

SWZD
SPICEWORKS ZIFF DAVIS

The Past, Present, and Future of **B2B Marketing**

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Introduction

Welcome to the year that was in marketing. And what a year it was.

The COVID-19 global pandemic unexpectedly disrupted our lives, challenging our way of thinking and propelling everything that we knew ‘as normal’ out the window.

The crisis has impacted marketing and sales departments in many unexpected ways, however among the storm clouds there have been many silver linings. A shift to remote working, changes in customer demand, and increased spend in IT has paved the way for a new reality for many B2B marketers.

In this handy report, we’re going to look at the past to help shape our future. We’ll explore what marketing strategies and tactics were successful in 2020, what needs improving, and how you can plan to thrive in 2021 and beyond.



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The Past, Present, and Future of Marketing

Now that this year is almost behind us and we're past the initial pandemic hurdle, we'll explore the pivotal shifts in marketing and how it's impacted B2B marketers - for better. We'll deep dive into each topic, gaining insight into the valuable lessons learned, see what the future holds, and determine which ideas will help you successfully navigate the future.

1. Adapt your communications to educate and engage with your audience

The strict lockdowns imposed on countries at the beginning of the pandemic meant millions of workers were suddenly forced to work remotely. To say marketers embraced this challenge creatively is an understatement.

Human-centric marketing soon became the backbone in how brands communicate with their audience. Marketers began crafting empathetic messages to communicate with their audience, letting their customers know that they were there for them, acknowledging the crisis and offering help. Adapting messaging and communications worked wonders, whilst global audiences were grappling with the unfolding crisis; receiving reassuring, honest communication from brands offered some comfort in uncertain times. Personally relevant communications soared as 59% of B2B marketing leaders[1] created targeted messaging as a direct result of the pandemic.



Communication was key at the start of the pandemic and continued to be the golden tool throughout. With people worried about their health, families, income, and schooling, their personal lives were being impacted in unforeseen ways, so it was crucial that marketers showed empathy and stability in their messaging whilst still being there as a company for their customers.

As time went on, marketers showed that being authentic and thoughtful helped engage with customers, and brands showed how they could help companies adapt to the new world.

With hybrid remote-working conditions looking to become a reality and half of organizations considering a permanent remote working solution[2], this will inevitably impact how marketers can reach their audience going forward.

Marketers will need to adjust the way they communicate with their audience and rethink how they educate and engage with their potential buyers in order to drive sales conversions.

It appears most workers are spending more time on screens[3] (be it laptops or mobile phones), which presents many creative channels that sales and marketing can utilize to reach their audience. Once you've outlined your objectives, consider how you can work these channels in 2021 and beyond.

Source:
[1] Engage B2B Buyers in an Uncertain Environment, 2020, Gartner
[2] Is Your Company Switching to a Flexible Work Policy After the Crisis?, 2020, Spiceworks
[3] Media Usage During Covid-19 by Country, 2020, Statista

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Email:

All hail email! With 44% more emails[4] being sent than before lockdown began, it's imperative to nail your email strategy. With continuously changing situations, marketers must continue being educational, empathetic, and targeted in their message and content.

It's not as simple as 'being noisier' than your competitors and vying for your customer's attention. It's about crafting tailored, relevant, and personalized email to your segmented audience, which resonates with their current situation, geography, and demographic at the same time of your email campaign. It's about growing better, not growing at all costs.

Some top email pointers:

- Don't exploit the situation.
- Entice customers to open an email with a subject line that's relevant.
- Consider using inspirational content related to your company's area of expertise to increase open rates.
- Offer new customers the option to subscribe to your content, whether it's a new product release or a monthly newsletter.
- Build customer loyalty and stand out from your competitors with invitations to exclusive virtual events, discounts, subscriptions, gifts, etc.

Source:
[4] A Look Back at How COVID-19 Impacted Businesses in Q2, 2020, HubSpot
[5] Stats Roundup: Coronavirus Impact on Marketing, Ecommerce & Advertising, 2020, Econsultancy
[6] How Often Should You Post on Social Media?, 2020, Meltwater

Social Media:

Don't be scared to try social media. With audiences spending more time on social channels than ever, now is the time to try if you haven't already ventured into this territory. Since 45% of people worldwide are spending more time on messaging services[5] (e.g. WhatApp, Facebook Messenger, etc.), try to start small and scale up with this channel.

A few social media tips:

- You'll need an active presence to gain followers, so post regularly on social media. This doesn't mean bombard your followers with spam or irrelevant content – instead, schedule at least a few posts each week, and ask your internal stakeholders to like/share your content so it reaches far and wide.
- Less is more[6]. LinkedIn says to post once a day, and Hubspot advises that engagement significantly drops if you post more than that.

Videos:

Video follow-up has been an often-overlooked technique in B2B sales. B2B marketers have long upped their video game to simplify complex topics and create targeted content. Align with sales and help them send a quick video follow-up through email that will help them stay ahead of competitors.

The ability to easily video a screen share or take a selfie video with your smartphone has significantly reduced resource and technical limitations for sales reps.

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SMS:

The pandemic has increased media usage, and with 70% of users suggesting their mobile phone usage has increased[7], marketers should consider using SMS as a channel to reach their audience as a standalone with push notifications and in-app messages or integrated campaigns via other channels. SMS marketing generates a whopping 98% open rate[8], and marketers benefit from increased customer engagement rates, low cost, and high ROI.

Client Communication:

Client entertainment is no doubt going to look different in 2021. Plan some fun, virtual ways to keep in contact with clients, help relationship building and replicate the 'human connection'. Consider virtual happy hours, quizzes, or virtual escape rooms for a bonding experience. You could also organize delivery of an afternoon tea hamper or a cocktail making kit to engage with your audience and show your appreciation.

Cross Channel Communication:

Is Email Marketing and Social Media a marriage made in heaven? Do SMS and video make the perfect couple? Consider how you could drive engagement across two or more channels to maximize engagement – for example:

1. An incentivized email asks a customer to fill out a survey on a recent IT product/service they purchased
2. Once they've filled out the survey, they receive an SMS with a link to share on social media
3. Once they share on social media, they get their incentive (e.g. $10 gift card)

2. Drive conversions by reinforcing your brand's value through the buyer's journey

Brands have had to make it about the audience, not about them. They've adapted their brand and content strategy to map the changing needs of the audience and learned how to influence the changing buyer behaviour by creating swathes of engaging, relevant content in direct response to the crisis.

Then, something delightfully unexpected happened. Communities were rallying together; people were listening, reaching out; and brands were being human, kind, and helpful. Rather than focusing on aggressive or sly sales tactics, many brands were providing free educational content to help their customers and the wider community.

Brands have had to adapt their strategies to continue being the bridge between their products and services with their customers, whilst marketers reinforced the company's value by creating trust with their customers.

The already complex B2B buyer's journey changed even further due to COVID-19, with decision makers experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. The buying cycle became even longer than before. SWZD's recent research shows the average buying group now consists of 6-8 people, who are involved in IT purchases. As a result, marketers need to continue to cater at all stages of the marketing funnel, and brands need to patiently 'guide' customers through the new buying journey whilst providing messages of reliability and stability.

Source:
[7] Coronavirus Impact: Global Device Usage Increase by Country, 2020, Statista
[8] Want 98% Open Rates? Launch an SMS Marketing Program, 2020, The Daily Egg

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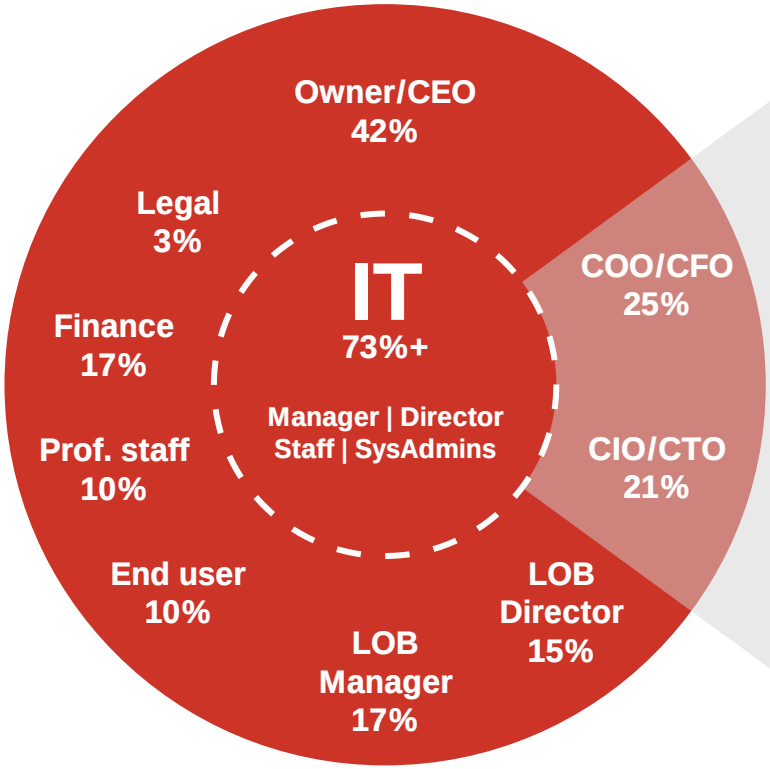
Meet the Buying Collective



6-8

People involved on avg in IT purchases

(3 at small companies vs. 12 at large companies)



IT involvement is a constantin Tech Purchase to:

- Determine need
- Evaluate solutions/brands
- Recommend solutions/vendors

...before engaging others to approve funds and purchases

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With customer communication and buyer interactions increasing in complexity, how can marketers simplify the process, whilst ensuring a smooth, logical experience for their customers going forward? Through marketing automation.

Marketing Automation can help you market effectively on multiple channels and automate repetitive tasks, helping marketing teams keep up with the increasing volume of digital interactions. MA platforms are built to scale and speed up marketing efforts while ensuring each touch point the customer has with your brand is more personalized.

MA software can help marketers manage several campaigns, which can even run on autopilot to free up time and resources. With marketing automation, you have a 360-degree view of how your prospects are interacting with you, and you've got the tools you need to turn them into customers.

MA software can help marketers not only capture leads but build relationships while moving customers through the buyer's journey at scale, across multiple channels (e.g. email, social media), and provide them with personalized content that's relevant to them.



Another consideration for the future is thinking about how you can get visibility of in-market accounts and their entire buying collective. How can sales and marketing identify where prospects or customers are in the buying journey? Through ABM.

Investing in an ABM solution that offers visibility into first-party intent data by capturing intent signals across a wide range of industry sectors can help brands target decision makers when they're in the market and ready to buy.

Sales and marketing can look to engage the most relevant prospects that are truly in-market for your solution with an intelligent ABM solution. Many vendors offer a variety of intent data, but be sure to have total clarity on the source and structure of the intent data that's feeding your program. Don't settle for vendors without the capability to assemble the best intent data to power your ABM in terms of quality, diversity, and scale.



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3. Value-driven content remains crucial with renewed emphasis on repurposing and promotions

When lockdown commenced, headlines that referenced COVID-19 generated an average of 131% more traffic than those that didn't. Audiences at the beginning of the pandemic showed a preference for a factual and direct tone of voice, however, their content appetite changed over time.

Our findings showed our ITDM audience welcomed light-hearted, cheerful, and entertaining content - a gentle breather in all the heavy and serious COVID-19 related content that was being churned out by marketers across the globe.

Digital content such as webinars, ebook, videos, and events were great ways to engage with various personas of the buying committee in their buying cycle. They still are. It's always been about having your content at the right place and the right time, but now more than ever it's about ensuring the tone, topic, and type of content match your audience's preferences.

Marketers need to deep dive into how their customers' content consumption patterns have changed and plan a content strategy that's tailored to their audience and evolving content consumption habits. Would your customers benefit from whitepapers, buyers' guides, or short series of video demos?

B2B buyers are steering clear of promotional or sales material and seeking out content that helps them do their job more successfully, move forward in their buying journey, or gain insight from peers or industry experts.

With 50% of B2B buyers[9] holding off on purchases because of the pandemic, how could marketers use content to engage with their audience in new ways?

- Consider repurposing old content and make it available digitally. For example, is there an old e-book that you could pick relevant content from and turn into a short video series or a month's worth of blog posts? You'll benefit from new traffic sources and a chance to reinforce and enhance your message.
- If you've presented a webinar recently, use the transcript to create a series of blogs. If there's a working case study in there, why not create a visual PDF of the client testimonial?
- Video is hot right now. Create short, light-hearted videos to engage with audiences who prefer to consume content via video.
- Collaborate! Is there a client you could team up with to produce co-branded content? You'll reach a wider audience and increase credibility with an industry expert or thought leader presenting with you.

Source:
[9] Survey: US B2B Decision-Maker Response to COVID-19 Crisis, 2020, McKinsey

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Bearing in mind 20% of the value of content is in the creation and 80% of content is in the promotion[10], consider these channels to promote your content.

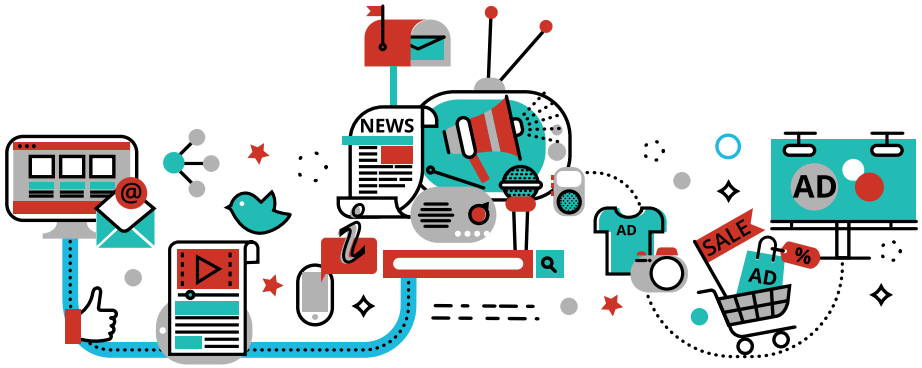
Owned media:

A cost efficient channel where you can control the message and user experience. This could be through your website, social media channels, email marketing, or content syndication.

Paid media:

Consider investing in paid search such as search engine marketing, paid social media channels, display ads, and content distribution networks to help place your content in front of prospective customers when they're in the research phase and looking to make a purchase decision.

For detailed info on how to plan and promote your content check out our **helpful hints**!



Source:
[10] Why Content Marketing Should Always Be 20% Creation and 80% Promotion, Singlegrain
[11] New IDC Spending Guide Shows Continued Growth, 2020, IDC
[12] Media Usage During Covid-19 by Country, 2020, Statista

4. The power of digital grows with the shift to remote work

One thing which has been made apparent by this pandemic – is the value of digital.

When the 'remote working' phase initially became mandatory, marketers who relied on traditional offline marketing channels had to act fast. Their audience and customers were now sitting in their 'home office', glued to their laptops for longer hours. And so there was the golden opportunity of using digital to reach their audience.

SWZD's recent **State of IT report** stated that 44% of companies had already accelerated or planned to fast track their digital transformation. Recent findings show that global spending on digital transformation[11] technologies and services was forecast to grow 10.4% in 2020 to $1.3 trillion.

So, marketers grabbed this opportunity to adapt their digital strategies during this new 'remote lifestyle' phase, to reach their audience through new or overlooked digital channels. For example, 44% of the world's population[12] were spending a longer time on social media in March, which paved the way for social to become a 'must have' for any marketer.

There are plenty of benefits of digital marketing. It's a more cost-effective strategy than traditional marketing, especially for organizations whose budgets or resources have been frozen due to the ongoing pandemic. Additionally, marketers can interact with customers, have better control of their audience and can view real-time results of each digital marketing campaign.

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So, what does the future of traditional offline marketing look like? Face to face events, direct mail, and brochures are still very tactile and will continue to remain a great way of connecting with your audience. These tactics will continue to be integral in a marketer's strategy, however some marketers might shift their apportioned budgets between offline and online until 'long term social distancing measures' are put into place and workers start to return to the office.

According to SWZD research, 61% of the workforce is working remotely during COVID-19 vs. an expected 30% remote after COVID-19, which means remote working will continue to remain an option for most companies.

But in absolute terms, we expect the remote work revolution to roughly double the number of permanent remote workers once things return to normal (16% remote workforce before COVID-19 vs. 30% after COVID).



Source:
[13] Top Martech Trends for 2021, 2020, NewsCred

5. Investment in IT spend will continue into 2021

With the largest ever remote workforce in play, companies around the world were rapidly forced to invest in IT infrastructure, collaboration tools, equipment, and other IT solutions to help organizations work effectively from home.

When COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic in March 2020, our **initial survey** found that IT departments swiftly deployed technologies to help businesses continue as normal.

After the initial rush to remote work, another poll was launched amongst SWZD's IT pros, which **indicated that IT spending would continue** and businesses were still seeking out IT solutions to help them deal with remote challenges.

This proved to be a great opportunity for marketers to influence IT buyers in-market. They were able to use educational, relevant, and valuable content to engage with buyers.

Since their audience was now at home, many organizations invested and upgraded their digital stack. In fact, 60% of marketing leaders[13] indicated that they were anticipating increased Martech spend in the next 12 months.

Fast forward to September 2020, our **annual report on IT budgets and tech trends** surveyed more than 1,000 tech buyers to see how this shift will influence IT in the coming years. Key findings showed that COVID-19 was a catalyst for business transformation, with 75% of companies planning long-term IT changes. These plans drove tech spending and more than a third of budget increases for 2021 is said to be influenced by the pandemic.

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Remote Revolution:

Whilst the IT industry is shifting continuously, tech brands can invest time to analyze the market changes and help customers with their changing requirements.

Key Findings From Our State Of IT Report

- With the pandemic driving new business needs, while down compared to previous years, 80% of IT budgets will either increase or stay the same between 2020 and 2021.
- IT will still play a critical role to support remote workers in 2021 and beyond, which means organizations will continue to invest in hardware, software, and services to maintain productivity amid the remote work revolution.
- IT departments may be asked to focus on security, enhance communications between remote workers, cloud, or even disaster recovery plans in preparation for new scenarios. The focus will likely be on optimizing existing operations rather than experimental projects and other emerging tech adoption plans.
- As investment will continue to shift between areas, businesses will still need guidance on choosing a service or solution that fits their evolving needs, often turning to trusted advisors to guide them through their buying journey.

Implication for Marketers:

- This is where tech marketers can take the lead in this marketing dance. The trends outlined in our **State of the IT report** present opportunities to help businesses navigate change and plan for 2021.
- The pandemic has increased the workload for many, including IT buyers, making it harder to reach them through traditional channels such as in-person meetings and conferences. This is where **digital marketing takes the spotlight** again.
- With virtual events now becoming the norm, many IT buyers are continuing to look to connect with vendors and peers in a virtual set up. Our data shows that 55% of IT buyers expect attendance of virtual events to increase over the next 12 to 24 months, and many IT buyers also said they've attended more virtual events than they did before COVID-19.

Where should marketers invest in 2021?

With budgets shifting between marketing channels, consider investing in and/or re-evaluating your Martech stack. What will help your sales and marketing teams understand your audience's changing behaviour and needs in 2021? Should you create bespoke content for them, guide them through the buying cycle, and/or produce tailored solutions for them?

Consider investing in your digital infrastructure with IP tracking (to identify intent), virtual events platforms, content experience platforms, social media management platforms, PPC, and CRM.

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6. Virtual events reach maximum popularity as the pandemic limits face-to-face environment

Many marketers turned to virtual event platforms to host their 'face-to-face' planned conferences and seminars, due to social distancing measures and strict lockdowns in most countries.

The initial conversion to virtual events was a method of trial and error for many. Trying to create the same buzz and excitement as their live face-to-face predecessors proved to be tricky, but marketers embraced the many advantages that came with this challenge.

Digital events saw a powerful increase in registration numbers, since attendees didn't have to justify travel costs or other expenses. Marketers were able to reach a wider pool of registrants, capturing full booth analytics and the material being presented suddenly had a much longer shelf life. In fact, the majority of IT buyers surveyed in our State of IT report said they've attended more virtual events than they did with face-to-face events, before COVID-19.

SpiceWorld, SWZD's biggest annual event connecting thousands of IT pros with tech brands, had been held face-to-face for 13 years. It was converted into a virtual event, and proved to be a huge success, with more registrants than ever before. More than 7,000 registrants spanning across 139 countries joined in to network, collaborate, watch seminars, or have a virtual pint with their peers and industry experts! With the content available on demand to watch 24/7 for the next six months, it continues to give unprecedented access to valuable material for a longer time.

With so much uncertainty and continuously changing rules and regulations in each country, it's hard to keep up with how many people from which households or bubbles you can meet up with, let alone plan for a face-to-face event or conference.

With that in mind, it's looking more likely that a hybrid model of virtual and face-to-face will be the future for the events model. Marketers can continue to harness the positives that virtual events bring such as an increase in global reach and longer shelf life of the content.

Virtual event platforms are getting more creative, enabling attendees to interact with others (e.g. through avatars, cocktail making lessons, quizzes or listening to a live streamed band) trying to replicate the human connection we yearn for. Marketers could continue to focus on providing access to ungated, high quality content from their events to continue driving long-term engagement with their audience.



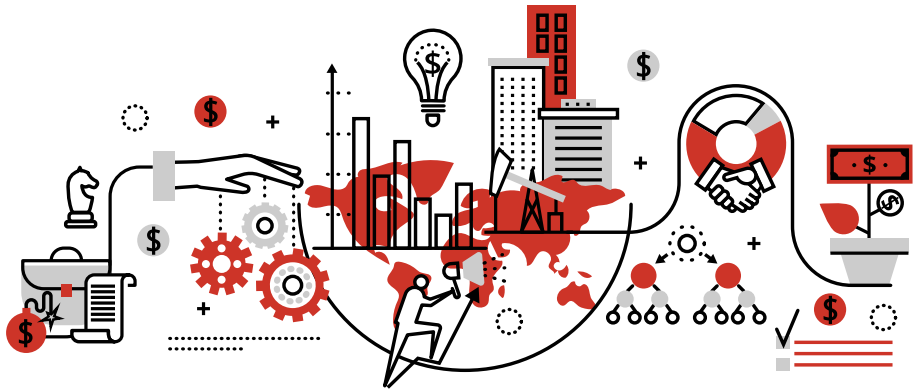
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7. Empathetic and value based marketing messages could help drive conversion despite limited revenue growth

No one could have predicted how the crisis was going to impact their revenue in 2020. Going into 2019 and 2020, our State of IT survey showed organizations were optimistic about their revenue figures, however understandably, due to slowing economic activity as a result of COVID-19, many companies faced slumped revenue figures for 2020.

Organizations were busy striving to meet their goals, and many had to find the right balance between pushing forward with the same vigour and determination as 2019 to hit targets and revenue figures, whilst taking into consideration how the crisis was affecting customers.

Gartner's research[14] indicated that 86% of Tech CEOs believed revenue growth would be impacted the most from a global economic recession.



Revenue in 2021

- Company revenues are expected to stagnate in 2021 due to slowing economic activity resulting from the global pandemic.
- While one-third of businesses expect revenues to increase year-over-year from 2020 to 2021, that figure is down significantly from 58% expecting revenue growth between 2019 to 2020.
- Additionally, 31% of organizations believe revenues will decrease YoY from 2020 to 2021, representing a significantly more negative outlook than in the previous two years, when only 7% of businesses expected revenue to fall.

Going forward, marketers will still need to show empathy and care for their customers whilst fulfilling the business need of revenue generation. Sales and marketing will need to rein in any aggressive sales tactics, instead really focusing on what the customer wants and needs and how they can help them.

Source:
[14] COVID-19: Tech CEOs Prepare for Impact on Revenue Growth, 2020, Gartner

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Conclusion

2020 has been a learning curve in adapting, innovating, and embracing all the challenges and silver linings that have resulted from the pandemic.

Marketers have pivoted quickly, changed entire strategies, and realigned budgets and resources to continue putting customers' needs first.

At times it has been challenging for brands, but marketers have already seen the value of digital content and lead nurturing to drive brand awareness and generate pipeline for sales. As buyer behaviour continues to change, marketers need to continue practicing agile and responsive marketing and considering investing in ABM and marketing automation platforms.

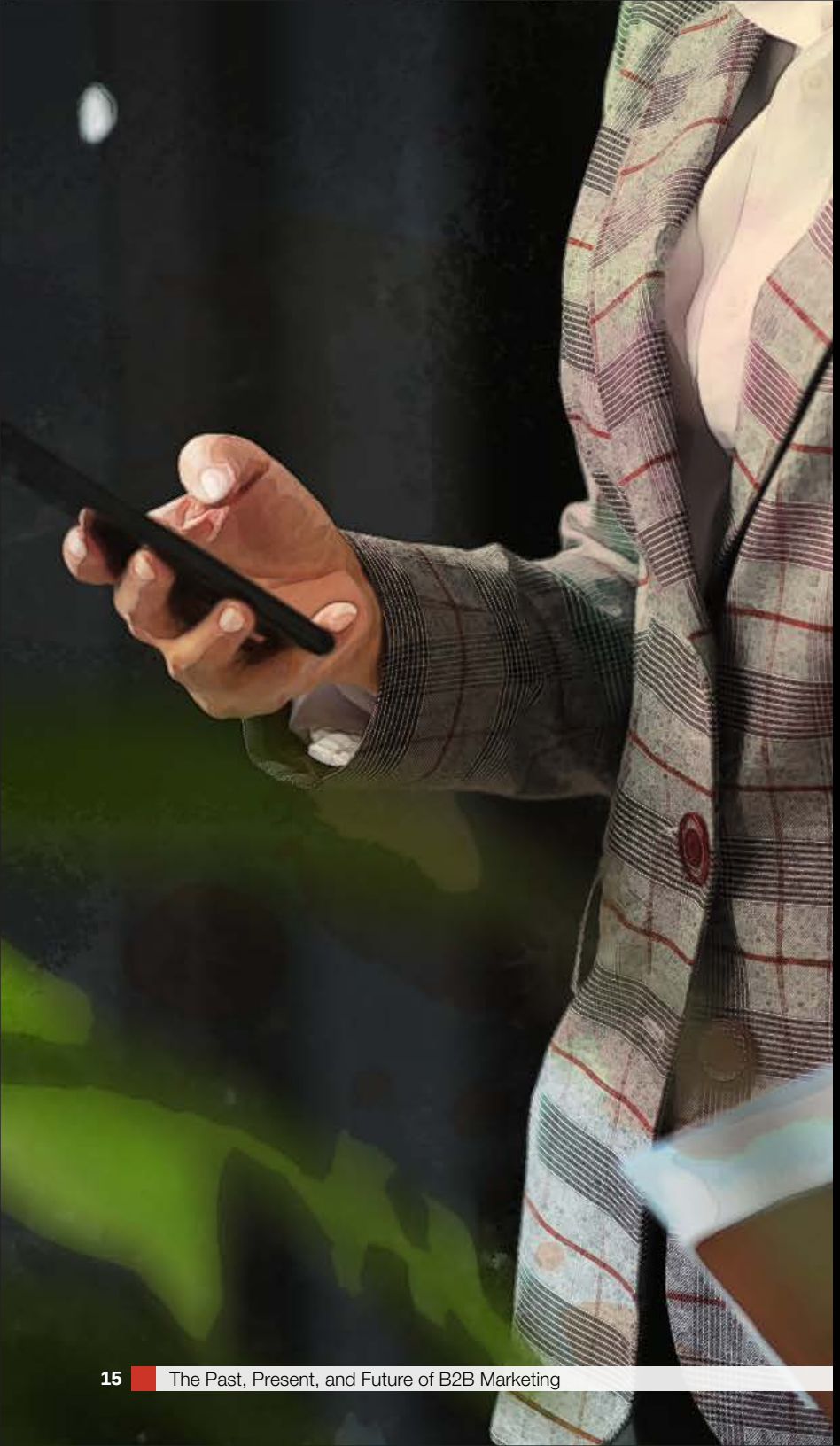
Humans are born wired for connection, it's in our DNA. With remote working looking to become the 'new norm', invest in relationships with your clients and prospects, and of course your colleagues. Human centric marketing will be key in 2021, where brands engage with customers as 'whole human beings with hearts, minds and spirits' as said by Philip Kotler.

Be ready to change your mindset and embrace change. The value you were offering before COVID-19 may have been very different to your value prop during the height of the pandemic, and perhaps could look very different to what you are offering in Q4 of 2021. Keep revisiting your go-to-market strategy, rethink the basics, and revisit the past. A strategy you had in 2018 might suddenly work with a bit of tweaking.



One thing is for sure, marketers are the glue that help drive companies forward, and they will need to continue to evolve to meet the new challenges and thrive on the opportunities that will come with 2021 and beyond.

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Spiceworks Ziff Davis, a division of J2 Global, Inc., is a trusted global marketplace that connects technology buyers and sellers across verticals including including IT, Marketing, HR, Finance, and more. Our quality and diversity of first-party intent data gathered from our contextually relevant media network helps tech brands target decision makers across the buying collective.

When combined with our integrated marketing capabilities, built on a deep understanding of the buyer's journey, we enable tech brands get unparalleled access to in-market buyers.

Welcome to intelligence-driven marketing.

For more information,

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