

# B2B Digital Marketing Communications Research During the Covid 19 Pandemic

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**Abstract**— The article is devoted to marketing B2B digital communications research during the Covid 19 pandemic. It is figured out that the main advantages of digital communications in the current difficult conditions are the low cost of participation and no need for business trips. It is revealed that due to rapid scientific and technological progress more and more companies looking for a transition from classic marketing communication tools to more innovative ones. The ability to disseminate information more effectively and the connection of all components of the company's activities are the main drivers for the application of the latest technologies in the communication policy of enterprises. However, most companies do not have a clear strategy for achieving business goals in the digital age, understanding the processes of digitalization only in the field of information technology. To fully understand the benefits of using information technology, it is necessary to integrate such technologies into other aspects of the enterprise. Digital marketing will facilitate the interaction of the enterprise with consumers, fully identify their needs, track each interaction in real time and provide a personalized experience. The main barriers to using virtual exhibitions by managers are investigated.

**Index Terms**— marketing communication, virtual exhibition, B2B market, pandemic, marketing research.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Due to the introduction of quarantine restrictions, almost all events relevant to the B2B market have been cancelled or postponed. Such events usually receive about 40% of the B2B marketing budget, which is about five times more than what is spent on digital marketing and digital communications. B2B marketing communications during the COVID19 pandemic are quite complex. Companies that take a "wait-and-see" position today, focused on survival and solving short-term problems instead of preparing for the future, may lose the opportunity to strengthen their market positioning and attract new potential customers. A positive perception can change the course of marketing activity during a protracted crisis. Also, it is an

activity during the crisis that prepares businesses for rapid recovery after COVID-19.

The right transformation of the strategy will help not only to keep existing customers but also to win new ones – outside the traditional target market. Updated marketing and communication strategies will focus on solving today's problems and preparing businesses for the post-crisis future. In such circumstances, online space is the most effective way to interact with customers and other stakeholders. According to research, the time spent on the Internet and social networks on various platforms, including for business (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and others), is increasing. For many companies, this creates an urgent need to rapidly expand the capabilities of digital marketing and online communications.

The impact of the transition to digital space can be observed in all areas of industry. Therefore, it is important for companies today to update their digital space and digital presence, marketing, and communication strategies – from website design and content to social media management and content marketing. As a result, it is expected to grow in popularity, as it is more difficult to interact with the target audience in the B2B sphere from home conditions.

After the end of the pandemic, the world is unlikely to return to its former life, so B2B communications need to adapt to the new realities after COVID-19. Customers will face unique challenges in the coming months and years, and marketing and communication technologies must be aligned with the new business environment.

Digital marketing will facilitate the enterprise's interaction with consumers, fully identify their needs, track each interaction in real time and provide a personalized experience. This will allow the company to respond instantly to consumer requests while forming an individualized unique trade offer or providing relevant personalized information.

The purpose of the article is to study the main features of the virtual exhibition and the prospects for their use by enterprises to promote products.

## II. THEORETICAL ASPECT OF VIRTUAL EXHIBITION

Most studies of the features of virtual exhibition activities have been conducted by such foreign scientists as Margolis N. (2005), Schubert F. (2008), Gottlieb W. (2014), Gong L., Brown M. (2019). Thus, Gong L., Brown M. (2019) investigate the virtual exhibition from the standpoint of business process management with the simultaneous integration of virtual innovation components into them. Margolis's N. (2005) research is devoted to the study of the influence of Internet technologies on the development of exhibitions and the formation of their infrastructure. The main aspects of consumer perception of virtual exhibitions in the B2C market, as well as the motivation for using virtual marketing, are studied by Gottlieb W. (2014). So, the motivation for using virtual marketing is increasing sales revenues, reducing costs, providing access to new sales markets and trust in the brand.

Tkachenko, T., Dupliak T. (2008), Serednytska, L., Heha R. (2017) investigate aspects related to the peculiarities of using Internet technologies in exhibition activities and the main differences between ordinary exhibitions and virtual ones, taking into account the trends of their development in the context of foreign experience. In quarantine conditions, company activity is concentrated on the Internet. Exhibition events allow uniting with companies in one and related areas of activity, communicating together. Now is the time for collaborations that provide an opportunity to increase the audience. In fact, isolation has opened many doors for top managers, consumers – all have become more open and accessible than ever.

In this sense, the issue of distinguishing marketing communication tools such as the Internet site, Internet catalogue, etc. from the modern progressive virtual exhibition is especially important. At the same time, the rapid development of digital technologies involves the active use of virtual exhibitions, which allows creating a tool for promotion, which is based not only on Internet technology but also on augmented reality and virtual reality (AR; virtual reality, VR). From this point of view, the issues of the motivation of companies to use this promotion tool, determining the needs of other stakeholders and the peculiarities of the organization of virtual exhibitions, considering the main trends in digitalization of company areas, remain unexplored.

## III. KEY ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS

The formation of communications in the B2B market is a much more complex activity than communication in the B2C market. The complexity of such a process requires longer planning, a clear understanding of the needs of the target audience and the formation of an appropriate strategy. This situation requires the allocation of a large budget for analytical research and conducting marketing activities. However, not every company can afford such investments, especially small and medium enterprises.

Understanding this situation, companies are striving to move from exclusively classic marketing communications tools, such

as attending exhibitions and using print media, to more modern ones with the introduction of digital marketing. Combining the main digital marketing infrastructure and understanding how to use it to attract potential customers, educate them and transform them into regular customers is the first step to digitizing the marketing activities of the enterprise. At the same time, today there is a small number of studies of the features of virtual exhibitions. Therefore, there is an organic need to study the features, capabilities, and obstacles of organizing virtual exhibitions in the marketing activities of enterprises during the COVID19 pandemic.

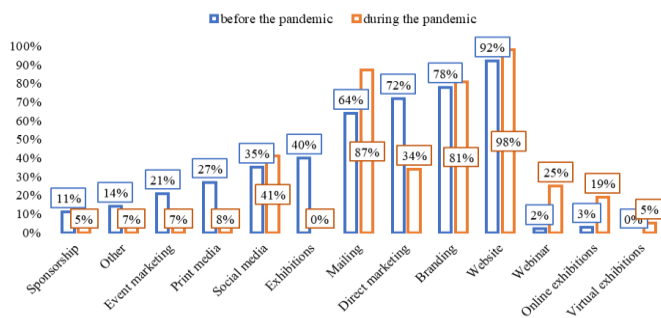
To solve this problem, descriptive marketing research on the main B2B marketing tools used by enterprises in the B2B market was conducted. The research was conducted among managers of industrial machine-building enterprises producing drilling equipment for the mining industry, instrument-making enterprises mainly for the metallurgical industry and enterprises engaged in the design of equipment, devices, and their components.

It was found that business managers have already begun to realize the importance of digital marketing communications. Thus, there is a significant reduction in the use of traditional exhibitions and direct marketing. Websites, branding and mailing are the main tools of marketing communications used by companies during quarantine restrictions to promote their products or interact with key partners (Figure 1).

Most businesses use websites to promote their products. It can be an Internet site, an Internet store, an Internet catalogue, etc., which allows familiarizing customers and partners with the service or product produced by the enterprise. The usability of the site should be at a high level. This provides a professional and branded device-adapted site that contains information about the company itself, has easy navigation, easily accessible rich and detailed information about the products or service to meet the needs of all partners.

Serednytska, L. and Heha R. (2017) investigate the virtual exhibition through Internet resources, where the virtual stands are the pages of the website, which contain information about the company, its products, and services. However, the development of digital technologies allows using additional functions in conducting virtual exhibitions, which radically distinguish them from traditional websites and Internet directories. According to research, it was found that Ukrainian industrial enterprises that participated in the survey do not use virtual exhibitions in their activities even now during the pandemic. Moreover, the survey showed that the level of awareness of marketers of these enterprises about the distinctive features of virtual exhibitions is low. So, only 7% of managers of industrial enterprises noted their awareness regarding virtual exhibitions, 58% heard, but they cannot clearly explain the differences between virtual exhibitions and Internet sites, and 35% of managers do not know or have not heard about such tool as a virtual exhibition to promote the company's products or services in the B2B market.

FIGURE 1.  
THE MAIN TOOLS OF B2B MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS  
BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC



Source: author's calculations based on a survey of enterprise managers

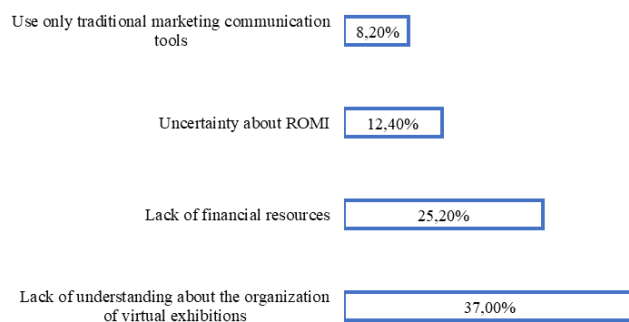
At the same time, the main reasons for not using virtual exhibitions as a promoting tool of companies and their products in the market were investigated (Figure 2). The main motivation of enterprises regarding the decision not to use virtual exhibitions is to focus on cultural beliefs. This is due to the lack of perception and misunderstanding of these technologies by their main customers, the high cost of organizing and maintaining virtual exhibitions, as well as the lack of information about the obvious advantages of this tool of marketing communications.

Thus, for 82.8% of surveyed managers of enterprises, virtual exhibition technologies are not interesting for marketing activities, among which 37% have weak knowledge on this topic and 8.2% consider themselves manufacturers using traditional promotion tools (Figure 2). The reasons for the lack of financial resources among these enterprises are 25.2% and uncertainty about the return on marketing investments (ROMI) - 12.4%.

As can be seen from the results of the survey, the main reason for non-use is precisely low awareness. Therefore, there is an organic need to explore the main types of virtual exhibitions and bring their advantages to the managers of enterprises. In this regard, we will consider the main features of virtual exhibitions and the prospects for their development.

FIGURE 2.

THE MAIN REASONS FOR THE LACK OF INTEREST IN THE USE OF VIRTUAL EXHIBITIONS



Source: author's calculations based on a survey of enterprise managers

Today, virtual exhibitions are one of the leading topics in Ukraine, which is attracting more and more attention.

Unfortunately, virtual exhibitions in Ukraine are not widely used as an online store and electronic directory. The concept of "virtual exhibition" (VE) as a tool of communication policy arose due to the excess demand over the presence of traditional (physical) exhibitions and the COVID19 pandemic. It was initiated by a global association of the world's leading exhibition organizers and major national and international exhibition associations. However, given the fairly young age of the concept, there is little quantity of empirical research into this promising new practice. Using virtual exhibitions is promising not only given the company's communication policy in the domestic market but also allows to maintain and develop international relations and use as a means of entering foreign markets, minimizing the company's costs. European practitioners have proven that the potential of virtual exhibitions is significant in the field of 4P (Gong, L., Berglund, J., & Fast-Berglund, A.; Gong, L., Berglund, J., Saluäär, D., & Johansson, B.). It should be noted that the weakest reaction of virtual exhibitions is manifested in the sphere of "place". This is because the benefits of using virtual exhibitions are manifested for the transfer of information rather than the physical distribution of goods. This situation may also be because many companies currently cannot automatically integrate online purchases through virtual exhibitions.

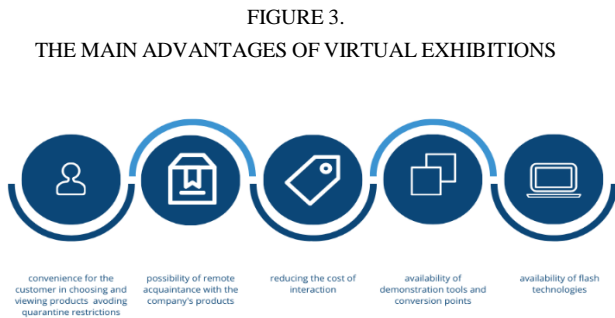
A virtual exhibition is essentially a tool of marketing communications, which allows you to get acquainted with the company's activities using computers and mobile phones via the Internet anywhere and anytime. This is one of the best ways to disseminate digital information to any territory, including the exhibition to promote companies and their products. Such virtual online exhibitions provide a practical and cost-effective solution to overcome the limitations of physical exhibitions, as well as provide a high level of interactivity for their users.

Today in Ukraine the use of virtual exhibitions is inherent mainly in museums, scientific and educational organizations, and libraries for educational purposes. However, it should be noted that several companies use virtual exhibition in marketing activities mainly in the B2B market. Thus, the Nestor Expo virtual exhibition service provides the opportunity to independently create a functional virtual stand with an unlimited number of exhibit pages, a powerful analytical system of accounting for visits and consumer demand. A virtual exhibition is essentially a collection of digital real-life events or objects designed by using multimedia and virtual reality tools that simulate the environment on a computer and are transmitted to the consumer via the web so that users can meet information needs as during physical contact with the object in real life.

The difference between an online and a virtual exhibition is obvious. All virtual exhibitions are online exhibitions, but not vice versa. Today, with the development of Internet technologies there has been a significant increase in the number of online exhibitions. Typically, all virtual exhibitions provide an imitation of the real environment, which is somewhat more complex, expensive than simple online exhibitions. Prospects for the further development of virtual exhibitions lie in many aspects, primarily related to the rapid development of

technology and changes in consumer preferences.

For the active development and support of virtual exhibitions, it is necessary to use flash technologies that allow the use of audio and video formats. Multimedia exhibitions will allow to solve meaningful tasks, attract consumers and influence the financial and economic performance of the enterprise more effectively. The main advantages of virtual exhibitions are shown in Figure 3.



Source: author's elaboration based on literature review

The speed of development of exhibition activity requires Ukrainian companies to form their exhibition policy, qualified exhibition management and marketing. Every year, this problem becomes more and more urgent: enterprises that spend considerable funds in presenting products at exhibitions and do not receive adequate efficiency are ready to invest in high-quality exhibition marketing.

Currently, state-of-the-art virtual / digital exhibitions make full use of conceptual and linguistic tools provided by combined new technologies. Some popular systems used to develop online virtual exhibitions are ViEx System, XMP-CMS and ARCO (Breiteneder, C., & Platzer, H.). All these systems have a common feature: they contribute to the development of several versions of the same exhibition in different contexts by separating content and presentation, including providing adaptation to mobile devices.

So, ViewShare is used to create interactive materials, maps, graphs, tags, etc. Text Framework (XTF) provides access to digital content. Blacklight provides different information displays for different types of objects. Open Kobalt is designed to build, access, and share virtual worlds both on the local network and on the Internet. Such technologies create the basis of virtual exhibitions - virtual reality. Virtual Reality (VR) is a digital virtual environment similar to the real world but created by a computer.

VR technology has a real application in medicine, education, presentation of cultural heritage sites and has great potential for its application in marketing. The basic unit for virtual reality is a 3D image, and 3D animation is used to show virtual objects and environments interactively on a PC. VR can be divided into two types: simulate the real environment for learning and education; development of an imaginary environment for marketing activity of the enterprise.

Popular products for creating VR applications on computers are Bryce, Extreme 3D, Ray Dream Studio, trueSpace, 3D

Studio MAX and VR. Using virtual exhibitions, special attention should be paid to aspects of intellectual property law. When planning a virtual exhibition, it is necessary to comply with copyright standards for each type of digital resource used (text, images, sounds, video, graphics, 3D), you need to check whether each digital element will be copyrighted and not have restrictions on its use.

Regarding ways to organize virtual exhibitions. Today there are various models of virtual exhibitions, including photo exhibitions; multi-banners; exhibitions with audio and video accompaniment, exhibitions- "presentations" on separate production; exhibitions- "demonstrations" with rich multimedia content, including audio and video series, text, sections; thematic interactive exhibitions with certain quests, presentations, travels, games, etc.

In each of these types, a content area is allocated. A content area is an area in which the theme of an exhibition is revealed through several information units. Individual sections of the exhibition consist of different chronological or thematic segments on one or several pages, each of which can be identified by name.

This part is the basis of a virtual exhibition and contains content organized through hypertext structures and expressed through a series of digital elements (text, images, video, audio, 3D programs) with a uniform style and structure: short descriptive texts about the company, its products; deeper research on certain aspects of the company's products; product image galleries; interviews and stories of owners, managers, clients, etc.; video clips, animation; audio clips, music; documents, maps; 3D content; signatures for digital objects. These sections can be linked to the introductory page, which details the goals, characteristics, and target audience of the exhibition.

To organize a virtual exhibition, participants receive special equipment – virtual reality glasses, for example, Facebook Oculus (Figure 4). All participants receive Facebook Oculus glasses by mail which may seem expensive until comparing it with renting a showroom, especially in the center of the European capital. Everything looks like a traditional exhibition. Several hundred people gather in the virtual pavilion. The participants walk between the stages, listen to the speakers, communicate with each other. With Oculus devices and platform solutions companies can turn their idea into virtual reality and share it with VR clients.

FIGURE 4.  
OCULUS QUEST VIRTUAL REALITY HEADSET



Source: developer.oculus.com