

# COVID 19 IMPACTS ON DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES: THE CASE OF CATERING SMES IN PORTUGAL

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## ABSTRACT

*Focusing the study's on the implementation of digital marketing strategies by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the catering sector in Portugal during the pandemic period COVID 19, the present investigation aims to understand the impact of this pandemic in the implementation of digital marketing strategies of SMEs, to investigate the depth of implementation of these strategies according to the digital marketing decalogue, and to propose a performance matrix for these SMEs that intend to start efforts in this direction. For this purpose, a qualitative study was carried out, using semi-structured interviews, in a sample collected under the snowball technique, composed of 9 SMEs. It was possible to notice that the current pandemic crisis implied changes in how digital marketing strategies are perceived and applied. It was also found that more than strategies, these SMEs adopted isolated initiatives that combine digital marketing strategies and traditional marketing, and it was also possible to proceed with a set of measures to be implemented by these SMEs that intend to start efforts in this direction.*

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Marketing, Strategy, COVID 19, SMEs, Catering

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, society has undergone major transformation processes, many of which, centred on information technologies, which increasingly present themselves as responsible for the recent changes in the scope of consumption, the promotion of partnerships and intensification of networks business, as well as in the discussion of hegemonic commercial and technological models of innovation production (Castells, 2016; Aarikka-Stenroos & Ritala, 2017). According to these authors, the changes that have been impacting today's society, configuring the information and knowledge era, can be attributed, in large part, to the advent of new communication technologies. In this context of innovation and transformation, the internet provides knowledge and information, facilitates personal relationships, opens new channels of communication in organisations, develops channels of interaction between customers and companies, between producers and consumers and, creating new forms of trade or commercial transactions (Castells, 2016). This interaction between companies and consumers happens, more and more, through digital marketing strategies (Rosenthal, 2017), and the crisis caused by the pandemic COVID 19 accelerated the growth of online commerce, being online commerce considered as one of the components of a digital

marketing strategy, namely by companies that already have a strong presence on the internet and who have achieved a good reputation with their current or potential customers (Hoyos-Estrada & Sastoque-Gómez, 2020). According to Winarsih & Fuad (2021), SMEs can find in this context the opportunity for the much-needed digital transformation, promoting the sustainability of their businesses. However, these authors also argue that some of these companies do not have the skills to undertake these transformations. Due to their size and scarcity of resources, they are also more vulnerable to the pandemic's economic and financial effects COVID 19.

In Portugal, as well as around the world, among the activities that have suffered from this pandemic, we can highlight the catering companies, which make up the tourism chain, and which have been intensely affected due to social isolation necessary to prevent the proliferation of COVID 19 (Finkler et al., 2020).

This research intends to understand how the socio-economic situation caused by COVID 19 pandemic influenced the implementation of digital marketing strategies by SMEs in the restaurant area, according to the digital marketing decalogue and propose a performance matrix to support the SMEs on the implementation of a digital marketing strategy. In this way, it was carried out qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews applied to 9 Portuguese catering SMEs to investigate the marketing strategies adopted during the pandemic. Based on the results obtained and on the relevant literature, we propose a performance matrix for SMEs that intend to implement a marketing digital strategy, according to the digital marketing decalogue.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Digital Marketing and Business Strategy during COVID 19 Pandemic

Several authors (Andrade & Fernandes, 2020; Vilar et al., 2018) have highlighted the importance of digital marketing in business strategy, saying that combining these two aspects can contribute to effective management of the business model since most of the threats and opportunities currently arise from the internet itself. This “new” environment requires managers to implement loyalty and consolidation strategies for current customers and attract new customers, requirements for which small companies' managers will not be particularly adapted (Vasconcelos et al., 2017). Kotler (2000) stated that companies have to be innovative in defining their marketing strategies, guaranteeing that they will face challenges such as competitiveness, customer service, changes in international markets, consumer culture and ethnography. Reporting to digital marketing, Kotler (2016) argues that the digital transformation has enabled companies to compete successfully in the global market through the use of digital platforms that have allowed them to promote proximity to the customer, in its various stages, and the availability of metrics that allow measuring the impact of investment in marketing and communication. Currently, digital platforms provide companies with the supply of content that allows them to evaluate, in an interactive, focused and measurable way, the strategies that are being implemented and their impact on potential customers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016), providing access to events in real-time (Ghotbifar et al., 2017).

Cudriz & Corrales (2020) argues that the current focus on digital marketing allows quick and real-time decision-making, depending on consumers' observed behaviour and the metrics provided by the market. However, these decisions must be consistent with the strategic objectives, under penalty of jeopardising the fulfilment of previously defined goals and objectives. González, et al., (2013); Grove (2015) consider that companies should promote digital transformation, integrating the marketing area and other departments and dimensions of the company, such as creating internal communication channels where employees can share their opinions, anxieties and

motivations. This is about implementing endomarketing techniques, another step in the digital marketing dialogue.

Reporting to the digital marketing adopted by Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), Naves, et al., (2017) states that marketing strategies are not restricted to large organisations. SMEs have been strategically exploring this tool, allowing them to capture consumers' attention increasingly present in a virtual environment. The entry of SMEs into the virtual environment brings them numerous advantages but also challenges. On the one hand, in a virtual environment, consumers will have greater autonomy to compare products. On the other hand, digital marketing allows SMEs to access a more global, more competitive and more profitable market.

Alshaketheep, et al., (2020) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed companies to change their marketing strategy to real and honest marketing, capable of meeting emerging environmental and social challenges worldwide. The authors focus on the consumer's perspective, revealing that they were attracted to offers, anti-crisis agreements, and personalised digital communication actions during the pandemic, which provided empathy for companies. The pandemic has brought structural changes to the way companies operate, particularly concerning their processes and structures (Winarsih et al., 2021). Blockages and local supplies to various supply chains have meant that the global supply chain has become highly fragmented in most sectors and markets (Moreira et al., 2018). In the catering sector's particular case, many companies have become "receptionists" for large restaurants, becoming fast food suppliers and expanding their role to buyers and suppliers.

### **Digital Marketing Cycle or Decalogue**

Ortiz, (2013, 2014 and 2015) developed a digital marketing decalogue, also known as the Digital Marketing Cycle, a tool that analyses the digital market, defining specific actions to implement a digital marketing strategy. It is a practical and effective work methodology that assists in realising marketing campaigns that essentially use the vehicles and resources available on the internet Ortiz (2015). According to Ortiz (2015), it is a blended methodology that combines actions taken in the real world with actions in the virtual environment. This tool is based on applying ten principles, which are assumed to be essential for implementing a marketing strategy, using various resources and languages available in the virtual world, using modern vehicles.

The ten principles or guidelines defined by Ortiz (2013, 2014 and 2015) are as follows: i) research; ii) planning; iii) internal marketing; iv) e-mail shots; v) social networks; vi) blogs; vii) other sites; viii) website or virtual store; ix) optional final finish; and x) result. These guidelines, also evidenced by Zimmerman (2014); Goetten, et al., (2017), are adaptable to the sector, product or service, depending on the need, and the respective order can be changed.

The principle of i) research relates to the part related to the investigation and analysis of the public intended to be reached in a virtual environment to gather the information that allows marketers to solve specific problems that may arise during the research stages. In ii) Planning, the actions to be used to implement the marketing strategy are defined. The iii) Internal marketing is aimed at the company's internal marketing, whose objective is to promote the organisation's image among its employees. Iv) E-mails triggering refers to the systematic dissemination of informational e-mails about the company, which may also take the form of newsletters, which include information about the products or services it transacted. V) social networks aim to create links between the company and consumers, presenting their products spontaneously and informally. On virtual platforms such as vi) In blogs, it is possible to publish content in text or audio and photographs and videos. Vii) Other sites are tools that disseminate the company and its products in digital addresses other than yours. Viii) Website or virtual store is where the consumer visualises the company's product, making purchases through the shopping cart and making the respective payment through a

completely online procedure. Ix) Optional final shot aims to consolidate the marketing campaign, reinforcing the dissemination through traditional media channels, such as television, radio and cinema, and magazines and newspapers, billboards or pamphlets. Finally, the x) Result is the presentation of information (for example, through graphs, tables or surveys) that shows the feedback on the sales of the products offered by the company, and it is possible to learn from there on the future evolution of the company and adopt strategies based on this expected evolution. It is the consequence of applying the previous guidelines.

The emergence of the pandemic COVID 19 has led many companies, namely those in the catering sector, to start selling in a virtual environment. Thus, organisations and their employees must adapt to the use of the internet and take advantage of the virtual tools that are at their disposal and that best suit their business, namely adaptation to the customer, aspects such as cost reduction and profitability, customer relationship and tools used by the competition (Godoy & Daolio, 2017). It should also be noted that, as mentioned by Lombardi, et al., (2020). To Silva, et al., (2019), the application of this digital marketing tool is always relevant, allowing reducing risks and the likelihood of errors. To promote a sustainable performance, Lombardi, et al., (2020) suggest the stabilisation and long timing of employees' contract, incorporating an optimal strategy and the effectiveness of the corporate social responsibility implementation, which nowadays is very valued by the costumers.

Based on the relevant literature and on the exploitation of companies that develop the catering activity in the Centre of Portugal, we assumed the following proposition to our research: According to the digital marketing decalogue, to face the harmful effects on the economic and financial activity caused by the pandemic COVID 19, catering SMEs in Portugal do not use digital marketing strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of this article's objectives, a case study was carried out in SMEs in the area of catering in the Center of Portugal region. It was decided to conduct qualitative research. A set of semi-structured interviews was prepared, with a pre-approved script, but with sufficient openness to change the order of the questions applied to the directors or those responsible for the nine companies considered for the purpose. According to Cavaye (1996), this type of investigation is focused on ascertaining the meanings and understanding of a certain circumstance, and its measurement will not be an initial concern.

The semi-structured interviews script was adapted from Iacovou (2016). The Delphi method was used to validate the script for the semi-structured interviews (Landeta, 2006; Elkington & Lotter, 2013). We invited 7 Portuguese experts/researchers to review the semi-structured interviews script. The validation process started at the beginning of September 2020, ending in the first week of December 2020. The specialists/researchers, after four rounds, unanimously validated the semi-structured interviews. The first set of interview questions dealt with the interviewees' demographic data, their experience, the company's financial data, human and physical resources and a survey of the initiatives associated with digital marketing implemented up to the time of the interview. The second set of questions aimed at ascertaining how the socio-economic situation caused by Covid 19 influenced the implementation of digital marketing strategies by these SMEs. The third set of questions sought depth or the degree of implementation of these strategies. The last group of questions intended to understand which specific measures could be implemented in these SMEs under study, to implement a digital marketing strategy.

We started by contacting four catering companies on December 15, 2020, present at [www.tripadvisor.pt](http://www.tripadvisor.pt). We selected the central region of Portugal and chose five companies at random. The e-mail asked us if they wanted to participate in the study and if the company met the

following criteria: SMEs with less than ten permanent employees, with business volumes of less than 2 million euros, with more than one year of activity and with some digital marketing initiative implemented at the time of the interview, as a way of promoting your products or services. We chose Portugal's central region, as it is a region of low population density, which makes catering companies more difficult to have customers than in large cities. In the third week of December, two companies responded to the e-mail indicating that they could participate in the study. The last interview was done on January 15, 2021. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform.

After doing the nine interviews, we performed the interviews' transcription and analysis according to Duarte (2004). In short, in the first phase, the transcriptions of the interviews were made. Then, coding and tabulation were performed in Microsoft excel 2016 per question. Coding and tabulation facilitated the verification of the interrelationships between the different questions and companies. Finally, we proceeded to analyse and write the results that we present in the next section.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

According to the objectives stated for the present study, the analysis of the results allows us to ascertain, in the first place, that the socio-economic conjuncture caused by Covid 19 influenced the implementation of digital marketing strategies by SMEs in the restaurant area.

First of all, it is important to mention that, although the majority of respondents recognise the importance of the prevalence of some type of marketing strategy for the success of their business activity, when asked about these same strategies in favour of their business, it is possible to realise that they focus on specific initiatives, isolated from a more comprehensive plan, where the objectives are essential to communicate the existence of the business and the products or services they provide. These punctual initiatives, which tend to have greater antiquity in their implementation, focus on the traditional marketing spectrum, having been mentioned as other examples the presence in events such as fairs or outdoor markets, the dissemination of informational flyers, advertising in newspapers or radio local or paid advertising in the form of sponsorship at local popular festivals. They do not target a defined or segmented target audience; they do not aim at the fulfilment of previously defined purposes, goals or objectives other than increasing the number of customers or attracting new customers, which confirms the difficulties in reconciling initiatives of traditional marketing and digital marketing by SMEs, as pointed out by the authors Vilar, et al., (2018); Vasconcelos, et al., (2017).

Despite this sensitivity perceived together with the interviewees for the importance of carrying out these specific activities, it was possible to perceive that the opinion tends to be quite favourable to digital marketing strategies' contribution to these companies' business. This awareness, openness and recognition of potential advantages on entrepreneurs, given the implementation of digital marketing strategies, finds an echo in Kotler (2016); Lamberton & Stephen (2016).

Although some respondents stated that they had already resorted to some digital marketing strategies before the appearance of Covid 19, it was possible to notice that all the cases addressed in this study started efforts to adopt or increase these strategies for the first time, always to bring sustainability to their business or to reduce as much as possible the losses arising from their commercial activity. For this purpose, and as a result of a cost-containment strategy, they tended to resort to family members, friends or acquaintances who knew the area of digital marketing. These efforts increase the volume of business captured directly through marketing strategies, either through the delivery service of meals at home or through the collection of meals over the counter for consumption at home (takeaway). However, this increase in billing does not make up for the losses with the drastic reduction of meals served in person in the restaurant's physical space. From

the testimonies collected, it is important to highlight the difficulty of these interviewees in being able to lower fixed costs related to salaries, rents or loan repayments, in renegotiating long-term contracts with suppliers and also reducing the profitability of meals served at home, either by increasing expenses of transport, when the same is done through the company itself, or by paying the commission when distribution companies do the transport. Thus, it is possible to see how much the current situation has determined the change in the model of this type of business and its influence on the adoption of digital marketing strategies, which is in line with Finkler, et al., (2020).

Although these are the most general considerations in the testimonies of the interviewees about the role of mitigating the financial imbalance of their companies due to the implementation of digital marketing strategies, it is interesting to highlight the importance that the provision of quality meals, since exposure, particularly on social networks, is seen by them as a potential threat, in the sense that they can create currents or waves of negative criticism, from which it will be extraordinarily difficult to escape. Moreira, et al., (2018) had alerted us to the existence of these two sides of the coin that the great public visibility obtained by the growth of the business, based on digital marketing strategies, can originate. These operational changes are in line with the contributions of Alshaketheep (2020), who indicate that companies of this type should adapt their methodology, operations and strategies, in the new contexts of social and economic uncertainty caused by the COVID pandemic 19.

The second objective of the present study concerns the determination of the degree of depth of implementing the digital marketing strategies adopted by these SMEs in the area of catering, taking as reference the digital marketing decalogue. From the analysis of the results, it is possible to notice that, more than strategies, there are specific efforts or specific initiatives in the scope of digital marketing. This tendency begins to be seen when it is noticed that, in general, these SMEs did not start this process, starting with research or planning, as suggested by Zimmerman (2014). In essence, there were no efforts to analyse the organisation's internal and external activities, to outline the public's segmentation objectives, to define the company's positioning, to select the marketing mix tools, to select the action tools, to determine a budget, schedule and control and evaluation elements. The cyclical need or the sense of opportunity prevails with these interviewees as a driving force for concrete actions in this area. In addition to this lack of planning, there is a tendency to the absence of digital marketing initiatives directed specifically to the interior of the company, as suggested by Godoy & Daolio (2017), to promote ideas, projects and values useful to the company, which stimulate the acceptance of the mission, objectives, strategies and tactics of the business, which can be associated with mental models, ensuring continuous information and feedback, providing a stimulus to the participation of all those involved in the process.

Then, it was possible to notice that the practice of sending informational e-mails or newsletters was quite reduced in these companies, as suggested by Ortiz (2015). According to the interviewees, it is only occasionally associated with specific commemorative dates or events that some testimonies point in this direction. With the lack of this digital marketing practice, it was possible to realise the failure to use one of the most popular and efficient ways in the continuous supply of information to your audience and the creation of leads. Concerning social networks, all respondents claim to have adopted these as their preferred digital tools. The use of these tools is suggested by Ortiz (2015) as one of the most important steps in the digital marketing decalogue. In the present study, it is possible to ascertain that these companies' presence is frequent in more than one social network, with Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter being the most popular for this purpose. The reasons for the adoption of these social networks as vehicles where the essentials of the digital marketing strategies of these companies are based focus on the zero-membership cost, the potential to provide sales, the ease of use, the reach of a theoretically unlimited audience current or potential, lead creation potential and real-time feedback.

About content, there is great diversity, and it is possible to find testimonies that point to the use of text, images, sound, live videos and artistic photos. There is also a tendency for these publications to be associated with anniversaries or other contexts that leverage communication to a higher level of notoriety. It was also possible to verify with the interviewees that there was no use of other digital tools, as suggested by Ortiz (2015), who favour the dissemination of news, reports or opinion articles, that no interviewee whose company does not yet have a website, took advantage of this socio-economic situation to create it, as suggested by Zimmerman (2014), and that no interviewee associated his company to other speciality sites or entities in the restaurant, tourism or leisure activity sector, as proposed by Ortiz (2015). On the other hand, concerning the association of the digital marketing strategy with other traditional marketing campaigns, there is a great diversity of initiatives, demonstrating that this is a practice that occurs frequently and regularly, as suggested by Ortiz (2014). Also, in these initiatives, extreme care is taken not to waste financial resources on these entrepreneurs' part. Finally, it was possible to notice that there is a set of indicators analysed by these companies and that allow them to analyse the impact of the implementation of the adopted digital marketing strategies, as suggested by Zimmerman (2014). These indicators include the volume of sales translated into monetary value, the number of meals served, the number of negative and positive comments on social networks, or the number of customers who place more than one order and translate into the customer loyalty rate. There is also a trend towards implementing customer follow-up initiatives in the post-sale and determining the degree of customer satisfaction.

According to the third objective of the study and taking into account the results obtained so far, Table 1 presents the measures to be implemented to increase digital marketing strategies in the present study's target companies.

<b>Table 1 MEASURES TO BE IMPLEMENTED</b>	
<b>Digital marketing decalogue step</b>	<b>Measures to implement</b>
Search	Collect information such as gastronomic preferences, food tastes and habits, types of meals that customers buy most, how much money they spend on average on a meal. This information can be obtained through questionnaires sent to customers and potential customers, <i>via</i> e-mail or available on portals, websites and social media, a survey conducted through Google Analytics to verify the most visited pages on websites, blogs and social networks. A complementary collection of information regarding the competition and the market in general, such as legal or ethical aspects.
Planning	Filling in a traditional SWOT matrix and defining the online Media Plan contains specific actions to be performed, dates, times, responsible persons, etc. Quantitative and qualitative indicators of campaign success should also be defined.
Endo marketing	Create an internal online media plan and use the Intranet, task management software, and social media. Training and lectures can be held for company employees, to explain the characteristics of the products and services to be sold or how to offer them.
E-mail shots or newsletters	Send institutional e-mails and newsletters about products and services with relevant information for the target audience. Send e-mails regarding holidays (Example: Mother's or Father's Day). Send product marketing e-mails, which directly offer the company's products and services). The body of the e-mail must be linked <i>via</i> hyperlink to the company's website, blog and media partners.
Social media	Increase social networks by promoting products or other services that bring the company closer to the customer, creating virtual events or offering prizes. It is suggested the use of competitions or cooperative campaigns, which encourage cooperation between Internet users, and not only competitive campaigns with individual winners.
Blogs	Launch of relaxed posts that create relationships and not just sales. Reinforcement of content

	with several pages, animated banners, different applications.
Membership to other sites	Enrol the company in several research sites, portals, directories, blogs, and partner sites so that the client can reach the company's virtual address through links.
Own website/virtual store	Provision of its website, as a more institutional and formal tool, containing information such as who the company is, the list of all products and services, customers and partners or suppliers.
Complement with traditional marketing	Reinforcement of the strategy through messages in advertisements in traditional physical vehicles such as TV, radio, magazines and printed newspapers, cinema, billboards, etc. Events, product launches, use of stands, courses and lectures on the products or services offered.
Result analysis	Verification of statistical and qualitative indicators on the website, blog or social networks. Particular attention should be paid to the number of people who visit the website, online store, blog and social network, the sales conversion index, the rejection index, the number of sites and blogs that indicate the company's website, the number of negative and positive comments on blogs and social media and customer loyalty rate. The post-sale and customer loyalty actions <i>via</i> the web must also be analysed. Statistical indicators must be defined and sales, such as customer satisfaction level, number of clicks on a specific communication action, increase in the organisation's reputation and the return on investment rate.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study allowed us to realise that the harmful effects caused by the pandemic Covid 19, to which the SMEs of the catering sector in Portugal were not unaware, implied changes in how these entrepreneurs perceive and apply digital marketing strategies to the digital marketing decalogue. Gradually, these companies tend to give up isolated initiatives associated with traditional marketing to promote their activity and their products and tend to incorporate initiatives associated with digital marketing. The driving force behind these changes is centred on the need for these entrepreneurs to find sustainability for their businesses or reduce as much as possible the losses resulting from their commercial activity. In this context, digital marketing tools tend to be free, easy to handle and manage and allow great interactivity with the target audience, and they become the preferred ones for this type of SMEs. The benefits arising from the implementation of these initiatives associated with Digital Marketing are recognised, even though the profits from them are not sufficient to compensate for the losses associated with the new business model, based on the delivery of meals at home or in a takeaway regime, ceasing to exist face-to-face meal service in the room or at the restaurant counter. The difficulty of lowering fixed operating costs, the need to reallocate physical, material and human resources, and the introduction of services such as transportation and packaging of meals, give rise to costs that are not offset by the public support that the government has been channelling to companies in the sector.

The context caused by the increase in public visibility and interactivity with its current and potential customers leads to the need for a qualitative increase in the service provided and, in the products, sold by these companies. For these entrepreneurs, there is a fear of waves of negative criticism that could destroy the company's reputation, which translates into the need for immediate investment, not matched by the availability of liquidity or additional facilities for accessing bank credit. This urgent scenario means that more than the implementation of digital marketing strategies, these entrepreneurs see some of the initiatives contemplated in this area as “lifebuoys” for immediate use in social emergency times.

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