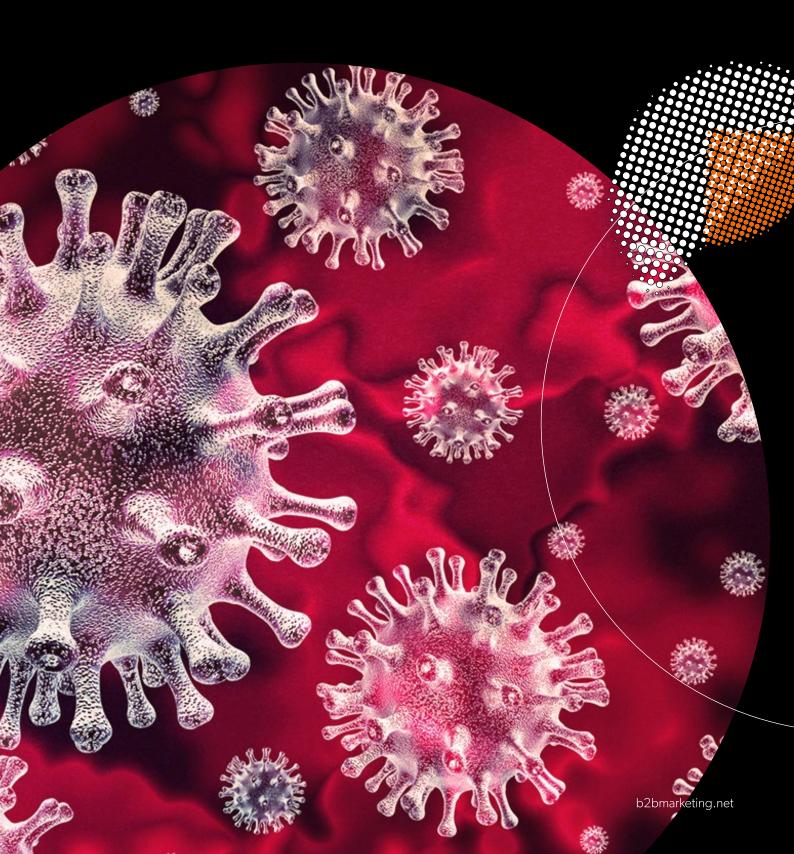




# The great disruptor

Survey: B2B marketers' response to Covid-19





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# Introduction



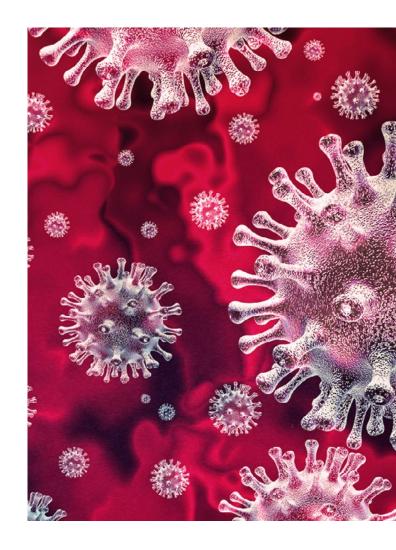
Joel Harrison, editor-in-chief and co-founder, B2B Marketing

With the exception perhaps of 'digital transformation', two words that B2B marketing agencies and their clients have used more than any others over this past decade are 'disruption' and 'agility'. We use them positively – if, sometimes, aggressively. We use them to challenge and inspire.

Disruption and agility talk of a great change to vertical sectors and business practices, and of the speed in which, in this digital age, brands need to address them to stay relevant, and even to stay alive.

Covid-19 has rewritten the book on disruption. Nothing in living memory has forced as big a change upon as wide a global group in as short a timeframe. In response, we find ourselves needing to rewrite the book on agility.

But how in practical terms has Covid-19 really affected B2B marketers, and what – if anything – are they doing about it? We asked them. The results are published in this report.



# Comment



**Denise Persson,** chief marketing officer, Snowflake

Today, uncertainty and change have become everyday aspects of our business lives. In marketing, we are constantly adapting to meet the needs of our customers to ensure their safety and wellbeing in these testing times. But the ways in which we market to customers have also changed: our existing marketing channels are no longer effective, and adaptability is key in addressing customer needs.

Now, more than ever, in order to ensure we are relevant and timely to the requirements of customers, tapping into real-time data is crucial. Marketing teams must pivot towards an agile digital environment which can harness the power of live data and virtual events, better outreaching to both existing and new customers.

Ultimately, this data should be without restrictions and integrated into every marketing function. Thanks to

advances in cloud technologies, we can easily create a digital twin replicating the office in our very own work environment. By combining all the inbound data, we can very quickly start developing a 360° view of our customers and tie our marketing investment to business outcomes. This is helping to speed up communications and cross collaboration between different business units both within and external to an organisation.

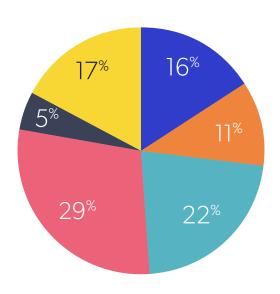
We will all be at different stages of becoming data-driven marketing organisations. And while things may initially look bleak, Covid-19 is also creating opportunities and encouraging us to improve the wealth of information at our disposal to better understand and serve our customers. If data has not been front and centre of your marketing operations up until this point, then it's worth taking this time to readdress this.

# The survey

We put 20 questions to companies across different geographies and industries. Respondents were primarily senior level, with responsibility for marketing budget allocation and strategic decision-making. 16% of respondents were CEOs and 33% CMOs or directors of marketing. As the pie charts below indicate, the survey had a wide reach across the globe and over verticals.

We believe the results to be representative of the global B2B marketing cohort, and thus this report should provide a clear picture to fellow marketers. This may help benchmarking right now, and help planning – whether tactical or strategic – in the difficult days ahead.

#### What is your job title?



16% CEO

11% CMO/VP marketing

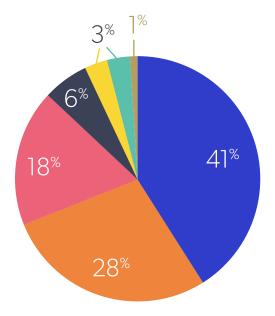
22% Director of marketing

29% Marketing manager (or equivalent)

5% Marketing executive

17% Other

#### Where is your company based?



41% UK

28% North America

18% Europe

6% Asia

3% Africa

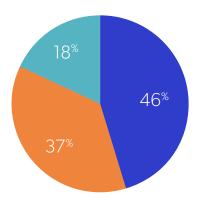
3% Australia

1% South America

# The questions

# What impact do you expect Covid-19 will have on sales revenue from your existing/regular customers?

Some might argue that this is the \$64,000 question, as so much else hinges upon it. Put simply: how will Covid-19 hit sales? And taken as a single snapshot, nothing else quite underlines the seriousness of the pandemic's impact on business than responses to this question.



Covid-19's impact on the bottom line is expected to be swift and profound. Almost half of the total respondents say this explicitly, with another 37% saying it's too early to tell. A fortunate 18% are expecting little impact overall to sales figures.

Most companies see sales revenue as the be-all-and-end-all. So much else depends on it – headcount, strategy and planning, R&D, marketing – that the effects of a significant downturn can't help but have an impact on operations for all but those companies with the deepest financial reserves.

With a B2B marketing lens, the question then becomes: will marketing budgets and plans be casualties of necessary cuts, or will senior management put increased focus on marketing, looking to it to swiftly address the downturn?

## 46%

say there has been, or will be, a significant and/or rapid downturn in revenue.

# 37%

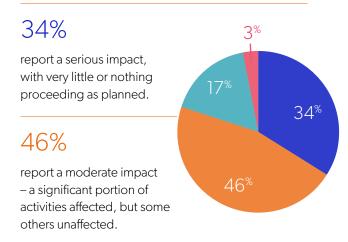
say it is still too early to tell and they are still monitoring it.

## 18%

say there has been little impact – it's largely business as usual.

# What impact has the Covid-19 emergency had on your marketing planning and delivery?

The immediate impact of the crisis on marketing departments has been notably negative.



## 17%

say they've experienced a minor impact, with the majority of things unaffected.

## 3%

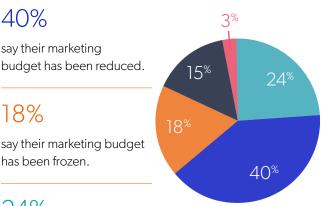
report no impact – business as usual.

While both the brutal reality of the impact and its speed may not be entirely surprising to marketers, the scale of it that our survey has identified may prove surprising, with 80% or respondents reporting a serious or moderate impact.

Whether this proves to be an initial, 'automatic' reaction remains to be seen, but it does underline the disruption that marketers are going through right now.

#### What's happened to your marketing budget?

Results for this question align closely with the previous one. Both marketing activity and marketing budgets have been hit quickly and hit hard.



24%

say the budget has remained the same.

## 3%

say marketing budgets have increased as a result of the crisis.

## 15%

say they don't know yet.

We'll see over the coming weeks and months whether this proves to be an initial spike or a pervasive trend. Nevertheless, it is of course a huge concern for marketers, given that evidence from previous periods of economic slowdown shows it has often been marketing departments which are seen as soft targets for quick and easy cuts. For now, the daily reality revolves around looking to get more done with less.

The outlier statistic for this question is the one which deserves to give marketers heart: 3% of respondents say their marketing budgets have increased as a result of the crisis. The hope and expectation for marketers would be that such companies represent the forward-thinking vanguard who consider marketing key to finding completely fresh ways of engaging in a disrupted landscape.

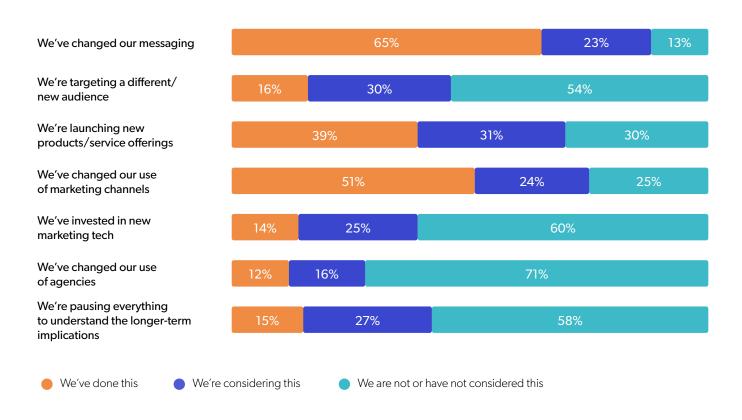
# Are you changing the marketing techniques, channels or messaging that you're using as a result of the Covid-19 emergency?

As all good B2B marketers know – or at least are constantly being told – to counter disruption, you need agility. Change has become a constant in the new world, based around the digitally-connected consumer. This means the best marketers have become those that are adept at dealing with change, or instigating it.

The pandemic has prompted what we might call hyperacceleration in business disruption. Business-marketingas-usual will no longer be fit-for-purpose in many cases. In such cases, change is imperative. The table below provides fascinating insight into how marketing activity has changed and what marketers are doing differently. It paints a picture of a confident and strategic initial response to the crisis. 65% have already changed their messaging; 51% have changed their use of marketing channels; and 39% are launching new products or services. Agility does appear to be the order of the day.

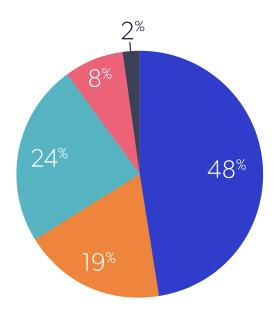
One heartening statistic for marketers on the agency side is that, in the middle of all this extraordinary change, only 12% report that they are changing their use of agencies. Given that top agencies today are all about strategic planning and fresh insight derived from data, agencies will be pleased to, at the very least, still be included in the conversation.

# "65% of companies have already changed their messaging as a result of the emergency"



Do you believe there's an opportunity for your organisation for innovation (in terms of product/service development or marketing delivery) as a consequence of Covid-19?

Following straight on from the previous question, the answers to this next question reinforce the fact that companies are cognisant of the need for change, and see themselves as up to the challenge. Nearly half (48%) of all respondents believe that a new opportunity does now exist around innovation in product development or marketing delivery. In fact, only 9% see it as unlikely or impossible.



48% Yes, and we're actively exploring that now

19% Yes, it's something that we're considering for the future

24% Potentially, but difficult to say right now

8% Unlikely – but I wouldn't rule it out

2% No chance

#### The view from the business

One saying went around marketing circles with such speed at the advent of lockdown that it became something of an instant cliché: if you weren't digitally transforming before, you certainly are now. The Covid-19 emergency has inarguably accelerated all things digital, and the question has become: can you flex to keep your business going in a 100% digital environment? In the words of one American company: "We're not, for example, going to trade shows – so how do we architect experiences that we would have delivered face-to-face? How do we amplify this?"

Those in B2C marketing have been hit hard, particularly those involved in verticals such as travel and hospitality, airlines and hotels. While B2B marketers are – arguably – slightly less vulnerable, these remain serious times. Some verticals do see this as a time of opportunity. Technology firms are going to take centre stage when it comes to rethinking what a post-coronavirus world – one better prepared for another global pandemic, if and when that should happen – will look like, and how business continuity can work. It seems likely that from here on in, vertical-specific marketing will increase. What does this mean in practice? Relevance, timeliness and personalisation.

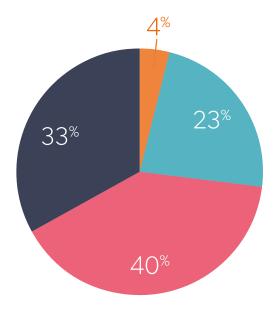
How brands stay in touch with their customers during the pandemic – whether or not said customers are still buying things from them right now – may well prove very important as we come out of it. Extraordinary times tend to make or break relationships, and many marketers (both business-side and agencyside) have expressed the feeling that, after Covid-19, brands are going to have more of a responsibility to their customers than they have had in the past.

# How important do you feel marketing's role is in protecting existing business relationships and revenue?

The received wisdom about marketing's optimal role is that it exists to find and attract new customers, and to help close warm prospects. At the advent of the wider global lockdown, there was much talk about how, in order to survive, companies and agencies would do well to focus on shoring up relationships with their existing client base. Keeping close to them to find out how things have changed, and what they now need in the changed environment – this was seen as the top priority, above new customer acquisition.

This question was included specifically to stress-test this consideration. If, in fact, marketing departments should be asked to pivot in order to put more focus on existing customers and relationships, how do individual marketers feel about this?

The good news is that 73% of respondents see this as either 'very important' or 'extremely important'. Marketers do seem to have an appetite for flexibility and for leaning into a new challenge.



0% Unimportant/our role is to focus on acquisition

4% Not very important

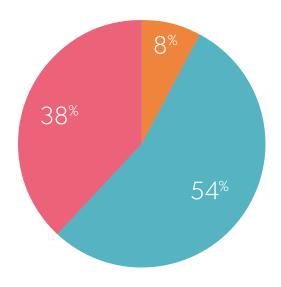
23% Quite important

40% Very important

33% Extremely important

If you answered 'quite important', 'very important' or 'extremely important', how well do you feel marketing teams understand existing customers' new challenges/pain points?

Following on directly from the previous question, for those marketers who do feel confident operating in the new reality and putting a focus on existing customers – who in many cases will have new and revised pain points – we asked how informed and prepared their teams are for actually executing on this. Once again the results were positive and confident, with only 8% feeling their teams have very little knowledge or understanding of customers' new challenges.



0% Not at all

8% Very little knowledge

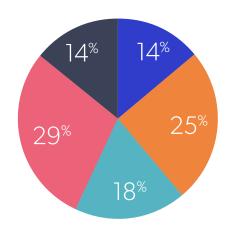
54% Some knowledge

38% Considerable knowledge

0% Don't know

# If you operate a new customer acquisition/demand generation programme, which applies?

In terms of attracting new customers, existing customer acquisition and demand generation programmes do appear to have been hit, both in terms of actual results delivered and perceived confidence in continuing with them. Only 25% report that these activities are continuing as normal with performance unchanged.

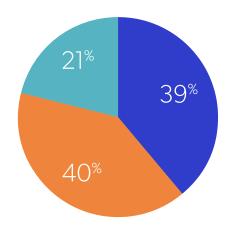


- 14% Increasing effort/budget
- 25% Continuing as normal (performance is unchanged)
- 18% Programme has been paused/suspended
- 29% Under review (performance has reduced)
- 14% Undecided

# Are you already, or do you have a plan to work with customer-facing teams to gather insight on customers' current challenges/pain points?

Good modern marketers will tell you that success is all about data and insight. Given the immediate change in circumstances that marketers themselves have – in this survey – reported experiencing, it's not a great leap to extrapolate that their customers' realities and priorities will also have changed. Understanding this is critical to formulating how best to engage with them.

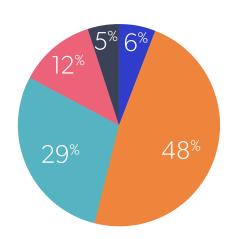
Given this, it is perhaps surprising that 21% of respondents report 'no planned activity' around gaining fresh insight on customers' current challenges.



- 39% There is a programme in place/we are already supporting
- 40% We are working on a plan
- 21% No planned activity

# How challenging are customer-facing teams finding it to engage/have a dialogue with existing customers at the current time?

For those that are committed to engaging with customers to better understand how their pain points have pivoted and what their main concerns are today, the results – for the question of how this activity is going, right now – are split pretty much down the middle. Just under half are finding it challenging to engage, while just over half say that most accounts are engaging okay.



- 6% No challenges/ business as usual
- 48% Some challenges with a few accounts
- 29% It is difficult with most accounts
- 12% Very challenging on all accounts
- 5% Don't know

Prior to the Covid-19 emergency, to what extent did the members of your marketing team work from home (or other places outside the office)?

With lockdown having rapidly necessitated a new normality, operational pressures have changed. However, most businesses have supported people working from home effectively for some time already, as the results show.

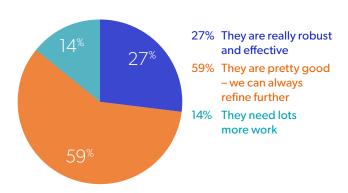
effectively for some time already, as the results show.

19% Not at all
38% One day a week

or less
18% Two days a week
7% Three days a week
3% Four days a week
14% Always
(bar company)

How robust or effective would you say your internal marketing team communication and management processes are?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the results for this question align with the previous one, indicating that the majority of marketing departments are happy with the communication channels and operational processes they already have in place.

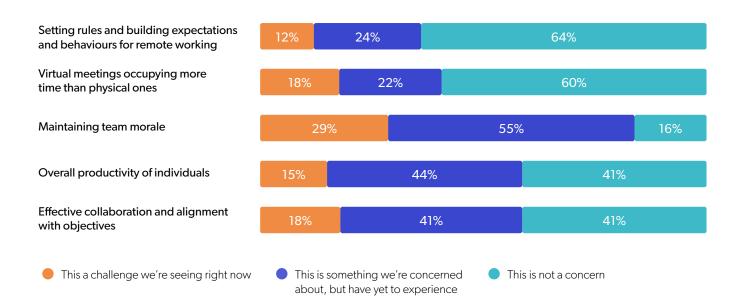


# To what extent are any of the following potential concerns relating to remote working and virtual teams an issue for you?

meetings, etc)

Business under lockdown comes with its own set of expectations and challenges, some of which will only come into focus over the longer-term. In terms of the immediate

effects reported by marketers, the biggest concerns lie in maintaining morale and ensuring the work being done remotely remains aligned with delivery objectives.



To what extent are the skills and competencies of your marketing team aligned with the requirements of marketing under lockdown?

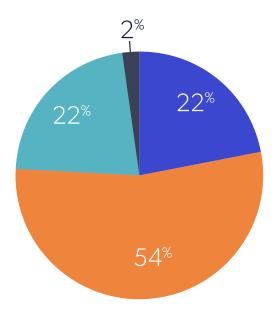
Marketing is reporting a very high level of confidence in the individual abilities of their team members and how they relate to the present situation. 76% say the competencies of their teams are completely or mostly aligned with the requirements of marketing under lockdown.

The digital platforms that we've all become familiar with since the turn of the millennium are now proving nothing less than invaluable to keeping business going. We could also argue that marketing departments are more typically used to collaborating than some other departments, meaning that the change to the demands of the average business day – particularly around added communication and visibility with wider teams – haven't felt too great for them.

To what extent are you seeking to proactively help your team develop their skills and/or marketing knowledge in response to this dramatic change in the working environment?

While the answers to the previous question imply that marketers as a whole haven't identified many gaps in team competencies, it's always good not to be complacent and to be proactive in considering how the new working reality might be used to better advantage. Additionally, some people may find they have a little more time on their hands while at home, and may wish to use this to develop new competencies or sharpen existing ones.

57% of respondents are either actively looking at this from the top level down, or are encouraging their teams to use this period to identify any of their own skills deficiencies. Some marketing departments may remain fearful of the potential impact on productivity or budget – 16% say they're not encouraging requests or training right now.



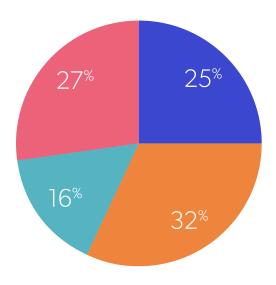


54% Mostly aligned – we have a good skills base, but will have to brush up on some things

22% Partly aligned – we need to fill some skills gaps

0% Barely aligned – we're going to struggle to deliver our marketing

2% I have no idea



25% At a team level, I'm proactively looking at measures to develop skills and competencies

32% Individual members of the team are being encouraged to proactively diagnose their own skills deficiencies, where appropriate

16% We're not encouraging requests or training etc at this time

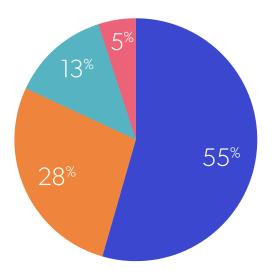
27% We don't have a formal policy for this right now

# At a corporate executive management level, to what extent has marketing been part of the organisation's strategic response to the crisis?

Reponses to previous questions have made clear both the size and immediacy of the challenge. They then pointed to how marketing departments are actually being affected, and how they might respond. We also looked at how, practically and collaboratively, marketing departments feel they can still function under the strictures of lockdown.

So the question then becomes: will marketing really be allowed to make the difference it deserves to and is hungry to, or will it become sidelined as the reality of shrinking revenues kicks in?

The good news here is that marketing departments have felt included in initial response meetings and in formulating strategic planning. The majority have said that marketing was comprehensively included at the executive management level from day one, and able to offer meaningful input and direction. Only 5% of marketers have felt completely sidelined during this initial period.



- 55% Marketing has been 100% involved from day one, providing meaningful input
- 28% Marketing has been involved meaningfully, but only after discussions started
- 13% Marketing's input was sought retrospectively, and the response was dictated from above
- 5% Marketing has not been involved at all

#### The view from the agencies

Without meaning to sound too excited in the face of a global crisis, many of the agencies we've spoken to have found the disruption to be a galvanising force, speeding up change and reinforcing their commitment to being agile and responsive. They've stepped up and stepped in to help the companies they're working with.

Talking about what this initial period has felt like, one agency told us: "It has definitely been an acceleration of transformation. We're absolutely seeing the need for work that would have taken three months happening in three weeks. We need to double-down on being trusted strategic partners for clients. We win because we are agile and nimble."

There are countless ways in which agencies can help. Finding fresh ways of finding the right people, catching their attention and convincing them that you can solve their problems is of course agencies' bread and butter. From our conversations, agencies seem to have a genuine hunger to work with clients as closely as possible at this time – something that lockdown, with its 'digital democratisation' of dispersed teams, supports.

As well as a change in how they work with clients, this period will almost certainly see some changes to the agency landscape itself. Some smaller, specialist agencies may well struggle, while the process of M&As and consolidation of holding company agencies is likely to be accelerated.

# Did your organisation and/or marketing team have a crisis management plan in place?

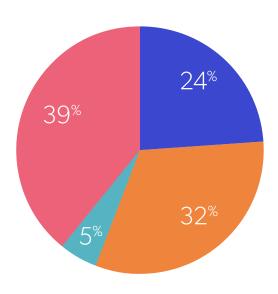
Readers of this report will no doubt have their own subjective responses to the results, being surprised by some and finding others in line with their expectations. The editorial team here at B2B Marketing admit to being somewhat surprised by the fact that crisis planning seems to be so well taken care of by companies from all arenas. No fewer than 56% claim to have had a crisis management plan in place which was either very or partially effective.

One assumption we might permit ourselves is that Covid-19 will prove to have forever changed the way we think about, and actively plan and budget for, unforeseen crises that may represent an existential threat.

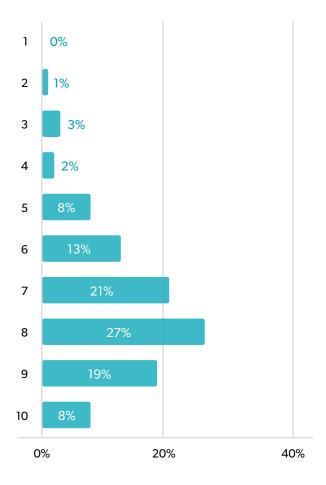
How would you rate your firm's response to Covid-19 in terms of speed and effectiveness on a scale from 1 to 10? (1 being the slowest and least effective)

With 'disruption' and 'agility' being the keywords of this report, it's heartening to end it on a positive note. The vast majority of respondents to our final question around agility consider their organisations to have moved quickly and effectively in response to the crisis.

There's little doubt that the crisis has impressed upon everybody the critical importance of being able to react quickly to changed circumstances. The trick is in keeping everyone strategically aligned to deliver responses which prove effective rather than merely speedy.



- 24% Yes, and it was very effective in this instance
- 32% Yes, but and it was partially effective in this instance
- 5% Yes, but it wasn't effective at all in this instance
- 39% No, we had no crisis management plan



# **Q&A** with Sarah Thomas



Sarah Thomas Marketer/Virologist

# 1. Given your background as a virologist, what kind of impact do you think Covid-19 is going to have on B2B marketing over the next 12 months?

At no point did I think that my two careers – as a virologist and a B2B marketer – would collide. Fast forward to 2020, and our normal is home working, video calls and virtual 'everything', driven by a global pandemic.

During the first part of my career, I worked as a research scientist, studying HIV. The thing that fascinates me about viruses is their simple ability to adapt and evolve at speed to ensure survival. At the core of evolution is a responsiveness to change.

Isn't that what effective marketers do every day? Constantly scanning the horizon for threats and new opportunities, adapting our strategy and programmes, evolving and staying agile to stay ahead of the competition. I think it's in our DNA – both in terms of the way we work and our mindset. The big pandemic-driven change we are dealing with now is in the way we execute some of our programmes.

The pandemic is making us all stop, reframe, reset and to ultimately be more creative about what we do, how we engage our audiences and execute our marketing programmes.

2. What do you think marketers should do in order to prepare best for this period – both in terms of marketing planning, and in terms of their careers and personal aspirations?

The programmes I am most proud of in my personal career are those where I actually had limited budget, a crazy deadline or where the only way was up.

These are also the times when I experienced the most professional growth as a marketer and was challenged to be creative, to think on my feet and be 'scrappy' in my approach.

We are only just at the point of having reliable Covid-19 testing and a vaccine is still many months off. This is the way we will be working for the foreseeable future. It's not 'if', it just 'is'. Everyone is working with what they have and having to pivot programmes that may have been months in the planning. There is limited investment and, in many cases, marketing budgets are flat or have been significantly cut.

The pandemic is giving people permission to start with a blank sheet, to be bold and to experiment with new ideas and new technologies. It's a time of evolution for marketing too.

# 3. What do you think B2B marketing is going to look like when all this is over?

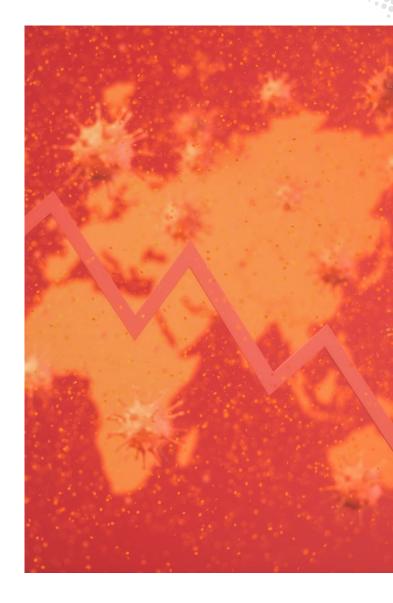
It's hard to focus on the long-term and career when you feel like you are on the business front line as many marketers are at the moment.

I do believe that a personal network of peers has never been more important. Connecting with fellow marketers is a way to share experience, get advice and ideate. There is a great sense of camaraderie and a connected B2B marketing community which has grown recently. More empathy, a generous sharing of ideas and support, and a more meaningful sense of 'all in this together' against a common adversary. This is something we will all benefit from in the future.

There is no doubt that, going forward, we will all be living and working differently. I hope one of the positives is that we see a surge of creativity and innovation. I do think that we are going to see a renewed focus on brand – and what I would call culture. Buyer values have shifted and customers are paying attention to whether companies are living up to their brand values both internally and externally.

For any science geeks out there, this is what I am currently listening to: *This Week in Virology* podcast by Vincent Racaniello from Columbia University.

Vincent has a **channel** dedicated to talking about viruses and also provides great updates on Covid-19.



# Key takeaways

It's not an overstatement to say that Covid-19 has disrupted everything and taken the global business community into unprecedented waters. This report represents the initial response from the business community to Covid-19. The acceleration of change which it has brought with it necessarily means that marketers are already living in the reality which may or may not prove different to their initial hopes and fears. Yet for everything that is currently going better than expected, there will be something that has gone worse; for every company that is finding it harder than expected, there will be other companies seeing some surprising successes. But overall, the findings are unavoidably the same – that Covid-19 represents the biggest challenge the global business community has faced in a lifetime.

To recap, here are some key takeaways:

- The vast majority of companies expect a significant downturn in sales revenue, or say it's too soon to tell. Less than a fifth expect business as usual.
- Marketing activity and marketing budgets have seen an immediate, significant impact.
- Marketers see great value in finding new channels, platforms and strategies through which to engage both existing and new customers during this time.
- Businesses are rapidly changing what they say and how they communicate it.
- Businesses, for the most part, are not changing their use of agencies.
- Marketers feel they have a very important role to play in safeguarding existing customer relationships, rather than keeping a sole focus on creating new ones.

- At corporate executive management level, marketing departments have felt trusted and have been included and consulted around response planning.
- The new reality of working from home is going well for the vast majority of businesses.
- Most businesses did have a crisis plan in place ahead of the pandemic, and found this to be effective.
- Responding quickly is seen as important, and most business have managed to do this

#### The way ahead

Plummeting revenues mean businesses have to avoid financial free-fall. Finding new ways of communicating and innovating are more important than ever. While it's right to hesitate to use the word 'opportunity' when discussing a global crisis which has caused millions of people loss, hardship and uncertainty, seen purely through the lens of the B2B marketing community, this is a time in which marketing can and should step up.

With the exception of the significant challenge represented by reduced or frozen marketing budgets, the results of our survey seem to show clearly that many of the right pieces are in place: marketing departments are trusted and are being consulted; working from home is not proving an insuperable barrier to delivery; teams are generally well-trained and able to be flexible and agile; and the need for speed and for baking-in crisis management to future planning is agreed. It's a time for bravery – a time for marketers to engage with the unprecedented challenge which is here right now.

# **About**

### B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

#### Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research and reports
- Training
- Events
- > Membership.

For more information on any of these products or services go to <u>b2bmarketing.net</u> or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920.

## Snowflake

Snowflake Cloud Data Platform shatters the barriers that prevent organisations from unleashing the true value from their data. Thousands of customers deploy Snowflake to advance their businesses beyond what was once possible by deriving all the insights from all their data by all their business users. Snowflake equips organisations with a single, integrated platform that offers the only data warehouse built for any cloud; instant, secure and governed access to their entire network of data; and a core architecture to enable many other types of data workloads, including a single platform for developing modern data applications.

Snowflake: Data without limits.

Find out more at snowflake.com









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