus on their returns.

Figure 2.1 – The most effective social channels for B2B companies
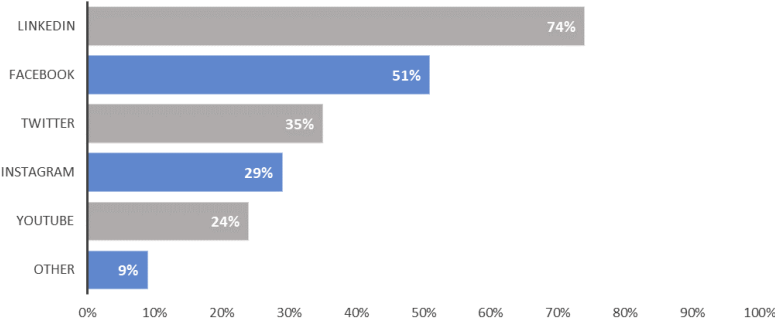
Source: (2019). 2019 B2B Marketing Outlook. Chief Marketer.

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As a matter of fact, *figure 2.1* shows that in 2019 the most effective social channel resulted to be LinkedIn, which has been used by 74% of the companies, followed by the 51% rate of Facebook. Thus, B2B businesses are investing much more on their social media marketing efforts, and they are starting to realize that the focus is progressively shifting from valuable economic returns to enhanced brand awareness.

For a successful outcome, organizations need to take a strategic approach and execute their social campaigns with precision. High returns on investments depend on setting marketing goals that contribute to the company's overall growth. Having defined goals that are relevant to the business help creating a winning B2B social media marketing strategy. Each goal needs to be smart and measurable in nature so that gauging success becomes simpler, and more scientific.

Companies choose their social media platforms according to their objectives. Those who focus on a formal business relationship mostly choose LinkedIn, which allows firms to enhance their expertise and their knowledge, by exposing their employees' skills. Through Facebook companies can promote events related to their products and services, and they can also conduct promotions.

In order to increase awareness and visibility of their brand, many firms – in particular in the USA – use Twitter, which can be useful to managers in sharing important news and timely information that may be relevant to customers. Instagram, on the other hand, brings less effective results in the B2B sector, if compared to the ones obtained by B2C companies. In fact, *figure 2.1* shows that just the 29% is assigned to this platform, rate due to the social media's aim and structure.

In January 2020 Instagram has registered about 500 million active worldwide users per day, on a total of 1 billion existing profiles, a huge number considering that LinkedIn's total users float around 610 million (Statista, 2020). Then, what guides the choice of B2B companies is not the number of potential customers, but how they can reach them. Moreover, Instagram's numbers include younger users, who do not reflect the usual B2B target, while most LinkedIn profiles represent people working for specific companies, interested in looking for new opportunities and relations. Instagram users' activity is also different, as they post personal contents that make them part of a community; while, on LinkedIn, posts are aimed at showing a person's knowledge and general background. For all these reasons, B2B companies choose social media platforms that can reflect their target and offer them certain results.

In conclusion, social media optimization efforts can make a positive impact on the company's brand development. The key to enhance business reputation is to be active and responsive on social channels, in order to show the company's initiatives.

2.2.5 *Brand*

The fundamental asset able to support all of the previously presented tools is the brand. Organizations which build a distinctive and cohesive brand identity can benefit from a number of favourable brand performance outcomes. These outcomes include superior brand preference (Bengtsson and Servais, 2005), increased levels of trust (Ghodeswar, 2008), greater brand differentiation (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000) and stronger customer identification with the brand (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). Constructing the brand image is a process which requires time and patience, thus company's investments aimed at enhancing brand performance are mostly done in a long-term logic.

However, the process of building brand image starts from the desired image, which is what the company wants to express, the values it has been thought to transmit. Then, the communicated image is what the company is effectively able to communicate to the public, through messages, visuals, activities, products. On the market, the latter encounters the image of the competitors, which defines the company compared image, which is stronger when compared with weaker ones, and vice versa. This is the perfect expression of how organizations are conceived in relation with others, that brings customers to experience their decision-making process. Next, the expected image comes from what customers perceived from the company communicated image. In conclusion, the perceived image is the final idea that each customer has in his mind, and it is completely different from the initial desired image, because of distortions, different mindsets, and psychographic reasons.

The brand should be protected by the attacks of competitors, by nurturing the difference. In order to do so, organizations must be constantly innovating the product, keeping the niche leadership, creating the myth, selling quality. Communication is a strong ally for this purpose, as it is useful to keep customers' memory aware and arrange an accurate story telling.

Consistency always constitutes the key to a successful outcome, and marketing efforts should focus on maintaining it through all the available assets.

2.3 Customer profiling

In the B2B sector, potential customers pass through different stages before becoming effective buyers. Initially, all the companies on the market are potential customers, and they are also called leads, as they have not been classified yet. Moreover, the process of segmentation defines some criteria of qualification where leads are grouped in order to be considered by the company's marketing effort. When a company fits into one of these criteria, it becomes a prospect. It does not necessarily have to have indicated an interest in buying, but it has to have the means to buy.

The goal of marketing is to reach customers at the moments, or touch points, that most influence their decisions. For years, touch points have been explained through the metaphor of a "funnel", in which customers start with a number of potential brands in mind, then a specific marketing strategy is directed to them as they methodically move through the funnel and reduce the initial number, and in the end they emerge with the one brand they chose to purchase.

Nevertheless, nowadays the funnel concept fails to capture all the nuances raised by the emergence of an increasingly discerning, well-informed customer. Thus, a more sophisticated approach has been required to help marketers navigate this environment, which is less linear and more complicated than the funnel suggests. This new pattern has been defined as "the consumer decision journey", taking in example consumers because it has been firstly analysed starting from marketers' experience in the B2C sector. However, it has been lately applied also to the B2B approach, with some different measures, such as shifting the focus from consumers to customers.

2.3.1 Beyond the funnel

The first interpretation of the customer decision journey is represented by the so-called funnel – in *figure 2.2* – which consists in a visualization of the process of turning leads into prospects and, eventually, into customers. Its name derives from the idea that marketers cast a broad net through their campaigns, in order to capture the highest possible number of leads, and then slowly nurture prospects through the steps of their purchasing decision, narrowing down the number of candidates in each level of the funnel. This model starts from the assumption that marketing and communication practices arise customers' propensity to purchase, by generating high levels of attention and engagement, towards the ultimate buying decision.
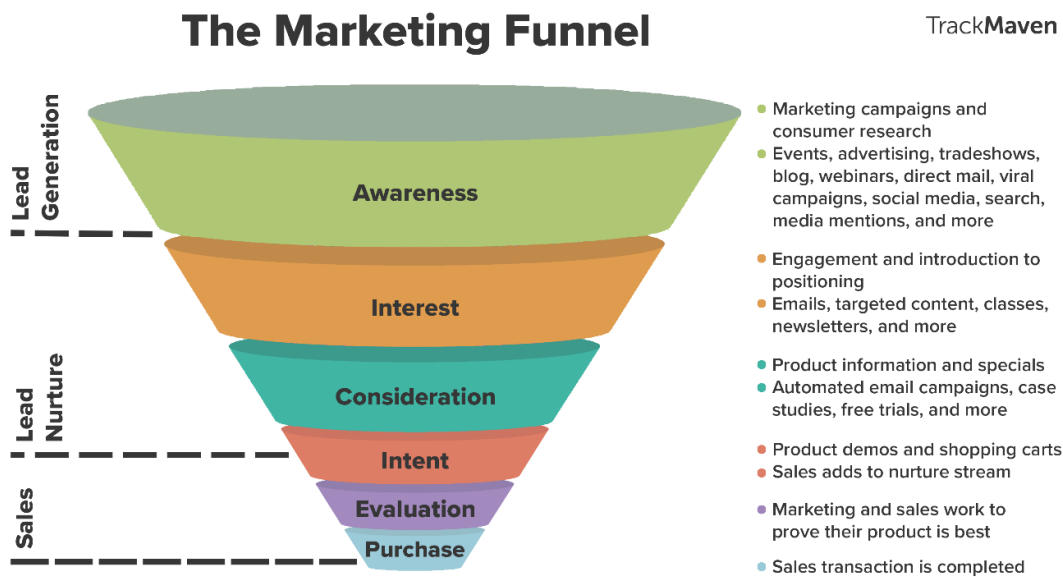
Awareness is the uppermost stage of the marketing funnel. Leads reach this stage through targeting and the resulting marketing campaigns. Here, marketers try to build trust around their company through events, advertising, trade shows, content creation, webinars, direct mailing, viral campaigns, social media, search, media mentions and more. Lead generation is a consequence of the awareness created, as information is collected, and leads are pulled into the lead management system for nurturing further down the funnel.

After being generated, leads move on to the interest stage, which consists in an opportunity for companies to develop a relationship with the people in their database and introduce their positioning. During this phase, leads learn more about the company, its products, and any helpful information it provides, with the aim of capturing their curiosity. Marketers can nurture leads through emails, targeted content, classes, newsletters and more.

In the consideration stage, leads have been changed into marketing qualified leads and are seen as prospective customers. Marketers can send prospects more information about products and offers through automated email campaigns, while continuing to nurture them with targeted content, case studies, free trials, and more.

In order to get to the intent stage, prospects must demonstrate that they are interested in buying the company's product or service. This can be stated through a survey, after a product demo, or when a product is placed in the shopping cart on an ecommerce platform. This stage represents an opportunity for marketers to emphasise the reason why their offering is the best choice for

the customer. At the end of this stage, prospects become potential buyers. Then, during the evaluation stage, potential buyers are making a final decision about which company, amongst the ones they are considering, can sell them the best product or service. Typically, marketing and sales work together closely to nurture the decision-making process and convince the other party of their potential and to make it an effective buyer.

In conclusion, those who decide to buy from the company turn into buyers. This is the purchase phase and consists in the final stage of the marketing funnel. This is where the sales department takes care of the purchase transaction. A positive experience on the part of the buyer can lead to referrals that fuel the top of the marketing funnel, and let the process start over. Noteworthy is that there is not a single agreed upon version of the funnel; some have many "stages" while others have few, with different names and actions taken by the business and customers for each. In this process, part of the marketers' job is to turn as many leads into customers as possible, thus making the funnel more cylindrical, though this is still not a reality for businesses. Moreover, this representation explains a general approach to the marketing funnel, which can be declined into the dual perspective of B2C and B2B, as shown in *figure 2.3*.

Figure 2.3 – Differences in B2C and B2B funnel interpretation
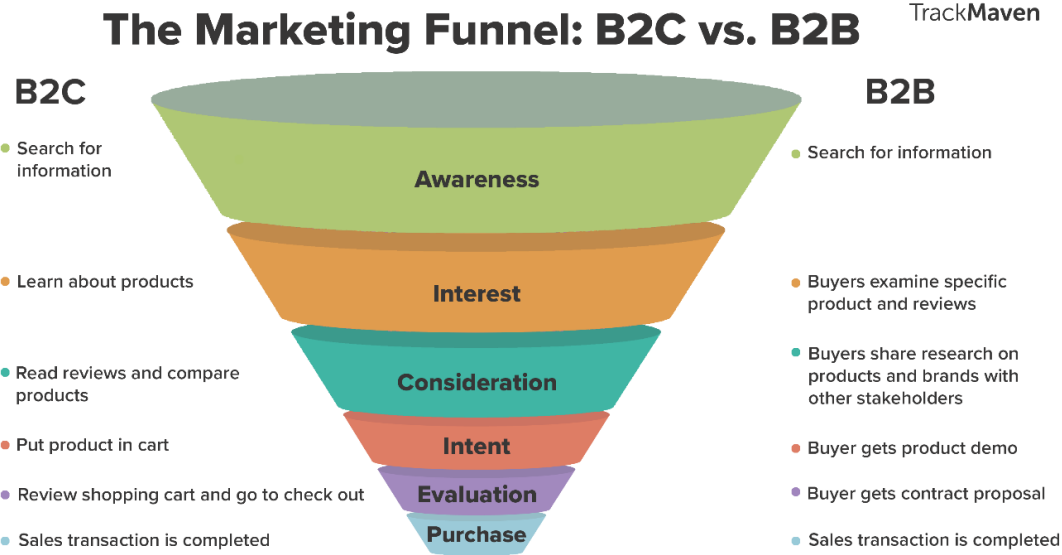
Source: Lee White, R. (n.d.). How The Marketing Funnel Works From Top To Bottom. [online] TrackMaven | The Marketing Insights Company. Available at: <https://trackmav en.com/blog/marketing-funnel-2>.

This comparison highlights the tendency of the B2B marketing process to be more cooperative inside the company, as it involves different roles and skills. The complexity of the stages is controlled by the marketing and sales department, which work together in the engagement of their potential customers, while in the B2C approach marketing and sales are more detached

and work alongside, taking over the project in specific phases. Another important difference is in the relationship with the client, who in the case of B2B has continuous opportunities to confront with the supplier, which differs from what a B2C relationship is about. Given the fact that in the B2C sector companies relate with wider audiences then the ones engaged by B2B, it rarely consists of a personal share of ideas between the customer and the company. This, on the contrary, happens in B2B companies, where the two parties involved in the transaction act together in the definition of the final offering and this causes customers to be considered potential buyers since the interest stage of the funnel.

Although, this does not define B2C companies as not capable of having direct relationships with customers, even if still remaining on a lower level of reliance when compared to the one occurring between two businesses. In fact, the exponential increase in the offer of products and services associated with technological evolution, the fragmentation of the media and the consequent multiplication of touch points between the user and the brand has radically changed both the user's purchasing behaviour and the way in which companies go about their business. This gave rise to the "Many-to-Many" marketing model, where the user is no longer a passive user but an active and interactive actor in the purchasing process, him being able to influence the purchasing decisions of other users and having the power to change how companies engage them. As a consequence, the path to purchase has become less representable as a linear path structured in an ordered sequence of phases.

On the other hand, the decision-making process in the digital age increasingly resembles a circular process in which all the phases of the funnel influence each other and contribute to the achievement of the final result.

Ultimately, what matters is the experience lived by the customer, which is formed through every single moment of his interaction with the company. The customer experience is the customer's internal and subjective reaction to any direct or indirect contact with a company (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). More specifically, direct contacts are the direct interactions that occur during the purchase and use of a product; indirect contacts, on the other hand, are meetings that do not take place in interpersonal contexts, but through the sales and communication channels activated by the company, through word of mouth from third parties or from other meetings with the company or with the product not programmed by the customer.

2.3.2 Customer decision journey

In 2009, four researchers published an article on McKinsey&Company which gave a revolutionary interpretation of the decision-making journey, they managed to do this by introducing the idea that the buying process is no longer linear, thus the marketing funnel is no longer relevant. They stated that customers are moving outside the marketing funnel by changing the way they research and buy products (Court et al., 2009), due to technological advances which have led to an increase in their access to information.

Starting from the assumption that the goal of marketing is to reach customers at the moments that most influence their decisions – defined as "touch points" – they defined the funnel approach as being too focused on finding a match between specific phases and those touch points. Indeed, the wide number of key buying factors resulting from the recent explosion of product choices and digital channels, coupled with the emergence of an increasingly discerning, well-informed customer, has made it difficult to synthetize all the stages of the process into a unique ideal representation.

Thus, given the need for a more sophisticated approach that could help marketers navigate this environment, they came up with the "customer decision journey", a less linear and more complicated model. The perks of this new finding consist in its adaptability to different geographic markets, different kinds of media, and in particular to different products and services.

They developed this approach through the examination of 20,000 users and their purchase decisions across five industries located in three different continents. The results showed how the proliferation of marketing tools and innovative offerings requires marketers to find new ways to get their companies included in the initial consideration set that users develop at the beginning of their decision journey. Furthermore, they highlighted how the shift from the "One-to-Many" towards the "Many-to-Many" marketing communication needed a more systematic way to satisfy customer demands and manage word-of-mouth.

The customer decision journey – in *figure 2.4* – is a more circular process, composed of four primary phases representing potential battlegrounds where marketers can win or lose: initial consideration; active evaluation, or the process of researching potential purchases; closure, when customers buy the products or services; and post purchase, when customers experience them.

Figure 2.4 – Graphic representation of McKinsey's customer decision journey

2
Consumers add or subtract brands as they evaluate what they want.

1
The consumer considers an initial set of brands, based on brand perceptions and exposure to recent touch points.

Active evaluation
Information gathering, shopping

3
Ultimately, the consumer selects a brand at the moment of purchase.

Loyalty loop

Initial-consideration set

Trigger

Moment of purchase

Postpurchase experience
Ongoing exposure

4
After purchasing a product or service, the consumer builds expectations based on experience to inform the next decision journey.

Source: Court, D., Elzinga, D., Mulder, S. and Vetvik, O. J. (2009). The consumer decision journey. McKinsey Quarterly.

Contrary to the funnel metaphor, the number of brands under consideration during the active evaluation phase may expand rather than narrow as users seek information and shop a category. Furthermore, companies may interrupt the decision-making process at any stage, by simply entering into consideration and even forcing the exit of rivals. This change in behaviour creates opportunities for marketers by adding touch points, but also needs to be evaluated in order to be ready to face the rivalry of others. Thus, brands already under consideration can no longer take their status for granted, although the number of brands added for consideration in different stages differs by industry. In today's decision journey, user-driven marketing is increasingly important as customers seize control of the process and actively gather information helpful to them. Most of the touch points during the active evaluation phase involve users' activities such as Internet reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations, as well as in-store interactions and recollections of past experiences. Just a small part of the touch points involves company-driven marketing, therefore marketers' role is to understand how to influence the ones created by their customers.

At the moment of purchase, after having compared all the different offerings, customers reach a decision about the brand and effectively buy the product or service. Then, the post-purchase experience shapes their opinion for every subsequent decision in the category, so that the journey becomes an ongoing cycle. Although the need to provide an experience that inspires

loyalty and therefore increases the probability of a repeated purchase, the competitiveness of today's markets makes customer retention difficult. In fact, amongst those customers who profess loyalty to a brand, some are considered active loyalists, who not only stick with it but also recommend it; others are passive loyalists, who appreciate a brand without being committed to it. All marketers should make expanding the base of active loyalists a priority, and in order to do so they must focus their spending on new touch points, which require companies to adopt new marketing efforts in response.

The key to success nowadays consists in aligning marketing with the decision journey. In order to do so, the marketer needs to be focused on the awareness stages that characterize each of its company's offerings. The idea is that there is no defined amount of time in which the customer needs to move from a stage to another, neither the marketer has to expect some sort of action from him. The customer is only part of a database that can be materialised by specific engagement activities. Although the latter should not push the customer in making a decision and in reaching the following step of the process, instead it should rather make him aware of the opportunities given by that offering in comparison with the others.

2.3.3 Stages of awareness

As previously explained, digital evolution has made individuals' behaviours unpredictable, forcing marketers to ideate a new framework in order to meet their needs. Numerous entry points have designed the new buying process, with leads entering the process at different stages, due to their increased knowledge of the products and strong decisional confidence. The role of marketers shifted to maintaining the brand message consistent in all the phases of the journey, leaving users the freedom to move from one phase to the other and even to go back to the start when second thoughts take over.

In order to do so, marketers should rely upon the definition of five stages of awareness, given by Eugene M. Schwartz in his book "Breakthrough Advertising", where they are defined as levels which identify the different awareness of potential customers about: their needs, how to satisfy them and which products they should choose for that purpose. Although different entry points can characterize every buying process, each customer will always find himself in a specific stage of awareness when starting his journey, depending on his personal knowledge on how to solve his problem. What is helpful about Schwartz's stages of awareness is that they give marketers a framework to move people the evaluation phase to the effective point of sale. These stages are defined as follows:

1. Unaware, when an individual is not conscious about his problem and is not looking for something to buy. They tend to respond to company's content having no clue for it, defined as "cold social media traffic", which mainly comes in from social media channels like Twitter or Pinterest. They are not worth a marketing effort in most of the cases, as it would consist in creating a need in them, a feeling that they might have or not.

2. Problem aware, when a person can see his problem, but he does not know how to solve it, and neither which companies could offer him a solution. This kind of traffic usually flows into blogs and websites, arriving via search engines or through social media channels. The key aspect of this stage is that the potential customer does not know the brand, thus he cannot trust it. The best strategy to adopt is that of creating strong content with independent value, which clearly shows the company's value and beliefs.

3. Solution aware, when an individual is aware of the solutions at his disposal but has not chosen one of all and does not know about the company's offering. In this specific case, marketers should opt for highly descriptive content marketing, such as a white paper, free report, multi-post tutorial delivered by email, webinar, or other tools.

4. Product aware, when a person has come to know the company's offering but is not convinced about whether or not it could solve his problem. Providing them with further information about the offer would not be seen as an incentive, as they are still at an earlier stage of the conversion process. At this stage, people have already seen the company's content they were provided with, but it did not make any difference in their evaluation, thus marketers should take an approach able to fully address prospect questions and objections. This can be done, for example, by the use of basic email autoresponder. The key here is to deliver real content with independent value that also demonstrates a benefit of the offer, presenting a link to a well-crafted landing page at the end.

5. Most aware, when people know a lot about the company's product or service, and they are on the cusp of buying but need to know the specifics. These, for example, represent the wide category of long-time readers who are not customers yet. Marketers can speak directly with them, but they need to make sure that those direct messages could not hurt the company's chances with other customers at different awareness levels.

Marketers who know their prospects' stage of awareness, know exactly what they need to communicate in order to bring them at the end of the conversion process. Schwartz's

classification makes it evident that once a potential customer lends on an entry point, he will show different reactions depending on its technical knowledge of the sector and its decision-making power inside of the company he represents. Different entry points need to be faced with different content paths.

The key to direct different users towards more functional contents is distribution. Marketers should distribute contents through SEO investments and paid advertising, so that potential customers can intercept them according to their readiness to deal with them. Nevertheless, contents should remain functional to their use by organic research, remaining consistent and not tied to the strict logic of interconnection.

2.4 Conversion process

Further data on B2B come from the research realized in 2012 by CEB's Marketing Leadership Council which, in collaboration with Google, analysed new patterns caused by the digital evolution in B2B marketing. CEB reports that B2B customers traverse 57% of the decision process on their own, before encountering a sales representative.

As a consequence, the whole process has to be preconstructed by marketers down to the smallest detail, leaving users the belief of taking decisions on their own, while all possible paths have been defined since its initial steps into the journey.

Firstly, it is important to choose how to attract leads. A basic SEO plan is a great first step for any business that wants to attract customers online and can be reinforced by other tools. Here the marketing mix needs to be defined in accordance with the users' stages of awareness. As shown in *table 2.2*, marketers need to choose the channels that will compose their marketing mix and that will help them in addressing the brand message to its specific target.

Table 2.2 – Scheme of the marketing process deriving from each stage of awareness

Stage Awareness	User status	Goal	Channel	KPI (in numbers)	KPI (in €)
Unaware	Target has not experienced the problem yet and does not know about the options available in the market	Share information and try to interest a new segment of the market	· Inbound · Twitter · Pinterest · Facebook · Instagram	· number of users reached · number of conversions (ex. download of written material)	· cost per conversion · cost per impression
Problem aware	Users know about their problem but do not know how to face it	Inform the general public about potential problems and their possible solutions	· Facebook ads · LinkedIn · Email Marketing	· number of users reached · number of conversions · number of clicks	· cost per conversion · cost per clic

Solution aware	Users know about the available solutions but are not sure about which product or service could better solve their problem	Reassure users by sharing other customers' experiences with the product and by explaining its characteristics and possible implemenations	· Google ads · Facebook ads · LinkedIn ads · Website · Email Marketing · Instagram	· number of users reached · number of conversions · number of clicks · mail opening rate · referral traffic	· cost per conversion · cost per clic
Product aware	Customers know the product and compares different alternatives available on the market	Create a strong relationship with customers based on faith by showing the company's values and experience	· LinkedIn · Email Marketing · Events · Website (blog)	· engagement rate · number of sessions · number of participants	· cost per interaction · cost per conversion · cost per clic
Most aware	Customers know and buy the product	Communicate with the sales rep in order to do cross-selling and to maintain a relationship with the client	· Direct mailing · Sales contact · Webinar	· mail opening rate · number of online participants	· lifetime value

Source: Author's translation and elaboration (Facco, A. (2019). SAS: ottimizzare l'investimento digitale e la lead generation. KRANG, 1(1), pp.24-31).

Once prospects reach the website, they need to find information that is valuable to them and helps them reach their goals. This consists in the engagement phase, where marketers need to interest the readers and keep them on their pages, in order to communicate the brand's expertise. Afterwards, one good strategy to nurture customers is to offer them something that could be useful to them, such as a downloadable worksheet, eBook, consultation, in exchange for their email address and marketing consent. This practice helps email marketing campaigns and therefore the raise of awareness amongst customers. Eventually some people's response to these strategies leads to direct contact with sales representatives, who are able to make them an offer based on different data arising from their behaviour during the marketing journey. Thus, the final offer results in a tailored proposition realized upon the customer's needs, that has a higher percentage of conversing into an effective sale. The real goal of conversion is to filter through the prospects and hand qualified leads over to sales, therefore saving their time and increasing their close rate, reducing customer acquisition costs.

The whole process of acquiring new clients needs to be preventively assessed through the definition of objectives and strategies. Then, in order to let the planner be able to correct the program by eventual errors, marketers need to provide managers with continuous feedback concerning the effectiveness of the plan. The results achieved are used in the subsequent planning development, thus consisting in the starting point of analysis in the next programs. Marketing campaigns are considered effective when they meet specific parameters set at the beginning of the whole process. Those metrics which can measure the effectiveness are defined as "key performance indicators" or "KPIs", which are tied to the company's organizational objectives.

2.4.1 KPIs and measurement

«Measurements within a defined context are metrics. Measurements require context to provide useful feedback. metrics that are tied to objectives are key performance indicators. Objectives must be well defined before we can identify key performance indicators.» (Tuten and Solomon, 2018, p.295).

As previously mentioned, organizations need to understand whether their strategies are working or not, in order to justify further investments in specific marketing tools, such as social media channels. A measurement plan is organized according to a four-step process known as the DATA approach, where the name is an acronym which stands for: Defining, Assessing, Tracking, Adjusting.

1. Defining what is expected to occur after the launch of a specific activity and what is needed to be measured, the results the program is designed to promote. In order to be measured, objectives must have SMART characteristics, being: Specific, Measurable, Appropriate, Realistic, Time-oriented.

2. Assessing the costs of the program and the potential value of the results. In order to measure the outcomes, it is important to understand the returns that each strategy can bring. Sometimes the best approach for assessment is simply to develop a cost benefit analysis.

3. Tracking the actual results and linking them to the program. Here data are collected, marketers look for patterns, try to measure activity indicators and precursors, and try to organize them in a way that enhances their utility. Main sources of information in marketers' social media data ecosystem are owned website analytics (e.g., Google Analytics); SNS analytics (e.g., Facebook Insights); analytics platforms (e.g., Brandwatch); niche analytic solutions and platform API tools. The social media performance dashboard is an insight tool built to provide intuitive navigation through the KPIs and a clear visualization of data.

4. Adjusting the program based on results to optimize future outcomes. The KPIs tracked and the assessment process provide valuable guidance to direct choices for future strategies and tactics (Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

The next step is to decide on the metric to be used in order to measure the objectives previously set. The framework is composed of three categories: activity metrics, interaction metrics and return metrics. The first consists of those metrics which are able to measure the actions the

organization commits to social media and comprehend the track of impressions, clickthroughs, time spent on the content, engagement and virality. Their role is to capture inputs and they are mostly used to assess campaign effectiveness by tactic, allowing for performance testing across every possible element of the campaign. On the other hand, interaction metrics focus on how the target engages with each channel chosen by the company. These include the number of followers, comments, likes, recommendations, reviews, and the amount of shared content. In conclusion, return metrics focus on all the outcomes, other than the financial ones, that directly or indirectly support the success of the brand. They consist of return on investment measures, cost reduction measures and other performance metrics that can compare previous investments with actual results. More specifically, return on investment (ROI) is a measure of profitability, capturing how effective a company is at using capital to generate profits. To determine ROI, analysts assign a financial value to the resource used to execute a specific marketing strategy, then measure financial outcomes and calculate the ratio between inputs and outcomes. On social media platforms, financial benefits can be estimated by the use of specific measures. Return on impressions, for example, demonstrates the number of media impressions generated by the social media tactics employed. Impressions are valuable because they raise awareness amongst users, thus changing their attitude and ultimately their behaviour, hopefully towards a final purchase. Another interesting approach is the return on earned media, which consists of quantifying the earnings deriving from non-influenced mentions, so those appearances in specific space for which the brand did not pay for. The metric used for this purpose is called advertising equivalency value, as it equates publicity in news media outlets to its paid advertising equivalent.

Nevertheless, measuring the entire purchasing process as the sum of the interactions in the various stages of awareness touched by the user can be difficult and misleading, given the fact that this process is fragmented and not linear. To solve the problem, it is important to concentrate data collection efforts in each entry point and to measure them through clear and solid indicators.

3. Social media marketing

Social media has attracted significant attention in the last few years since users started to perceive them as more trustworthy than any other form of communication. Capitalizing on the popularity of social media and their perceived trustworthiness, more and more organizations have social media presence in order to engage customers with their products and brands (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Social media's ease of use by both organizations and individuals make them able to generate higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions increasingly more than other traditional digital media. Their strong potential is that of generating word-of-mouth, such that organizations that use them as a marketing tool are better at spreading viral messages. These capabilities result in competitive advantages and higher performance for companies. Nevertheless, a part of literature suggests that traditional metrics are unsuitable for the dynamic environment created by social media (Hoffman et al., 2006), which explains marketers' difficulty in assessing their effectiveness.

Until 2008, research on firms' relationship with social media has mostly focused on B2C contexts. When researchers firstly started to address social media marketing in industrial settings, they looked at them as tools useful in attracting new customers and cultivating relationships with existing buyers (Brennan and Croft, 2012). Over the years, knowledge on the topic has developed further, making clear that social media marketing is similarly relevant and valuable in B2B contexts as it is in B2C settings, although the rate of adoption has been relatively slower for B2B organizations.

On this behalf, the World of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) has defined a guide to the design of a social media policy. Its main scope is to direct organizations on how employees and agents should share their ideas and opinions with social communities. Therefore, companies must select and share internally some specific standards to conduct, stating the basic expectations towards employees' behaviours on the internet, requiring them to be clear and honest. They must disclose their affiliation with the company, so that users can feel the credibility of the content, which in turn enhances brand awareness and trustworthiness. In order to assign specific roles online, companies should also opt for a social media structure, choosing between organic, centralized, hub and spoke coordinated, multiple hub and spoke and holistic honeycomb.

The first and the last structures are similar but opposite extremes as they both give employees the power to use social media and represent the brand, but in the organic structure no one owns

social media and the risk is that the content fails to deliver the desired message, while in the holistic honeycomb they are all perfectly trained and coordinated. The centralized structure consists in a social media department that reports to the Chief Marketing Officer or the Chief Executive Officer and is responsible for all the social activities and communications.

In conclusion, the single and multiple hub and spoke structures come from the same idea of having a team of people who are cross-functional and trained to address different social media needs, but the multiple one presents multiple teams organized in this way, which makes it more applicable to bigger companies with strategic business units.

3.1 New arising principles

Social media introduced many aspects for organizations to consider when launching a new product or proposing their services. Marketing changed accordingly, by starting to focus on elements that were not considered before. Content became the most important variable, as a post proposing interesting and valuable content is able to attract users' visits and interactions.

Digital content allows brands to contextualize their proposition, by presenting the values which are intrinsic in their works. It directly communicates information to final customers, thus needing to show consistency over time, that often facilitates the creation of a bundle between companies and users, confirming the proactive role of the latter in influencing business decisions. The two subjects continuously exchange messages, ideas, opinions and can verify the other's actions almost instantly. Further differences with traditional content are given by the separation between content and means of communication. In fact, new technologies allow the same content to be communicated through multiple platforms, even though it needs to be rethought in order to be appropriate on each of them.

As a matter of fact, different platforms require different approaches, thus a post that has been published on Facebook will not be suitable for LinkedIn and marketers must tailor the message in order to make it effective. This is also a consequence of the different audiences populating social media, each of whom has different interests and, in particular, different expectations from brands, meaning that workers signed on LinkedIn expect more formal content than users signed on Instagram, who prefer fun and entertaining content.

Companies are therefore trying to exploit content marketing in order to encourage users to start discussions and interact with them. Content and people represent the new centre on which businesses and new marketing strategies must focus. The new challenge for organizations is that of having a strong personality, knowing how to present themselves and being transparent in everything they share. This needs to be done through proper storytelling, a content-creation technique which manages to attract, influence, and generate emotions amongst users.

At last, the significant change in the new marketing paradigm is represented by the continuity and constancy that actions must satisfy. In fact, a continuous flow of contents and interactions with users is necessary, as they always need new and interesting themes to be discussed with other users and businesses day by day, in order to extend their connections. These changes have led companies to conceive marketing as a circular process, in which the most important ability is to learn. Thus, new strategies arise from ideas, suggestions and comments coming from users.

3.1.1 Content as a tool

Each company wants its customers to live a personal experience when using their product or service, and to create a strong relationship with them that can persist in time, this is where brand personality and customer experience come into play. Brand personality is composed of brand identity and brand image, where the first consists in the point of view of the company and its strategy, while the image is the perception customers have of the company. The more these two concepts overlap in their meanings, the better the company strategy is acting, as the customer

perceives exactly what the organization wants to express through its brand. Customer experience is based on what the brand wants the target audience to do, the ideal would be one able to intersect the audience's passions and needs with the brand identity. It necessarily has to draw attention to the company's beliefs and values and influence the purchase, being sustainable over time.

In order to be sustainable, the ideation of a customer experience needs a proper social media marketing tactic, which in turn relies upon content creation. Content is the main social object with which the audience can engage, and the information it contains has to be thought with the goal of transmitting a unique and ground-breaking message. The information being delivered in the content type can be emotional or rational and it changes according to the stage of the purchase process the target is into, whether it is an active or passive phase. Content is made of topics, which must show consistency with the company's ideas and the tactics being employed. The question marketers should ask themselves is whether what they have created is interesting enough to trigger participation and sharing. An effective content strategy is the one being able to meet the needs of the target, offering differentiating value and being distributed through channels tailored to that target. Moreover, 80% of the posts should be focused on the customers and just the remaining 20% on brand activities and statements. Each content strategy should have three main levels of content:

1. Hygiene content is evergreen content whose information is enough general and useful to be reusable over a long period of time, it permits the brand to be actively present on social media platforms. It includes day-to-day interactions and posts.
2. Hub content is used to generate engagement and interest amongst the audience, as it is published less frequently than the first one. Hygiene content is used to publicize it with the use of links and share tools, aimed at encouraging people to spread the message.
3. Hero content is disrupting and innovative, it is rarely published by brands but when they do publish it the return in terms of interactions and views is highly-rewarding.

This classification can consequently develop into a more specific one, considering how much value that specific content is generating by being published. Original content can be divided into:

1. Flagship content, which is the more original and disrupting amongst the others. It may carry a pioneer message able to shape the way people think about a topic, becoming a seminal work in the field.

2. Pillar content, the one published in compounding posts, those whose impact on users grows exponentially over time. In fact, it continues to attract people and engage them in reposting and sharing.

3. Authority-building content, which states the seniority of the company on the subject it is presenting.

4. Basic content, that consists in contributions not enough differentiating to affirm the brand as an authority in the field.

On the contrary, filler content fails to satisfy the brand's need for a message tailored on the demand, it is content repurposed from other sources, news announcements and commentary, coming from other content providers, which does not sound original to users.

Content can take different forms according to the message it has to share, the company that is publishing it and the channel used. In fact, each content type is suitable for specific objectives, as *table 3.1* shows.

Table 3.1 – Evaluation of content types for social media marketing

Content type	Suitable for objective	Participatory (P) / Shareable (S)	Publish to channels	Promote on channels	Desired action	Cost / Difficulty
Images	Brand awareness, engagement, lead generation, customer acquisition	P + S	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	Comments, likes, shares	Low
Pre-recorded video (ODV)	Brand awareness, engagement, point of differentiation	P + S	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Blog, YouTube	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Blog, YouTube	Views, comments, like, shares	High
Pre-recorded video (repurposed)	Brand awareness, lead generation, customer acquisition, engagement	S	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat, Blog	Views, comments, like, shares	Low
Blog post	Brand awareness, engagement, event promos, influencer promos, brand equity	S	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat	Views, inquiries, comments, like, shares	Low-Moderate
Infographic	Brand awareness, engagement, lead generation, customer acquisition	P + S	Blog, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Embed	Comments, likes, shares	Moderate
Article page	Brand awareness, engagement, event promos, influencer promos, brand equity	S	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	Comments, likes, shares	Moderate
Case study	Brand awareness, engagement, event promos, influencer promos, brand equity	P	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat	Views, inquiries, comments, like, shares	Moderate
Annual report	Brand awareness, engagement, lead generation, customer acquisition, influencer engagement, brand equity	P	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest	Blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat	Views, inquiries, comments, like, shares	High

Source: Tuten, T. and Solomon, M. (2018). Social Media Marketing. 3rd ed. UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

For example, videos are one of the most effective content on social media and it has the power to generate engagement because of its participatory nature. Users can share them and give their personal opinion, feeling empowered by it, as nowadays this type of content is thought to be representative of general situations, so that people can feel entitled to spread it giving their personal opinion. Videos enhance brand awareness and give companies the chance to differentiate from others operating in their sector. This type of content has the right characteristics to be used either by B2B and B2C companies, as it can perfectly present products and services and can engage different targets.

What emerges from these considerations is that the best way for a brand to achieve success is for the professionals that manage media to work together to develop an integrated content strategy and define an actual storytelling.

3.1.2 The 4Cs marketing model

In 1990, Robert Lauterborn proposed a customer-oriented marketing model, known as the "4Cs marketing model", which replaced the previous "4Ps marketing mix". The latter is a business-oriented model, which includes product, price, promotion, and place. The purpose of the new mindset introduced by Lauterborn is that of getting marketers to focus on targeting niches rather than mass markets. This idea goes against all those tools structured for mass communication – such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers – in the sense that their objective is to breach the knowledge gap, not considering that there are many different buyer psychographics that characterize a mass market audience. On the other hand, it favours niche marketing, through the use of digital tools, which allow marketers to develop conversations that are almost one-to-one and helps them to have a deeper understanding of what are the individuals' expectations about their products and services.

The 4Cs consist of: Consumer, Cost, Communication and Convenience. The Consumers – which will hereby be called "users", as the considerations need to be applied to the B2B framework – are the main actors of the communication process and an organization should present on the market an offering that has been created according to their wants and needs, thus addressing their demand. For this reason, companies should do research on this matter, by using the jobs to be done technique, that involves the process in which marketers "hire" solutions to transform an existing situation into a desired one, then when they find a solution that "does the job better" and achieves more of their desired outcomes, they "fire" the incumbent. This idea comes from an efficient metaphor that compares a job to a marketing effort and succeeds in

explaining how the most lucrative way to propose a product or a service on the market is to identify a gap in the market and develop the offering accordingly. This "C" substitutes the "P" of "Product" in the previous model, which was considered at the core of any marketing process, though in reality it is just one piece of the puzzle.

The Cost, according to Lauterborn, does not only consist in the cost incurred when purchasing a product – that is the second "P" and stands for "Price" – indeed, it reflects the total cost of ownership, which could comprehend, for example, the time spent acquiring the product or service, or its opportunity cost, which is what must be renounced to make an economic choice and is equal to the value of the best alternative. Many marketers mistakenly believe that the main motivation for purchasing a product is price, while facts show that positioning plays a far more important role, as it directly influences perceived value.

The third "C" of the model stands for "Communication", which contrasts the previous ideal of promotion, suggesting a change of perspective, from the one-way relationship caused by mass media to a mutual one resulted from the rise of social media and the internet. Communication, in this sense, is driven by users and it is a cooperative process that is led by the buyer. According to Lauterborn, promotion is manipulative while communication is cooperative. The 4Ps marketing mix considers promotion as a vehicle to share information with the target about the brand's offering, while a product or service that solves a very specific problem needs a more nuanced approach to reaching the audience. On this behalf, communication works towards establishing a dialogue with prospects, thus it must be designed to build meaningful relationships with customers. It includes any form of advertising, public relations, viral marketing, or any other communication between the organization and its prospective buyers. In particular, traditional media have evolved with the advent of specific tools, which have taken a leading role in customer engagement and customer retention processes. Amongst these, the following are particularly important:

- SEO (Search Engine Optimization), which concerns the activity of optimizing the characteristics of the website in order to improve the positioning within search engines.
- SEM (Search Engine Marketing), is the branch of marketing that applies to search engines, that includes all the activities aimed at generating qualified traffic to a specific site. The aim is therefore to exploit search engines potential to bring the largest number of interested visitors to the website. Usually the activities concern the acquisition of advertising spaces or the adoption of Pay Per Click campaigns and must be carried out in synergy with the SEO plan adopted.

- Social CRM (Social Customer Relationship Management), is a process composed by a set of tools that assist companies in listening, monitoring, and managing relationships with existing and potential customers, trying to predict and influence their behaviour through social networks. It is also a process that converts conversations between customers and companies into collaborative experiences, with the ultimate purpose of transforming them into meaningful. In fact, Social CRM has a customer-centric approach that uses social media to gather relevant information, in order to maintain or develop customer relationships. This facilitates other activities such as customer profiling and web targeting, offering content personalisation and thus helping in the enhancement of brand awareness. This approach implies an active participation of customers, who are not only seen as collaborators rather than buyers, which could become promoters of the company's products.

In conclusion, the last element of the marketing framework is represented by convenience, which focuses on the perceived quality of the buying experience. The latter consists in the final stage of the customer journey, thus defines the memory and affection that buyers will feel towards the product, the service, or, more generally, the brand. Convenience replaces the concept of "Place" of the 4P model, that reminds the placement technique, focusing on the process of getting the product in the hands of the buyer, so that he cannot be indifferent to it. Convenience has its basis on the idea of conveying the ideal of the product, placing it in several visible distribution points, avoiding forcing customers to notice it.

3.2 Online users

Users of the new millennium are no longer solely attracted by the promotional aspect of advertising, they also need conversations. They want to be able to talk and discuss, so much that statistics say that about 70% of users expect companies to respond within a few days, while actually only half of the companies check daily questions, requests or comments from customers. It is important that the conversation is not exclusively focused on sales, but also on creating a relationship that goes beyond the commercial relationship occurring between buyer and seller.

The average internet user spends 6 hours and 43 minutes online each day (Kemp, 2020) and the challenge for companies has therefore become to be able to listen to their customers, monitor their impressions and try to respond to them in the most correct and time-efficient way possible.

Consumers are nowadays called "prosumers", a term deriving from the synthesis between producer and consumer, which, as previously explained, comes from the fact that they contribute actively to the communication process. In fact, they no longer play a marginal role in business decisions, they want to be protagonists by making their voices heard.

As a consequence, although businesses cannot hide on social media, they can still have potential advantages from the acquisition and analysis of User Generated Content (UGC), which consists in the users' actions on the internet. Those who generate UGCs do not present common characteristics and equal behaviours and therefore contents vary accordingly to them, because of both the quantity generated by each of them and the type of opinion shared. Motives behind participation in social media can be various and researchers have identified the most common impulses as follows:

- Affinity impulse, as social media enables users to be part of a network, creating communities and expressing an affinity in the relationship with other individuals. In this sense, the affective dimension of social identity is assessed, and these platforms develop a social function. Users who contribute to social communities for this reason, they have the intent of building relationships and feel a sense of belonging, to satisfy their desire for social capital. The latter refers to the resources created by the building and maintaining of relationships in social networks.

- Personal utility impulse, utility, whether in the form of information seeking, incentive seeking, entertainment seeking or convenience seeking, is a major motive for users to choose to be active on social media.

- Contact comfort and immediacy impulse, people benefit from networks a sense of closeness with other users, which make them feel relieved knowing that others are easily accessible. Relief also comes from the fact that the contact in this context is without delay, satisfying their need for contact immediacy, which in turn can cause dependency from these platforms. This contact is sought also from brands, thus customers expect them to be active and responsive in every situation and at every time of the day. In fact, brands with higher response rates are favoured by customers, which consider timeliness and speed of response amongst the attributes they associate with the most successful brands using social media.

- Altruistic impulse, it serves a value-expressive function in that it enables users to express their own moral beliefs through their social media behaviour. Consequently, they perform acts of altruistic punishment when seeking to draw attention to companies

whose behaviour is considered not compliant to their ideas and, thus, unacceptable to the community.

- Curiosity impulse, people are often driven by epistemic curiosity when using social media as a means by which they can have access to new knowledge.

- Validation impulse, social media aim is to focus on the individual, feeding people's egos, which eventually, in some cases, can result in typical behaviours driven by the validation impulse. These include a proper dependency from other users' opinion, which can cause a tendency to overshare and a tendency to manage impressions. This has lately become a fundamental issue in teenage users, therefore many companies are nowadays structuring their advertising in order to promote acceptance and positivity on social media.

Despite these motives for participation, there are also other reasons which prevent some users from participating, causing the rise of the so-called "social identity suicide" phenomenon. People are increasingly deleting their social identities because of the spreading of awareness about privacy-related issues. Therefore, marketers should understand motives behind social media participation in order to make strategic marketing decisions and overcome customers' prejudices about social media. As a matter of fact, the trade-off between privacy guarantees and social media results has become very significant in the last decade as people bother more about the risks connected to the collection, unauthorized use and improper access of their personal data. The extent to which this happens is known as privacy salience, which however does not report any evidence about users' actions to protect their privacy. On this behalf, researchers have lately given evidence to the privacy paradox, which describes social media users' willingness to disclose personal information despite expressing high levels of concern for privacy protection. One way of explaining it is by considering the biases that influence people's reasoning and decision making, which cause their mind to be a two-part system, composed by system 1, which is more quick and intuitive, and system 2, which is slow and thoughtful. The first leads users to have an intuitive concern, which comes from an instinctive and emotional reaction to a possible privacy threat, while the other leaves room for considerations about the possible risks coming from a lack of privacy guarantees and evaluating if any benefits could offset those risks. Thus, this system makes it possible for users to have high intuitive concerns and yet determine that the risk does not warrant action.

Users who generate UGCs do not all have similar characteristics and equal behaviours, thus contents vary according to people, both for the quantity generated by each of them and for the

kind of opinion they want to express. Social media users can therefore be categorized by means of a segmentation framework, the Social Consumption/Creation Matrix, which identifies them according to their degree of social media consumption and creation. It effectively captures the dual roles of creation and consumption, by considering – from low to high – user propensity for content creation and consumption results in a four-segment matrix, depicted in *figure 3.2*.

Figure 3.2 – The Social Consumption/Creation Matrix
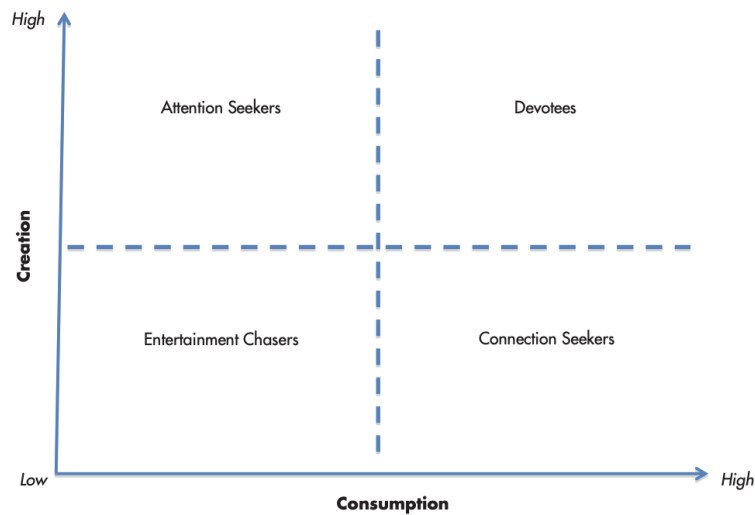
Source: Hodis, M., Sri Ramachandra Murthy, R. and Sashittal, H. (2015). Interact with me on my terms: a four segment Facebook engagement framework for marketers. Journal of Marketing Management, 31(11-12), pp.1255-1284.

Attention seekers are represented by celebrities and influencers, who have large networks, high social capital, and the ability to create social content valuable for other users. These individuals are moved by the validation impulse and mostly interact with brands in order to promote their products and services. Devotees are eager to share their opinions and seek brand interaction, which makes them ideal brand ambassadors. They are good at content creation, but also participate on social media as content consumers, seeming more authentic and genuine in others' eyes. Entertainment chasers are passive users characterized by a low level of both creation and consumption. In order to reach them, brands need to concentrate their marketing efforts in social entertainment, favouring advertising that allows direct interaction with them, such as videos, quizzes and polls. Connection seekers represent the majority of social media users, they create the community. They are low content creators and are motivated by the affinity impulse, which feeds their sense of belonging and incentivizes them in seeking connections and in building relationships.

Presenting these classifications helps defining the structure of social media platforms, which then needs to be brought back to the level of brand strategy. Each brand knows its audience and

has to restructure the way its social community works to be able to match the tendencies of their customers. Thus, according to the characteristics of its users, a brand can change its marketing strategy by acting to include specific targets and exclude others. In this regard, Forrester Research introduced the concept of Social Technographics by presenting a research it conducted on users' digital lives. By the data obtained it also identified six types of users: joiners, spectators, creators, critics, collectors, and conversationalists, which differ from each other in the way they interact with social media. Afterwards, Forrester revised the model and incorporated an overall score of social media usage, which perfectly reflects how actively a specific target of customers uses social tools, at which stage of the customer journey they are and how willingly they are to engage with brands. The final score range is from 0 to 100, and it represents the mean between six variables: discover, explore, buy, use, ask, engage.

Figure 3.3 – Social Technographics variables
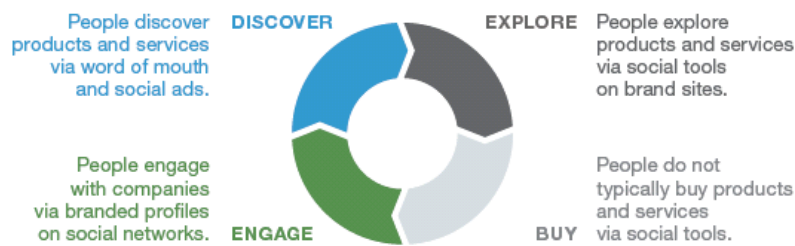
Source: (2013). North American Technographics Online Benchmark Survey. Part 1. Forrester Research.

Therefore, four types of social media users are delineated:
-   Social stars (scores > 60) privilege social interactions with brands, they exploit social media by sharing their ideas and opinions but also use them to connect with companies and brands. They are valuable customers to acquire because they are inclined to online shopping.
-   Social savvies (59 < scores < 30) expect brands to be easy to interact with. Social media play an important role in their lives but not as fundamental as for social stars.
-   Social snackers (29 < scores < 10) do not seek social interactions with brands, but they do not avoid them, so that when they are presented with a social campaign, they still appreciate it. Marketers targeting this audience should consider social media as a secondary tool in their strategy.
-   Social skippers (0 < scores < 9) rarely use social media to interact with companies, favouring other channels, such as email, website, catalogues, and stores. They are resistant to marketing, thus marketers targeting them should put minimum effort in

social media. They tend to be older, but they still represent more than 20% of the general population.

These scores vary when considering different countries and populations, as various is social media usage globally. For example, metropolitan areas present higher scores than suburbs, as the age range using social media is wider in the first then in the second.

Figure 3.4 presents an example of how Social Technographics can provide information to marketers about how to engage with a specific target and at which stage of customers' life cycle the target is. In this case, the overall score of 40 assigns US online adults to the broader category of social savvies, and it shows different characteristics of this group of people. They stated an average use of social media with the purpose of discovering new brands, and also an average consumption of social media content when considering buying a product or service. On the other hand, US online adults show resistance to online purchase, although sometimes their use of social media continues after the purchase through the share of their personal experience. In addition, they consider social media acceptable to engage in a relationship with the brand and to ask for support.

Figure 3.4 – Example of Social Technographics Score considering US online adults
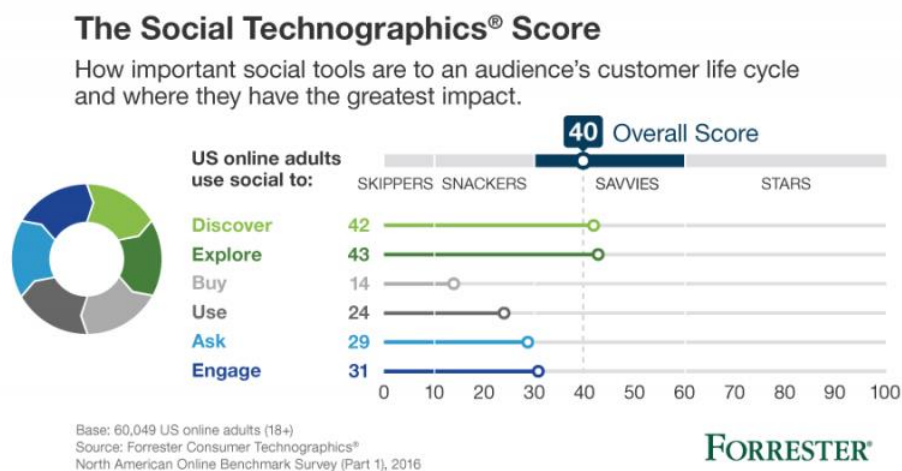
Source: (2013). North American Technographics Online Benchmark Survey. Part 1. Forrester Research.

In conclusion, the internet has brought customers in such an influential position that they almost take part in the realisation of brands' marketing strategy. This has progressively given rise to phenomena as the so-called brand ownership, which occurs when customers are so creative that they adapt and modify the proprietary offer accordingly to their personal needs, through content creation and by sharing their own experiences with the company's offering.

3.2.1 Tribal marketing

The internet and the increasing global connectivity have not only permitted a higher spread of information but also a rise of new initiatives amongst customers. This is due to increased brand familiarity which has led to the creation of a sense of belonging in people and, as a consequence, a sense of fidelity to the brand. All these phenomena together gave birth to postmodern tribes. The term postmodern serves as a way to differentiate them from traditional tribes, which are social divisions in a society consisting of families or communities linked by social, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. Instead, postmodern tribes consist of networks of heterogeneous people who share the same passion, using the same products or services, who identify themselves through brands. Tribes arise when customers identify as a group based more on common collective behaviours than on demographics, therefore not bothering about age difference, sex, or nationality.

In order to satisfy their desire for community, users look for products and services for their link value more than for their use value. Thus, they are the glue of the tribe, while brands become symbols of the tribe, serving as means of communication and identification.

Tribal marketing goes beyond simple market segmentation as it can be used for acquiring high-value customers who are likely to become repeated purchasers. It engages individuals based on important aspects of their identity, such as vocation, orientation, interests, passions, and perspectives. The whole concept behind this technique is that humans have a deep need to feel that they belong to a group, so that people belonging to the same tribe feel the urge to maintain harmony amongst the members, tending to agree with one another. This is called the bandwagon effect and it creates lock-in, reducing the likelihood that the tribe will switch to another brand. Moreover, «a group needs only two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate» (Godin, 2014, p.15), and the latter is made possible by social media. The internet made the reach of tribes global and unlimited and the viral power of social platforms accelerates tribe-building by sharing stories, exchanging knowledge, and connecting cultures. Therefore, in order to engage postmodern tribes, companies must align their message and brand identity with the members' values. Then, their interconnection has the power to trigger word-of-mouth through personal recommendations, social media sharing or online reviews, in a logic of "brand tribalism". The positive effect of tribes is that people naturally take initiative and decide to share their experiences, nurturing the tribes' mechanisms and making them effective, self-sufficient marketing engines.

Tribal marketing can help companies to enter their customers' lives, in the sense that they can create a strong bond with them, building intense customer loyalty. As a consequence, purchase is a natural result of this relationship, resulting in increased revenues. Companies that want to support the tribes growing around their brand must create opportunities for the members to meet each other in order to incentivize the share of ideas and giving them a proper brand experience, through events, sponsorship and activities. These can be all summed up in the concept of soft marketing, which consists in selling an experience and not just a product or service.

3.2.2 Cookies and privacy

Cookies are the main technologies that allow marketers to create targeted online advertising. They are small text files, usually containing letters and numbers, which are stored on different devices such as a personal computer, mobile or any other device capable of storing information. When a user's browser loads a particular website, it sends information to the browser which then creates a text file. Every time the user goes back to the same website, the browser retrieves and sends this file to the website's server. This technology is used for various purposes, for example to remind the user of the interactions previously had with a website, to identify users when they connect to an online account – such as a bank account – and to allow web pages to load more quickly. The technologies behind cookies are also used to analyse websites' traffic and to track users' browsing behaviour.

Cookies can therefore store information on the device that a person is using to surf the internet, saving personal data, such as an IP address, a username, a unique identifier or an email address, but also other non-personal data, such as language settings. In addition, they can also contain tracking Ids such as advertising Ids and user Id – which changes in Idfa when considering apps.

Cookies can be installed by first parties or third parties, in particular, first part cookies are set by the domain of the website that the user is visiting, the host domain, while third party cookies are set by a different domain, which could be a domain other than the one visible in the address bar. Usually, first-party cookies are used by owners of web pages to save details such as user passwords, in order to facilitate future access to their accounts; while third-party cookies are used to carry out targeted advertising by other websites that run ads, widgets, or other elements on the page being loaded. These cookies regulate how the ads appear or how the widgets and other elements function on the page. The third party provides these services in exchange for information regarding the user's visit to the website.

There are various types of cookies, the most known are browsers or http cookies, while less known others are tracking technologies, such as local storage objects, also called "flash" cookies, software development kits, pixel trackers, "like" buttons and social sharing tools, as well as fingerprinting technologies. These technologies fall within the scope of the ePrivacy Directive: in fact, computers, and mobile phones, together with any information stored on them, are considered part of the users' private sphere, and therefore protected.

The use of cookies for advertising purposes represents one of the most profitable and effective marketing tools. The aim is to monitor what content users have access to and how they behave, to deduct their preferences and interests. From the tracking, a profile is created, which allows marketers to identify specific clusters of customers, realizing an effective segmentation. These profiles are enriched over time by their activity on social networks, and this allows companies to define advertising tailored on each user. This information represents an enormous economic value for the industry, as products and services are no longer offered to face a specific demand, but rather the demand is created, inducing customers to desire products and services they did not know existed.

3.3 Social media mining

If social media marketing can be defined as the strategy which allows companies to have a wider network of relationships, social media mining represents the phase in which marketers apply specific techniques to extract knowledge and wisdom from social interactions. It can be interpreted as a new way of listening and understanding people, through their digital actions and behaviours. Some authors stress that continued development of social instruments has led to a multiplication of human interactions, while others argue that this is the reason why new business models allow a customization of transactions by consumer preference (Păvăloaia et al., 2019).

Every minute, 48 hours of video are uploaded on YouTube, 204 million e-mail messages are sent, and 600 new websites generated. 600,000 pieces of content are shared on Facebook, and more than 100,000 tweets are sent, and that does not even begin to scratch the surface of data generation (Lorentz, 2013). Given the fact that people generate a growing amount of data every millisecond, companies urge to understand this data just as quickly. Here comes big data, the set of methods and technologies used to analyse huge amounts of data, structured or not. Significant indications can be extrapolated from big data by combining heterogeneous

information, identifying additional relationships between different phenomena, and trying to predict future trends in a better way than could be done by analysing small series of data separately. Information overload is a phenomenon that makes large-scale data analytics, predictive modelling, and visualization increasingly crucial for companies to survive.

3.3.1 The process

Social media mining moves around the concept of information seeking. The starting point is the raw data, or a description of an object that can be processed and manipulated together with a more or less large number of other data. It can be of various aspects and in the form of text, images, sounds and can be stored with both physical and optical, magnetic or network means. By processing and crossing multiple data, information is obtained, and it is possible to observe their interrelation, since they have been dropped in a given context and have acquired meaning from it. The last step is the formation of knowledge, which is obtained by combining more information with the experience gained within the chosen context, which ultimately changes the view of who started the analysis.

As with any corporate objective, even in social media mining, the costs necessary to carry it out must be transformed into advantages for the company. Therefore, it is important to develop a precise planning of resources, depending on the importance of the analysis and the possibility of investment in the project.

The process starts from the definition of the final objective. At this stage, the most important aspect is to identify the problem to be solved and set the objectives to be achieved, in order to have a precise reference point. Then, it is important to understand what type of data is available, the context and how to study the information that will be available. Data collected by posts' content on social media consists of written texts of various sizes, which consists in the starting point of the sentiment analysis. They vary according to what marketers are looking for, which social platform is being taken into consideration and the context of reference. The data extraction phase represents a crucial moment, because having an excellent starting point makes it possible to reach an equally valuable result. Thus, marketers must carefully plan every aspect concerning the methods chosen for creating the database useful for the analysis.

As previously mentioned, the difficulties to be addressed relate to the enormous amount of data available, which must be reduced and selected in order to have the most representative sample of the population that is taken in exam. In addition, all appropriate attention must be used to not

violate the rules on respecting users' online privacy. One of the methods used in the extraction phase is sampling, this consists of a statistical technique which allows to gather information about very large populations through the analysis of a single group selected within it. Social media mining therefore consists precisely in purifying the data produced by online users and making them ready to be analysed.

3.3.2 Text and sentiment analysis

The path started with the new marketing strategies and continued with social media mining, now comes to the study of sentiment analysis. It represents the synthesis of the marketing field with that of statistical analysis, positioning itself as a hypothetical subset of the topics previously discussed. In 2014, Nathan Danneman defined sentiment analysis as the field of study that analyses people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, attitudes, and emotions, through the words that compose a simple text. It operates in the examination of texts, since it aims to understand the behaviour of users on the internet precisely through what they write on websites and social networks. He underlines the fundamental role that this type of analysis has in helping the management and the marketing department of a company in making conscious decisions. The procedure necessary for a good analysis must reflect the steps that social media mining uses to obtain valuable outputs. Those concepts must be the fundamental basis and always be kept in mind by the marketers who undertake this type of path.

Opinion and sentiment present one main difference: the first is defined as a subjective interpretation that one or more people have of certain facts or events, while sentiment is a way of thinking and perceiving things, implicitly or explicitly, relating to the personal mindset of each person. The differences between these two terms are flattened in sentiment analysis, where they are used as synonyms, since in the analysed texts the transposition of both opinions and feelings takes place.

Sentiment analysis has its foundation on textual analysis, which starts from a simple text, more or less long, and extracts the type of sentiment and the opinion behind it. To do this, there are several techniques and different algorithms, as well as different programs, however each technique that is used has as reference the four principles of textual analysis (Ceron et al., 2014):

1. The first principle states that all quantitative linguistic models are wrong, but some might still be useful. The reason is that the quantitative approach has little to do with the mental procedures that are used for the transposition of emotions into a text. These processes are still unclear and are still being studied, especially because every individual

has his own way of expressing himself and the meaning that a text can assume is extremely variable. The movement of a single word, the use of ironic expressions, double senses or simply a particular use of punctuation, represent extremely complex facets in a text. The great complexity of language and its constant evolution, with neologisms, metaphors, and new expressions, can hardly be analysed with automatic and quantitative approaches. As a matter of fact, software that has pre-established rules will never be able to understand the totality of the facets of human language.

2. Quantitative methods are used to help humans, not to replace them. This principle considers the role played by the staff assigned to carry out the analysis, which cannot be replaced by hardware and software and which always remains the fundamental component of the process. Quantitative methods, however, serve a great deal to speed up operations in which there are large amounts of data, which would not be able to be managed only with human skills. For example, without any support, a group of people would not be able to analyse the huge amount of texts that can be reached for world-famous topics, companies or products: thousands of comments on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, which grow in number day by day.

3. There is no right technique for textual analysis. This is because each technique is suitable and adapts to the purpose for which it is used. The main factors that influence the choice of technique are: the language; the age of the person who writes the text; the nature of the writer; the topic itself; the time period in which it has been written; the words used.

4. Always check the analysis performed. Each model and algorithm must be validated, that is, verified from the point of view of the analysis, so that it correctly classifies the data, either if it is a method in which the categories are priorly known and if they are identified retrospectively.

Once the classification of the texts has been completed and the distribution of the categories of the various texts has been identified, the validation test must be carried out, assessing whether the accuracy and error parameters are satisfied. Once the goodness of the classifier has also been verified, it is possible to proceed with the qualitative evaluation of the quantitative results obtained, in order to understand why certain frequencies of opinions have occurred. Marketers are likely to use schemes, graphs, or summary tables to have a greater clarity of the results obtained.

@PepsiCo

Histograms are often used to summarize the sentiment and polarity of the analysed texts, in order to easily compare the differences between various classes. *Figure 3.5* represents a cumulative histogram showing sentiment analysis performed on PepsiCo's social media platforms. The impact of all the different emotions taken into analysis – which are the variables on the abscissa axis – is made clear in this type of graphic. Instagram seems to be the one causing most of the reactions and comments amongst online users, while YouTube has the least interactions. The graphic also demonstrates that positive emotions are the most occurring in customers' opinions about PepsiCo's content. This is an example of analysis that gives important feedback to marketers about their work, stimulating changes and improvements in the quality of the brand message.

In addition, wordcloud is also used as it is useful to represent a set of the most frequently used words, written with different colours and characters, where those written larger have been used more than the others.

Figure 3.6 – Wordcloud representation of users' opinions about Los Angeles

Figure 3.6 reports a wordcloud realized by Airbnb, which takes into consideration the emotions arising from customers' reviews of the accommodations they booked to travel around Los Angeles. The bigger words are the ones that have been mostly used, and amongst those "love" catches the attention. The pair of "love" and "dreams" shows how people feel sentimental and visionary when visiting this city, while not feeling oppressed by its dimensions, considering it like "home".

In conclusion, emotional reactions of customers can influence purchasing decisions, taking into account that the number of people using mobile devices to exchange opinions in online communities has been increasing almost exponentially. As such, the emotional reaction of customers to company posts on various social networks becomes an important input in the decision-making process at a strategic management level.

3.4 Digital sales strategy

Another consequence of the spread in the use of technologies has been the shifting of part of the purchases from physical to digital channels. In fact, some companies have decided to replace their stores with sites and applications, where delivery takes place directly from the supplier to the customer rather than through the point of sale. Competition has consequently increased, loyalty systems changed, and physical retailers have had to modify their business models and integrate them with digital tools.

Online sales are carried out thanks to e-commerce platforms, which can simplify the purchase process making it intuitive even for people less used to technology. The term e-commerce derives from the abbreviation of electronic commerce and includes different types of commercial activities and digital transactions. The activities that develop online can include marketing of goods and services, distribution of digital content, financial and stock exchange operations, and other procedures. Basically, all operations involving the selling of goods and services through the internet and which require online payment can be assimilated to electronic commerce.

The introduction of electronic commerce has improved markets' efficiency, thanks to elements such as the virtual ubiquity of supply and demand; the simplicity of access to information for large audiences; the comparison of the offer and prices worldwide; the absence of barriers to entry. Electronic commerce can occur both directly and indirectly. The direct form refers to

transactions that are conducted and concluded entirely online, therefore the order, payment and delivery take place only for digital goods and services. Instead, in the indirect form delivery takes place through the use of traditional channels, for example when buying a physical product. In the case of the B2B sector, e-commerce can relate to the relationships that a company maintains with suppliers such as procurement, planning and production monitoring and, also to the relationships incurring with professional customers in different points of the supply chain. From the quantitative perspective, B2B e-commerce is a much more mature and widespread practice than B2C and today it is almost a market standard. It entails numerous advantages in terms of time saved and lower operating costs, deriving from the possibility of exchanging information on products and price lists in real time, ordering goods and services independently and paying electronically. Nowadays there are several platforms and B2B exchange models: from "e-procurement", to "e-marketplaces", to online auctions.

The opening of an e-commerce platform has brought numerous advantages for companies that can both shorten the distribution chain and apply a lower price to the products sold online, thanks to the reduction of costs and the increase in marginal profit. However, it should be stressed that in recent years the main international brands adopted strategies aimed at aligning prices along all their channels, in order to avoid showrooming and "cannibalism" between them. E-commerce for these brands is seen more as a tool to diversify and integrate the offer within an integrated marketing strategy. At the same time, this new purchasing method has also brought various advantages for customers, who can now buy a vast number of products and services with all the conveniences of online purchases, – shops open 24 hours a day, no geographical restrictions, electronic payment – bypassing the intermediate phase of going to physical stores. Nevertheless, e-commerce is the ultimate tool that permits sales online, which needs to be supported by marketing techniques coherent with the overall brand message.

3.4.1 Influencer marketing

When we talk about digital media, we refer to means that eliminate the trade-off between the breadth and depth of the message, as they allow to reach all online users with a very high and non-standard customization rate. However, social media are not all the same and the connections between users change depending on what is used. When considering connections, influencers play an important role. They are subjects who are followed by many users, they are usually famous people or experts in a certain sector, who manage to influence those who follow them with their personal opinions. Very often companies decide to contact or collaborate with

them in order to have a good base of connections, thanks to which they can spread their message.

The figure of the influencer does not necessarily overlap with that of celebrities, journalists, or bloggers, they can also be a form of social micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008). Social media introduce new possibilities for brands to create an interaction with their audience of reference and favour the connection between subjects capable of reciprocally influence each other. By combining the technological characteristics of social networks, influencing strategies and marketing planning, companies have the opportunity to reduce the amount of unused resources but also to increase total sales.

The adoption of influencer marketing strategies facilitates the creation and maintenance of more transparent relationships with the target audience. In this regard, Brown and Hayes (2008) identified three different principles that companies can employ for the implementation of an influencer marketing strategy:

- Marketing "to" influencer, through which companies can increase brand awareness within the community of influencers.
- Marketing "through" influencer, in this case, the influencer is used to increase the brand awareness amongst the targeted users.
- Marketing "with" influencer, in which the influencer plays the role of brand advocate.

Influencers can therefore be considered a bridge between the brand and the target audience. Influencers add value by not only reaching more customers but also creating content that can be repurposed for use across the brand's social media channels. By relying on the right influencer, companies can benefit from a greater volume of traffic on its website, greater exposure on social media and increased visibility of its products and services. The issue of trust is crucial in these dynamics.

As in any marketing activity, influencer marketing must also look at the final objectives that are chosen according to the specific needs of each company. The planning of the contents to be shared through the influencers becomes part of the social media planning of the company itself, which also requires to be monitored by looking at results and efficiency.

Influencer marketing is therefore a strategic tool which, if properly used, will guarantee the enhancement of various variables, such as brand awareness, lead generation, brand reputation and customer fidelity.

4. Research presentation and analysis of the results

The purpose of this study was to obtain an updated picture of the impact of digital technologies on B2B companies' marketing activities. The targeted sample included marketing leaders, sales representatives and chief executive officers of a hundred of organizations having their head offices in the North of Italy.

This research project has been realized along with my curricular stage in Marketing Arena, a marketing agency based in Rovigo. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 emergency, the last two weeks of my stage were completed via smart working, although this did not compromise my experience with the team.

Marketing Arena is a digital marketing agency which operates with a strategic approach along the main axes of digital transformation, with a particular focus on digital marketing and the development of technological platforms at the service of SMEs and large enterprises. Founded and directed by Giorgio Soffiato, it develops projects at national and international level with particular expertise in B2B and in the key industries of food and wine, SMEs, finance and fintech, automotive, travel.

4.1 Research method

As a starting point, I discussed with professor Finotto about the final objective of this research. I wanted to deepen my knowledge on B2B marketing by having a view of the actual panorama.

We decided to focus on northern Italy to restrict the range of the considerations and have more punctal results. Although, in order to make my research significant, I had to define a series of questions to submit to our population of interest, and those questions needed to investigate topics that had not been considered before.

Thus, I had to review most of the existing english literature on B2B marketing, – 778 total articles – selecting the themes they presented and trying to map the gaps in them, therefore trying to imagine and choose other possible matters. The most recurring broad topics I managed to gather: sales strategy on social media, narrative and content creation, employees' engagement on social media, impact of social media on brand awareness, customer engagement, recruiting through social media, competitive advantage given by social media, customer segmentation ability.

Using these as a starting point, together with Marketing Arena team, we came up with six macro areas according to which we structured the survey (see Appendix A):

1. Target, considering the stakeholders of the company. This section asked the responders to define their target and their marketing strategy in general, differentiating participants based on the dimension of the market they focus on.

2. Management, investigating the methods used to manage digital marketing and the activities connected to it, also questioning the budget.

3. Team composition, referring to companies having an internal marketing division. This part makes reference to the people composing the marketing team, and to the person leading them and addressing their roles.

4. Digital tools, questioning which online tools the company exploits in order to have results.

5. Touchpoints, considering the ways in which customers can have a direct contact with the company. In particular, what are the strategies to enhance brand awareness and make users notice their offering.

6. KPI and results, focusing on the key performance indicators chosen by companies in order to measure the effectiveness of their marketing efforts.

Once the areas were set, we had to define the population to be taken into consideration. In agreement with Marketing Arena, we decided to focus the analysis on companies belonging to a set of ATECO codes. In Italy, the ATECO code is an alphanumeric combination that identifies a specific economical activity. It serves as an indicator of the sector in which a company operates, it is univocal and it gives the same classification to similar companies, allowing them to be considered for statistical, tax and social security purposes. In agreement with Marketing Arena, we chose five codes with which the company had more experience in order to give a better interpretation of the data. They represented sectors in which the supply chain is well structured and the transitions from the producer to the end user are very diversified. Moreover, they were apparently "digitally-immature" as we thought they did not treat marketing as a fundamental asset to have effective results. These were:

- ATECO 11: Beverage Industries. This sector seems to be predominantly due to B2C, as people are the final consumers of their products. Nevertheless, in order for them to buy the final outcome, distributors take part in the process, making this also suitable to the B2B sector. It seemed interesting to focus our attention on how these manufacturers manage the tools and activities that digital makes available to them.

- ATECO 28: Machines for other general purposes manufacturers. We selected three sections belonging to it: 28.1, 28.2 and 28.9. It seemed interesting to investigate above all the organizational and managerial level of this industry. In particular, getting an eye on the sinergy existing between the sales force and the marketing department, whether they are separated or merged into a unique function.

- ATECO 29: Bodies for motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers manufacturers. We analysed it with particular interest in the section 29.3: Parts, accessories and engines for motor vehicles manufacturers. We decided to analyse companies that fall within this category to explore their openness to the digital world and their level of innovation in their sales methods and strategies.

At this point, having selected the industries of interest, I used Ca' Foscari University online databases to gather corporate information about the companies referable to these ATECO codes. I used AIDA – which in Italian is the acronym for "Analisi Informatizzata Delle Aziende" – to search for general information, such as the corporate name, VAT number, city, last balance sheet registration date, earnings considering the last available year, number of employees, foreign operativeness.

The results are shown in *table 4.1*, which puts evidence on 28.2 and 28.9, that appeared to be the most numerous sectors amongst the ones taken into consideration.

Table 4.1 – ATECO codes and their numbers

ATECO 2007	DEFINITION	RESULTS
11.0	BEVERAGE INDUSTRIES	3226
28.1	MACHINES FOR GENERAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	2890
28.2	OTHER MACHINES FOR GENERAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	10915
28.9	OTHER MACHINES FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	7288
29.3	PARTS ACCESSORIES AND ENGINES FOR MOTOR VEHICLES MANUFACTURERS	1792

Source: Author's elaboration

Afterwards, I filtered the data in order to make the analysis more significant and the results more specific. The filters I applied on the excel data sheet are the following:
- last balance sheet registration date greater or equal to 2017;
- earnings greater than one million euros;
- headquarters located in the North of Italy, divided by regions, considering Aosta Valley, Piedmont, Lombardy, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto, Liguria, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, Umbria.

Table 4.2 – Resulting numbers from data filtering

ATECO 2007	DEFINITION	RESULTS	
		NOT FILTERED	FILTERED
11.0	BEVERAGE INDUSTRIES	3226	228
28.1	MACHINES FOR GENERAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	2890	380
28.2	OTHER MACHINES FOR GENERAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	10915	939
28.9	OTHER MACHINES FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES MANUFACTURERS	7288	479
29.3	PARTS ACCESSORIES AND ENGINES FOR MOTOR VEHICLES MANUFACTURERS	1792	204
			2245

Source: Author's elaboration

Moreover, I made three data clusters by grouping data by region, dimension and earnings, in order to have a clearer vision of the data obtained in the research. As a result, we were able to have a first impression of the distribution of the companies on these variables. Regarding regions, Lombardy had the highest number of companies operating within its geographical borders with a results of 760 on a total of 2230 considered, visible in *table 4.3* On the other hand, the least company-populated region turned out to be Aosta Valley, with just 2 organizations belonging to the beverage industry. For this reason, we decided to exclude this region from our research, as it would have been misleading in the subsequent analysis of the results. This turns our starting population from a 2230 to 2228 companies, although the other clusters were still realized considering the starting number. Lombardy is followed by Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Piedmont in order of numerosity, which told us that the majority of the companies we were considering were situated in the center of northern Italy.

Moreover, having a look at *table 4.4*, we found out that we were considering a high number of enterprises and SMEs – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises – and these were mostly machines manufacturers, falling under the code 28.2, with a number of employees going from a minimum of 11 to a maximum of 250 people. Fortunately, micro businesses were present in a considerably low number of 35, not having a significant impact on the totality of the data.

Considering *table 4.5*, figuring the variable of companies' earnings, the ranges – listed in the first column on the left – start from a minimum of 10 million euros because of the filters we applied to the data that were previously presented. Data resulted to be equally distributed amongst the first three classifications, except for a lower number of companies having earnings higher than 200 million euros last year, which is totally relatable to a lower number of organizations having more than 250 employees in the previous table.

Table 4.3 – Data clustering per region

Region	ATECO 2007					Total per Region
	11.0	**28.1**	**28.2**	**28.9**	**29.3**	
Aosta Valley	2	-	-	-	-	2
Piedmont	36	64	94	31	79	304
Lombardy	47	181	308	165	59	760
Trentino-Alto Adige	15	4	20	6	6	51
Veneto	67	33	186	95	16	397
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	13	5	32	21	-	71
Emilia Romagna	29	84	226	108	31	478
Liguria	1	3	5	3	3	15
Tuscany	11	4	36	37	5	93
Marche	3	1	20	10	3	37
Umbria	4	1	12	3	3	23
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	**2230**

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 4.4 – Data clustering per dimension

Dimension	ATECO 2007					Total per Dimension
	11.0	**28.1**	**28.2**	**28.9**	**29.3**	
0 - 10 employees	13	1	16	5	-	35
11 - 50 employees	130	86	247	150	35	648
51 - 250 employees	72	233	558	283	114	1260
> 250 employees	13	60	109	41	55	278
not available	-	-	9	-	-	9
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	**2230**

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 4.5 – Data clustering per earnings

Earnings	ATECO 2007					Total per Earnings
	11.0	**28.1**	**28.2**	**28.9**	**29.3**	
10 - 15 mio	49	82	285	150	35	601
16 - 30 mio	81	130	324	162	63	760
31 - 200 mio	88	152	307	158	91	796
> 200 mio	10	16	23	9	15	73
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	**2230**

Source: Author's elaboration

After this preemptive analysis, it was time to contact the companies, sending the survey to gather further information about them. Unfortunately, AIDA did not have the email addresses of the companies stored, therefore I had to use another online database provided by the University, called Orbis. On this database I could download all the corporate websites of the organizations, saving them on an excel file. In order to obtain valid email addresses, I realized two columns:

1. one presenting the results of applying the function "MID" to the column containing the websites, so that from "www.website.com", the results would have been "website.com";

2. one presenting the results of applying the function "CONCATENATE" to merge the string "info@" with the output of the previous point.

I thought this could have been the only solution compliant with the GDPR European laws about data protection, which state that processing of emails is only allowed if either the data subject has consented, or there is another legal basis. Thus, using the "info@website.com" format was acceptable as it is considered a non-personal kind of information, which the majority of companies publish on their corporate website.

Unfortunately, I finished the phase of data gathering towards the end of February 2020 and all of a sudden my city, Padua, was forced to lockdown due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. This prevented me from continuing my stage in Marketing Arena, and I ended up experiencing smart working. On the evening of 9 March, the quarantine measures were expanded to the entire country and strengthened in the following days. All commercial and retail businesses except those providing essential services, like grocery stores, food stores, and pharmacies, were closed. This catastrophic event caused the postponement of sending emails as the closure of the companies would not have permitted any kind of return. As a consequence, we decided to include in the analysis another ATECO code, the 62.02, representing the sector of consulting in the field of information technology, which constituted one of the few kind of companies still operating during the pandemic, because they were comprehended in the businesses providing essential services. Another reason that made us choose this field is because, unlike the products they deal with and the services they provide, they sometimes result in being less innovative and less inclined to adopt digital to their marketing strategy.

I started from a number of 8885 italian companies in total, which were reduced to 86 when I applied the filters previously presented for the other groups. These organizations were mostly located in Lombardy and Veneto and had coherent distributions amongst the other parameters analysed – dimension and earnings. Therefore, at last we had a population of 2316 companies belonging to the B2B sector.

Table 4.6 – Data clustering per region including ATECO 62.02

Region	ATECO 2007						Total per Region
	11.0	28.1	28.2	28.9	29.3	62.02	
Aosta Valley	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
Piedmont	36	64	94	31	79	9	313
Lombardy	47	181	308	165	59	46	806
Trentino-Alto Adige	15	4	20	6	6	3	54
Veneto	67	33	186	95	16	12	409
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	13	5	32	21	-	2	73

Emilia Romagna	29	84	226	108	31	7	485
Liguria	1	3	5	3	3	-	15
Tuscany	11	4	36	37	5	6	99
Marche	3	1	20	10	3	-	37
Umbria	4	1	12	3	3	1	24
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	86	**2316**

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 4.7 – Data clustering per dimension including ATECO 62.02

	ATECO 2007						
Dimension	**11.0**	**28.1**	**28.2**	**28.9**	**29.3**	**62.02**	**Total per Dimension**
0 - 10 employees	13	1	16	5	-	3	38
11 - 50 employees	130	86	247	150	35	16	664
51 - 250 employees	72	233	558	283	114	49	1309
> 250 employees	13	60	109	41	55	18	296
not available	-	-	9	-	-	-	9
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	86	**2316**

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 4.8 – Data clustering per earnings including ATECO 62.02

	ATECO 2007						
Earnings	**11.0**	**28.1**	**28.2**	**28.9**	**29.3**	**62.02**	**Total per Earnings**
10 - 15 mio	49	82	285	150	35	40	641
16 - 30 mio	81	130	324	162	63	25	785
31 - 200 mio	88	152	307	158	91	20	816
> 200 mio	10	16	23	9	15	1	74
Total per ATECO	228	380	939	479	204	86	**2316**

Source: Author's elaboration

Furthermore, I decided to add another area to the survey entitled "COVID-19", in which my intention was to investigate organizations' responses to the pandemic, both from an organizational and digital perspective. The intent was to understand if and how they took advantage of the potential of their online communities to engage new customers, but also to discover which digital tools permitted employees' mobility and smart-working, together with their internal communication with other colleagues.

4.2 Population and sampling

The 7th of May I started to send the emails containing the survey, choosing to begin with ATECO 62.02, because of the reasons previously mentioned. Afterwards, I continued with the other codes, starting to get some error messages as a result of non-existing email addresses. This first attempt ended the 18th of May, then I started searching for corporate email addresses on each of the websites corresponding to the emails that did not reach the recipients. The second

attempt ended on the 22nd of June and the survey received a total of 101 submissions, which constituted the population sample. Its descriptive analysis led me to the initial data assessment of this research.

4.2.1 Descriptive data analysis

Important is to note that just four companies declared that they do not use digital tools for marketing purposes and this consequently reduced the sample from 101 to 97 companies answering all the questions of the survey. This acts as a good indicator confirming the idea that the great majority of B2B organizations have a marketing strategy that includes online platforms, social media and other digital tools. From these 97 we had to exclude other 5 companies who did not disclose their corporate names, which we needed in order to classify them by their characteristics. For the purpose of the more general descriptive analysis we started from the sample of 101 firms, because the considerations we made were not necessarily linked to specific aspects of their businesses.

Considering the survey, as question two asked the respondents to state their business role, I was able to group the answers and track the business areas that could potentially be a crucial role in the marketing process, as presented below in *figure 4.1*.

*Figure 4.1 – Distribution of respondents' business roles*

RESPONDENTS' BUSINESS ROLES
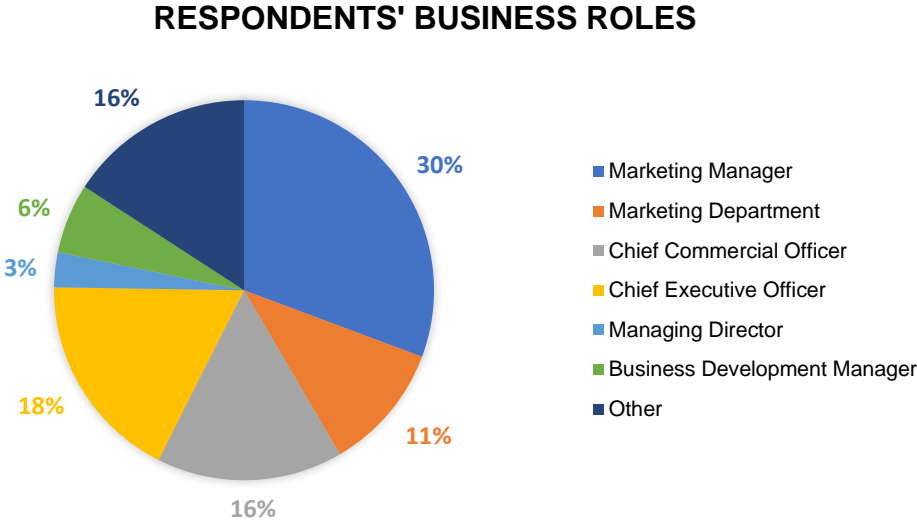
Source: Author's elaboration

As a matter of fact, the answers to question eighteen confirmed these thoughts, showing that in 51% of the cases digital marketing activities and the updating of contents on different platforms

are supervised by the social media manager and, in general, by the marketing department of the company.

Still, 20% of the organizations choose to entrust the management of their activities to specialized external suppliers that often are structured marketing agencies, but can also consist of freelancers who do marketing consultancy.

*Figure 4.2 – Roles in charge of managing marketing activities*

DIGITAL CHANNELS SUPERVISORS
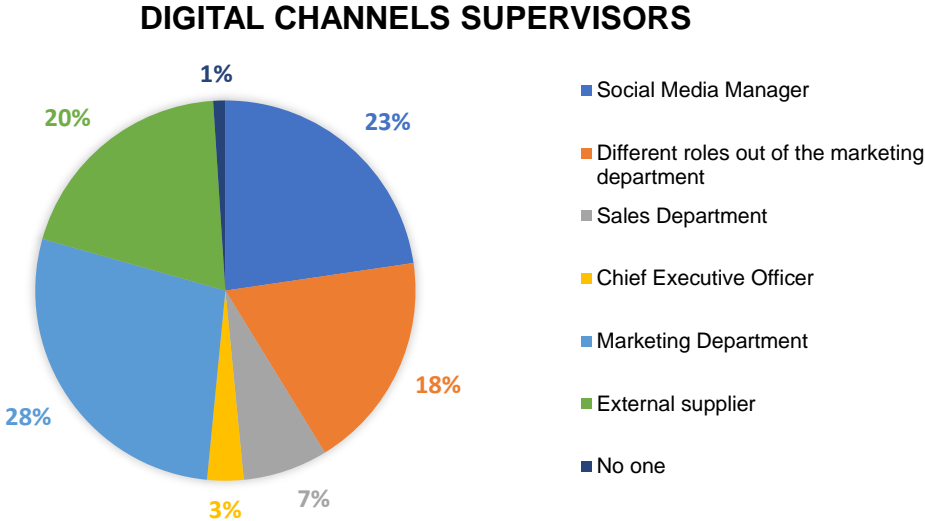
Source: Author's elaboration

Structurally the respondents are all medium-large companies, a consideration that arises from the fact that the 75% of them declared to be more oriented to a global strategy, rather than european (12%), national (11%) or local (3%). Together with this information, their earnings are all above one million euros, because of the filters applied in the definition of the population of interest and also the answers shown in the two pie charts are evidence of a structured organization, with different business units and specific roles with specific functions.

Their internal structures help them define a targeted communication plan which is supported by investments. Although our data highlighted that the average percentage of earnings allocated to digital marketing activities is very low, the percentage of the total marketing budget allocated to digital advertising is over 50% in 1 out of 10 companies. This means that regardless of the total earnings, when considering companies' marketing efforts, these are oriented to digital, investing in online advertisement, promotion on social media, search engine optimization and other activities. This shows a first pattern of digital maturity amongst the businesses we are analysing, they are going in the right direction even though they still need some improvements.

A solid plan also needs tools that can spread the desired message of the brand. For this reason, we investigated also which digital tools are mostly used by B2B companies, and the results shown in *figure 4.3*, make it clear that all the interviewed organizations have a corporate website and that they are favouring LinkedIn over other social media, followed by Facebook and YouTube.

Figure 4.3 – Number of respondents using different digital tools
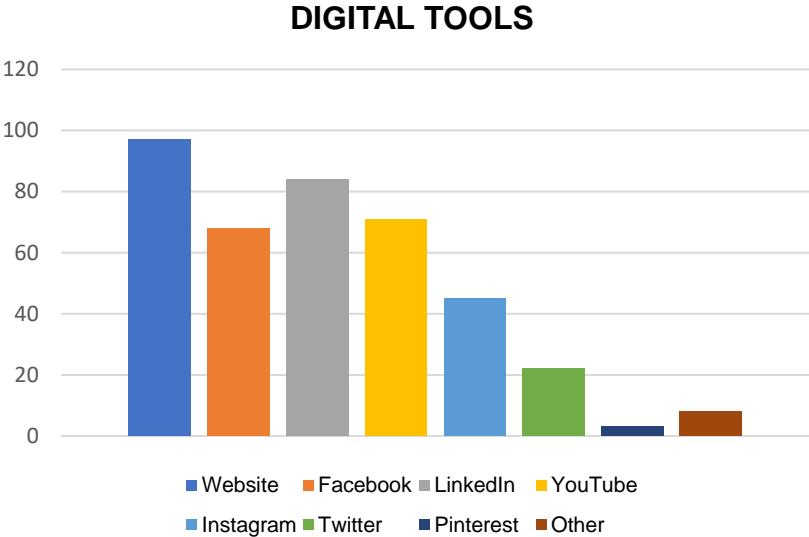
Source: Author's elaboration

This confirms what stated in *chapter two* that LinkedIn is the most effective social media for firms operating in the B2B sector, as it permits them to engage other companies and also to maintain a direct relationship with employees, which is particularly important for bigger companies. Noteworthy is also the high number of organizations using YouTube in our sample. It derives in particular from firms falling under the category of machine manufacturers, that use this social media to show their manufacturing skills and their production processes.

In fact, amongst these digital platforms, the interviewees selected the website and LinkedIn when asked which of them had permitted their companies to reach effective results.

E-commerce is not mentioned above because it was reported in question fifteen, which gave us a strong result, as 73 respondents out of 97 answered that their companies do not have an e-commerce platform, thus they do not sell online. This result was predictable because not many services can be sold directly online and, as previously said, B2B transactions are often made of a direct relationship between buyer and seller, practice that excludes forms of purchasing that do not provide the buyer with a total assessment of the characteristics of the product or service.

Another widely adopted tool is massive mailing, which interests the 64% of our sample. Newsletters in particular can be a great method to generate interest and engage already existing customers. They are often connected with website cookies, through which companies can gather information about their visitors and make their offering more targeted and precise.

Part of the communication plan are also all the offline tools that can also be promoted online. One third of the firms do not use them, except for those who do prefer magazines or newspaper articles. Moreover, trade fairs can be considered as part of this category, and they are the perfect way for a B2B company to meet new people, engage customers, raise brand awareness, create new partnerships and present their offering. A total of 51 interviewees declared to participate in international trade fairs, a value that confirms our initial idea about the dimensions of the companies that compose the sample. These show a coherent pattern in their previous answers, stating to have a structured marketing department and also a social media manager in some cases, who manages and updates their digital platforms. They marked how the adoption of digital tools has made their businesses digitally mature and progressively more organized. Most of them invest more than 30% of their marketing budget in digital marketing activities, which is the perfect strategy for them, given the fact that they are oriented to a global strategy. The relationship between these last information shows how the dimension of the company and the dimension of the sector it operates in, directly influences the digital know-how of the company itself.

On the other hand, internalization can be the key to digital maturity. A well-structured marketing department can form people who work inside it, develop new roles and better exploit the business potential. Regarding this, an interesting result comes from ATECO 28.2 and 28.9, where the distribution of interviewees' answers is the same between "internalized" and "entrusted to suppliers". This codes group all the machines for general purposes manufacturers, but this does not give good evidence of a possible model. Probably those who use innovative technologies in the production process are the same that have higher digital skills and thus decide to internalize the whole marketing process. The internal marketing team is normally composed of one or two people and is centralized in the headquarters. It is controlled by the marketing manager or, in less cases, by the chief commercial officer.

In conclusion, a proper communication plan presents several objectives and the final results must be assessed to see if they meet them. This is where key performance indicators come into play, acting as methods of evaluation of the plan's final outcome. We formulated question

twenty-four to investigate them and the objectives that resulted to be pursued are the increase of brand awareness and the generation of business opportunities. The former is curious as brand awareness is a long-term objective, often forgotten by companies that do not experience digital marketing day by day. It is the consequence of a constant and coherent sharing of content, strong relationship with customers, patience and strong vision. All these characteristics together are typical of businesses with a propension to digital and innovation, which confirms again our conviction of the digital maturity of these companies.

4.2.2 Digital against COVID-19

The world has changed dramatically over the first three months of 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting almost every aspect of our lives. These changes have been clear in the world's digital behaviour too, especially as billions of people turned to connected devices to help them cope with life and work under lockdown. Digital activities saw an exponential growth, mostly in the use of social media apps, and in coronavirus-affected countries, 76% of people have increased the time spent using technology. Italy ranks sixth amongst the countries whose social media use has increased with coronavirus, with an increase of 45% against 64% of the Philippines, the first country, and 23% of Japan, the state that recorded the smallest increase.

A Global Web Index report shows how people have consumed vast amounts of media during the lockdown, both for personal needs and work. In the world, the highest numbers have come from Facebook, with almost two and a half billion users, followed, with two billion each, by Youtube, TikTok and Whatsapp. In addition to the usual portfolio of social media platforms, users have also been turning to new solutions to help with the unique challenges that the pandemic has created. In particular, video conferencing apps have quickly moved to the centre of many people's work lives, and many users have been using these platforms to stay in touch with friends and family too.

The teleconferencing service Zoom has been a clear winner, with the company revealing that it has had as many as 200 million daily active users in recent weeks – twenty times more than pre-pandemic levels. Moreover, Zoom was one of the ten most-downloaded apps around the world in March 2020. An emerging theme is that of sustainability. The frequent use of online meetings has shown companies that travel and business trips can really be reduced. Italian companies today are convinced that the crisis of COVID-19 will impact positively or very positively on future decisions in environmental sustainability.

Part of the survey we realized was dedicated to investigate companies' reaction to the emergency with four specific questions assessing different topics. The first was asking whether they used digital means of communication during the lockdown or not, and just 5 interviewees answered negatively, showing that digital has played a crucial role for B2B companies to face this situation and all its consequences.

Therefore, we wanted to understand the final objective of their digital efforts, what they wanted to achieve through their communications, and which online tools they favoured. In this regard, most of them have used the corporate website and LinkedIn to communicate with external stakeholders, but also video conferencing platforms to maintain a direct relationship with both colleagues – through reunions and meetings – and customers – through webinars. In fact, their efforts have shown a focus on their relationship with customers, as the pandemic has jeopardized the bond shared between buyers and sellers, on which B2B business relationships are based.

Relationships maintained and grown over years have had to be reinforced, organizations have confirmed their capabilities to cope with the new legal provisions, ensuring business continuity to their stakeholders.

Figure 4.4 – Distribution of digital objectives during the lockdown

DIGITAL OBJECTIVES DURING COVID-19
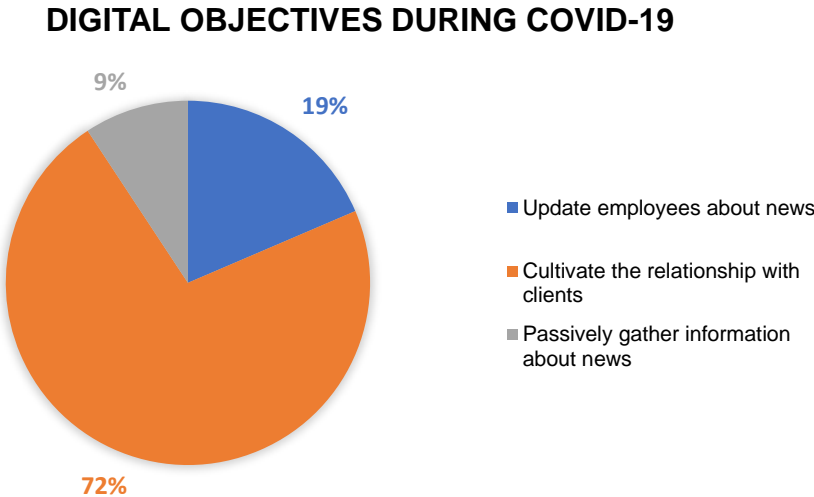
Source: Author's elaboration

Employees have represented the key to reach these objectives, being collaborative and positive (77%) when facing the new reality that none of them was expecting.

4.3 Bivariate data analysis

After the initial descriptive analysis, we wanted to verify the existence of specific patterns in the distribution of data amongst three variables: total earnings, number of employees and city of origin. In order to do so, we used bivariate analysis to relate each question and its answers to the characteristics of each company. In order to do so, I took all the corporate names of the companies that replied to the questionnaire and I compared them with the relative data concerning the above mentioned variables, taking them from the extractions made with the AIDA database.

Afterwards, I used pivot tables to analyse the data distributions, by summarizing the answers given for each question and classifying them by the variable taken into consideration. This analysis led us to detect and highlight specific traits in the options selected by the interviewees, these clusters helped us to show the most relevant themes of our research in different keys.

4.3.1 Distribution per earnings

We started from looking at the distribution of data amongst the four categories of earnings that we had defined:

- total earnings between 10 and 15 million euros, which was the most common category in our sample, as we had a number of 47 respondent companies that were within these limits;
- total earnings between 16 and 30 million euros, classification that registered a total of 21 companies responding to the survey;
- total earnings between 31 and 200 million euros, which registered 26 companies;
- total earnings over 200 million euros, where we had just one company.

By considering this variable, we wanted to understand if companies with higher earnings are more inclined to invest in digital marketing and are consequently more mature from a digital perspective. The answers to question nine, reported in *table 4.9,* show a pattern in which the number of companies investing more, grows as earnings rise. In the category of firms having earnings ranging between 31 and 200 million euros, most of them invest between 6 and 50% of their marketing budget in digital activities. On the other hand, the lower classification sees a great concentration of companies in investments under 1% of the total marketing budget. This demonstrates our idea that the percentage of investments is directly proportional to the total earnings registered in the previous year.

Table 4.9 – Correlation between digital marketing investments and total earnings

Question 9							
Earnings	< 1%	1 - 5 %	6 - 30%	31 - 50%	> 50%	not known	Total
10 - 15 mio	12	4	13	7	5	3	44
16 - 30 mio	3	2	10	2	2	2	21
31 - 200 mio	5	3	8	7	3	-	26
> 200 mio	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Total	20	9	32	16	10	5	92

Source: Author's elaboration

Same consideration arises from looking at the distribution of answers in question ten, where the disparity between interviewees answering "entrusted to suppliers" and "internalized" becomes more evident as earnings grow. Thus, while in companies belonging to the first category the total count of the two answers is distributed 50:50, for companies with higher earnings the relationship is more 40:60, showing that having a more substantial base allows companies to dedicate more resources and time to digital activities, deciding to structure themselves internally to support the growth of this business aspect which is starting to give a significant competitive advantage.

4.3.2 Distribution per dimension

We considered the variable of dimension – regarding the number of employees working for each company – as the most revealing in terms of results obtained by its analysis. Our expectation was that of finding a relation between the bigger dimensions of the companies and their marketing departments. Firms with lots of employees have a higher probability to define their strategies internally and to develop specific competencies on digital tools, thinking about innovative applications. Bigger dimensions require an organizational structure able to sustain all business areas, orchestrating them towards the achievement of a common goal, a condition that also carries great responsibilities.

The first step was that of looking at the distribution of companies between the four categories, as we did for earnings:

- number of employees between 0 and 10, which registered just one respondent;
- number of employees between 11 and 50, which had a total of 28 companies belonging to it;
- number of employees between 51 and 250, which was the most populous category with a total of 56 companies;
- number of employees over 250, with 10 firms being part of it.

In order to investigate our considerations, we looked at the answers to question four, reported in *table 4.10*, which show the correlation between the categories and the relative geographical target of respondent companies' marketing activities.

Table 4.10 – Geographical target for digital marketing activities

Question 4					
Dimension	European	Global	Local	National	Total
0 - 10	-	1	-	-	1
11 - 50	5	19	1	3	28
51 - 250	6	44	1	5	56
> 250	1	7	-	2	10
Total	12	71	2	10	95

Source: Author's elaboration

We focused on the box where "global" and "51 - 250" intersect, which has a value of 44 and represents the higher registration of the table. Considering that 75% of the respondents affirmed that their companies are oriented to a global market, this number means that most of the global companies have bigger dimensions, having a number of employees that ranges between 51 and 250. On the other hand, local and national values are very low and the companies orientated to them are SMEs.

To strengthen our thesis, we tried to find evidence by looking at the management section of the survey, in particular focusing on question ten, whose answers are shown in *table 4.11*, which investigated the distribution of companies in the internalization of marketing activities.

Table 4.11 – Management of marketing activities

| Question 10			
Dimension	Entrusted to suppliers	Internalized	Total
0 - 10	1	-	1
11 - 50	14	14	28
51 - 250	17	36	53
> 250	3	7	10
Total	35	57	92

Source: Author's elaboration

Here the disparity between the number of replies is clearly growing together with the growth of the number of employees, and the higher number of internalization is registered in relation to companies with a number of employees ranging between 51 and 250.

These data distributions confirm again our thesis that bigger companies with higher earnings are those more inclined to invest in digital tools and, more in general, technology, moving towards a transformation of their internal processes.

4.3.3 Distribution over cities

When it came to analyse data distribution per city of origin, I started from gathering information about where our respondents' companies were from, dividing it by city – represented in *figure 4.4* – and by region – *figure 4.5* – to see their distribution on the map. These images were realized through the use of Power BI[1], and the latter gives evidence of our intent to focus the analysis only on North-Italian companies. On the other hand, *figure 4.4* presents an homogeneous collocation of companies over the regions, although the spots result more concentrated in the north-west of Lombardy. This first consideration helped us to evaluate on what topics we needed to focus to obtain an interesting result by carrying on our analysis.

Figure 4.5 – Distribution of the companies' cities of origin
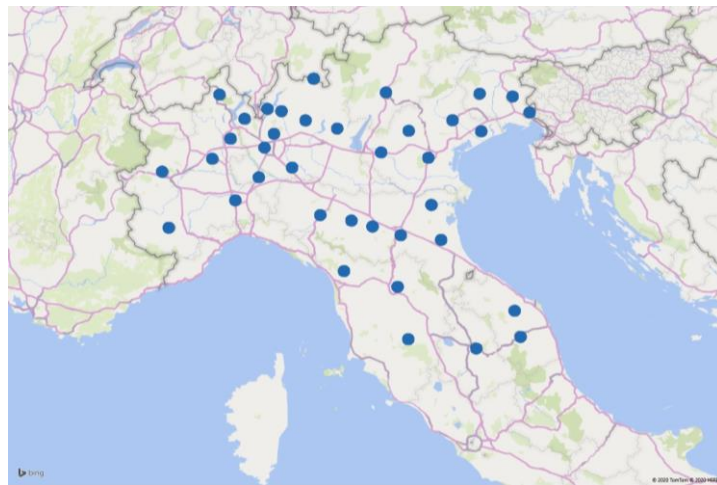
Source: Author's elaboration

Figure 4.6 – Italian regions considered in the analysis

Source: Author's elaboration

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[1] Power BI is a business analytics service by Microsoft. It aims to provide interactive visualizations and business intelligence capabilities with an interface simple enough for end users to create their own reports and dashboards.

We decided to assess the patterns that arose with COVID-19, in particular in regions like Lombardy and Veneto, which were the italian regions most affected by the emergency, with higher numbers of infected and deaths. As a result, all the 5 interviewees who answered "no" when asked if they had used digital tools during the emergency, have their companies situated in Lombardy and Veneto. This fact could be a consequence of the lockdown that interested the two regions during the pandemic, as several companies were forced to close their activities for a certain period, leaving their employees at home. Some of these were production businesses and they could not activate smart-working politiques as their processes need people's physical presence to be implemented. Therefore, these organizations had to stop every kind of activity and external communication as a consequence, they did not have the chance to create new content to be shared and worse, in some cases, they were not ready to face the emergency by working from home.

The companies situated in these regions are the same who stated that they had passively used social media just to stay updated on news about the situation or to inform their employees about governmental provisions and measures taken. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees said that their firm tried to maintain a direct relationship with customers (71%).

4.4 Further developments

The relationship with technology, powered by the virus, could continue even after the end of the emergency. One in five internet users say that they have become accustomed to enjoying streaming content and want to keep these new habits in the future. One in seven people will continue to devote the same amount of time to social networks even after going back to their daily life.

The return to reality is being slow and cautious, to avoid another peak of infections, but this is causing enormous economic problems, which will become evident in the long term. For this reason, the last question of the survey asked the respondents to write down what they expect to be the future that awaits them, and which digital challenges their sector could face in the next three years. Their answers have covered different topics, but they generally focused on two particular aspects: the consequences of COVID-19 on the economy and the need for a more structured approach to digital and its applications.

The former requires particular attention as this global pandemic has caused companies to reorganize their business both internally and externally, by ideating new solutions and rules that could guarantee operational continuity during the emergency. In particular, smart-working has been widely used all over the world to face the needs of customers without violating the laws in force. On this behalf, the respondents have marked the necessity for the definition of a new organization of people's work, able to reduce the necessity for direct contact and meetings, even though this changes the dynamics of a business relationship, which is founded on handshake and physical presence. They affirmed the necessity for a partial mantainment of some of these new rules, in order to diminish the risk of another lockdown:

«Surely this health crisis will increase the importance of online presence. Companies will be called on to digitize more and find alternative communication and promotion, trying to differentiate themselves on the market.» (Interviewee 31)

«Being able to best combine the need for people to meet each other, and customers' need to touch the steel, typical of the production of industrial machines, before acquiring them. This through new digital communication techniques. Being able to adapt communication tools to accommodate the transition from desktop to mobile. Making digital engagement tools effective in order to conclude real transactions. Supply of ancillary services through digital support platforms, which allow to connect the machines installed at customers, analyse the big data in return and create highly valuable tools for customers.» (Interviewee 37)

As emerges by these witnesses, the future path still looks blurred and full of difficulties, and the only certainty is represented by digital tools, and this is connected to the second theme that emerged from other responses.

«Try to find a balance between blind and driven digitalization and the real opportunities offered by the digital world, not only in marketing but also as a way of experiencing corporate communications, without radically and thoughtlessly breaking down the difference between outside and inside.» (Interviewee 34)

The idea coming from this answer is that of a company able to consciously adopt digital tools by applying them on a large scale in all the aspects of the business. This means bringing digital practices not only in the execution of the marketing process, but also in the definition of internal processes, of the relationship between people, eliminating the gap existing between the internal and external context of the company.

«Make up for a significant change in sales force methodologies. The digital environment must become as important as sales.» (Interviewee 82)

This comment develops the theme of digital applications, talking about sales force methodologies. On this behalf, it is interesting to note that till January 2020 e-commerce was at the bottom of the digital activities adopted by B2B activities and present only in 34% of the companies interviewed, while social media reached 84%. Today firms have understood that they can no longer overlook the opening of an e-commerce platform or the development of a digital channel if they want to strengthen the relationship with their customers.

Companies have understood the importance of looking at technology to be able to go through this phase and recover advantage over competitors by strengthening their position on the market. Technology is essential to face this new era and companies today are investing mainly in areas where technology has proven to give the greatest contribution to human capital, such as supply chain and business continuity, environment, health and safety.

Conclusions

The present thesis ends with some considerations resulting from the observations gathered through these pages. The purpose was to analyse the impact that the advent of technology has had on the marketing processes of B2B companies and its further evolution. Starting from a general definition of the sector, we then specifically analysed all the characteristics of a B2B marketing strategy and the related phases of the purchasing process. We have also presented how the consumer is now defined as "prosumer", a term deriving from the synthesis between producer and consumer, which comes from the fact that they contribute actively to the communication process.

This can be traced back to the introduction of social media in particular, which in recent years have revolutionized sales methods and business relationships in this sector. The latter have become increasingly direct and personal thanks to digitalization, which has allowed the removal of both psychological and geographical barriers.

All these elements allow us to conclude that the impact of digital on B2B marketing strategies is certainly positive and that it has brought great innovation on all fronts. To give relevance to this idea, a market analysis was conducted on a sample of 101 North-Italian companies operating in this sector. The fact that only 4 of them declared to not use digital tools in their marketing strategies suggests that B2B is no longer backward compared to B2C. On the contrary, from the subsequent analysis we have been able to ascertain that the ability of these businesses is to appropriate innovation by proposing it in all their areas and not only in those experienced by external stakeholders.

Furthermore, by analyzing the distribution of data by earnings, number of employees and city of origin, it was possible to highlight different market patterns. What is clear is that the largest companies are the same that are able to internalize the entire marketing process without necessarily having to rely on an external supplier, such as a marketing agency or a consultant. In addition, they use digital tools in a more continuous and targeted way, investing more in the promotion of their online activities. This makes them more digitally mature than the SMEs, which however should not be excluded from our considerations as they bring other interesting features.

The smaller companies, in fact, invest less and tend to externalize their marketing activities, but they are also able to have a more direct relationship with customers and maintain it over time. In their approach, trust is at the basis of business relationships and this is demonstrated by the

creation of a very dense network of relationships that outcomes their smaller number of contacts when compared to large companies.

During the drafting period of this dissertation, Italy found itself facing the COVID-19 emergency, which completely destabilized the market, causing difficulties for many companies. The questions of the survey aimed at investigating the phenomena raised in this period and showed how most companies and their employees reacted positively to the rules put in place by the government, with the introduction of smart-working to deal with the lockdown imposed. This period has even more emphasized the need for the use of digital to guarantee business continuity to customers. This has spurred many companies to review their internal organization and to review what they wanted to communicate to their interlocutors, a typical marketing approach method that once the emergency is over, will leave great ideas for the future.

The next few years will certainly see an increase in the use of devices both by consumers and by businesses, technological progress will see a greater and constant evolution, which will bring great innovations to the B2B market not only in Italy but worldwide.

Appendix A

Survey

1. Indicate your corporate name.

2. What is your business role?

Target Area

3. Does your company use digital channels (e.g. social media, website) as marketing tools?
   - Yes
   - No

4. Your digital marketing activities are more oriented to a:
   - Global strategy
   - European strategy
   - National strategy
   - Local strategy

5. Campaigns' contents and strategies are differentiated per area and country of destination?
   - Standardized
   - Differentiated

6. Campaigns' contents and strategies are differentiated per target?
   - Standardized
   - Differentiated

Just those who answered "Yes" to question n.3 will be able to answer the following questions.

Management Area

7. How is the communication plan structured?
   - Isolated campaigns
   - Ongoing campaigns

8. What is the percentage of total earnings allocated to digital marketing activities?

9. What is the percentage of the marketing budget dedicated to digital advertising?

10. The management and performance of digital marketing activities is:
    - Internalized
    - Entrusted to suppliers

Team Composition (area accessible just for those who answered "Internalized" to question n.10)

11. How many contributors take part in digital marketing activities?

Options from 1 to 10.

12. Which business role manages the team?
- Marketing Manager
- Chief Executive Officer
- Chief Commercial Officer
- Other

13. The management of digital marketing activities is:
- Centralized
- Divided between branches
- No branches

Digital tools

14. Given the supply of software (management, CRM, etc.), you believe that in the last three years your company has become:
- More organized
- Digitally mature
- More productive
- Unchanged

15. Do you have an e-commerce platform?
- Yes, proprietary
- Yes, using third party platforms
- No

16. Do you provide to your customers alternative repurchase methods to simple physical purchase (e.g. private area on the corporate website, dedicated email services)?
- Yes
- No

Touchpoints

17. On which digital channels does your company operate?
- Website
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- YouTube
- Instagram
- Twitter

- None of the precedents

- Other

18. Who is in charge of updating them with new content?

    - Social Media Manager

    - Different roles out of the marketing department

    - External supplier

    - Chief Executive Officer

    - Marketing Department

    - Sales Department

    - No one

19. If you would be asked to give evidence of the tool which permitted your company to reach effective results, which one would you indicate?

    - Website

    - Facebook

    - LinkedIn

    - YouTube

    - Instagram

    - Twitter

    - None of the precedents

    - Other

20. Does your strategy include massive mailing techniques?

    - Yes

    - No

21. Which offline communication tools do you use?

    - Magazines

    - Newspapers

    - Radio

    - Television

    - None of the precedents

    - Other

22. Do you participate in reference fairs for the sector of your company?

    - Local

    - International

    - Both

- No

23. Is the organization of academies on strategic themes part of your strategy?

- Yes

- No

KPI and results

24. What is the main objective you measure when considering your digital marketing investments?

- Increase sales

- Increase brand awareness

- Remain competitive

- Positioning

- Generate business opportunities

- Cross-selling

- Customer retention

- Other

Covid-19

25. Have you made use of digital media during this emergency?

- Yes

- No

26. Which one have you used the most?

- Website

- Facebook

- LinkedIn

- YouTube

- Instagram

- Twitter

- Email

- Videoconference

- Other

27. Which has been the main objective of your communications?

- Update employees about news

- Strengthen the relationship with clients

- Passively gather information about news

28. The introduction of smart working has brought your collaborators to react:
    - Positively, being available and proactive
    - Negatively, being critics
    - Both the previous in different cases
29. What do you think will be the digital challenges that your sector will have to face in the next three years?

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