# THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL CONTENT IN A DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY

## Ladislava KNIHOVÁ

PhDr. Ladislava Knihová, MBA
Faculty of Business Administration
Prague University of Economics and Business
Winston Churchill sq. 1938/4
160 69 Prague
Czech Republic
ladislava.knihova@vse.cz

Ladislava Knihová studied Linguistics at Charles University in Prague, specialising in English and Russian, earning a doctoral degree (PhDr.) in Philology and Teaching Instruction. After graduating, she worked in the diplomatic service and, since 2009, has been working for The University of Finance and Administration as an Assistant Professor. Currently, she is the Deputy Head of the Department of Language. She also works as a corporate trainer. Her former and current clients include Harley-Davidson, DHL, ING Bank and HUHTAMAKI. She has published numerous articles on learning technologies, teaching English as a foreign language and marketing. She participates in international conferences. Ladislava Knihová focuses on digital and social media marketing, as well as teaching English as a second language and English for specific purposes. In 2017, she earned an MBA, a professional degree, specialising in Marketing and PR. Currently, she is studying at The Prague University of Economics and Business on the PhD. programme in Marketing. She speaks English, Russian and German, along with some Arabic and Chinese.

## ABSTRACT:
Being under the pressure of uncertain times, galloping technology and dynamic changes in customer behaviour, companies hold their business managers accountable for fostering greater organisational achievements. While marketing budgets are shrinking, marketing professionals must deal with ongoing media fragmentation and declining advertisement performance. In their attempt to seek innovative communication channels, companies have started to recognise the high potential of customer education. This study's objective is to identify, analyse and interpret the role of educational content in a digital marketing strategy. Educational content, formats and platforms are examined with the aim of suggesting efficient changes in the design of digital communication strategies appropriate to technology brands. The author has devised a Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model as a tool for companies to carry out a reliable internal audit of digital communication processes. Based on the Fogg Behaviour Model, new types of customer relationships can be built with the help of relevant educational content which has been carefully crafted and adapted for customer-immersive learning. The insight into educational content implementation in technology brands' digital communication represents an added value to this study. To further elaborate on the topic, the author suggests new opportunities for future research as well as specific research avenues.

## KEY WORDS:
content marketing, customer success, customer-immersive learning, digital communication maturity, digital marketing strategy, educational content, education-based marketing, software-as-a-service

## 1 Introduction

The speed of technological progress influences every aspect of our lives. For more than ten years, companies' agendas have been dominated by the digital transformation of business processes. In every industry, new technological applications are used to collect a massive amount of data and many organisations are trying to convert data into real value.[1] However, it was not until spring 2020 – influenced by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic – that it became clear which companies were ready for digital

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[1] LAVALLE, S. et al.: Big Data, Analytics and the Path from Insights to Value. In *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 2011, Vol. 52, No. 2, p. 21.

operations (i.e., with fully functioning digital communication channels) and which were not. Besides, even companies with a highly developed digital infrastructure had to react swiftly to an increased demand for digital communication. The economic lockdown prompted a giant leap forward in most organisations' digital transformation.

This study's objective is to identify, analyse and interpret the role of educational content and customer education implemented by technology brands in their current marketing practice. Educational content, formats and platforms will be examined with the aim of suggesting an innovative and efficiently composed digital communication mix for technology products and brands. The author devises and presents a Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model as a tool for companies to carry out a reliable audit of digital communication processes, channels and levels of digitalisation. Simultaneously, basic preconditions for the seamless integration of digital customer education into the content marketing strategy will be suggested. Last but not least, the author will discuss basic strategies and principles for creating compelling digital customer experiences in the technology sector.

Many researchers and subject matter experts have examined companies' digital transformations. *The Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT), a private university based in Cambridge (USA), states in its world-renowned journal, *The MIT Sloan Management Review*: "*Although organizations can never be fully prepared for an unanticipated shock, the most resilient ones learn to expect the unexpected, rebound quickly when it occurs, and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities that emerge.*"[2]

By definition, technology brands could be expected to be better prepared for any kind of technology-related challenges. In the global challenge insights report *The Future of Jobs,* the *World Economic Forum* has confirmed that 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025, reminding the global community that there is not only a lack of technical skills but soft skills as well.[3]

However, the coronavirus pandemic 'shuffled the cards' and, consequently, all companies had to start playing the game while learning new rules on-the-fly. Almost without any warning, the macroeconomic impact of COVID-19 froze – or even regressed – economic activity across the world. Simultaneously, it posed unparalleled challenges to policymakers and business leaders.

There is no standard or simple recipe for adapting digital technology to achieve a business advantage. However, it is more important today than ever before to acquire new digital skills to exploit innovative technologies effectively. In addition to having digitally competent employees, having a leadership team with the right digital skills is also critically important. The latest research into digital savviness confirms that large enterprises with digitally savvy executive teams outperform their competitors with non-digitally savvy leadership teams by more than 48% (in terms of revenue growth and valuation). The authors of this research also define a digitally savvy top leadership team as a team with more than half its members possessing digital skills.[4]

In 2017, the *American Marketing Association* approved the latest version of the definition of marketing as follows: "*Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.*"[5] If there is a business sector offering added value to customers via various marketing strategies it is the IT industry and technology brands. Their marketing strategies focus on customer education which goes far beyond the promotion of a particular software programme.

# 2 Digital Customer Learning Experience

Technology has also profoundly changed the way marketers promote technology brands and their products. The enormous amount of data on customer behaviour that is now available makes marketing much more efficient and predictable. We have to realise and appreciate that "*fundamentally, it (i.e., the technology) allows for new ways to create customer experiences, new mediums to connect with customers and other constituents, and trillions of data points to understand customer behavior and the impact of marketing programs and activities.*"[6]

Used both efficiently and in a creative way, technology can boost marketing practices remarkably. In their latest book on the role of technology, Kotler et al. not only introduce marketers to the benefits of digitalisation but specify five ways in which technology can enhance marketing. These ways are that marketers: (1) can make more informed decisions based on big data, (2) predict outcomes of marketing strategies and tactics, (3) bring the contextual digital experience to the physical world, (4) augment frontline marketers' capacity to deliver value and (5) speed-up marketing execution.[7] The enormous amounts of data propelled by artificial intelligence help marketers evaluate real-time data based on customer behaviour. This gives them the chance to profile customers at a granular level and prepare truly immersive personalised digital experiences for them.

The omnichannel nature of marketing today necessitates re-skilling marketers with new digital skills so that they can prepare truly immersive and engaging experiences for their customers. In their book, Pine and Gilmore call this "transformational experience".[8] With the high complexity of technology products, it is increasingly the educational content that lies at the core of the communication message. This content must be carefully designed to help customers overcome the pitfalls that prevent the smooth acquisition of knowledge and skills while they are trying to master the complexities of these technological products.

If technology brands really want to take advantage of the unforeseen opportunities that are emerging, there has never been better time than now. Many producers have already transformed their software products into "software-as-a-service" (SaaS) cloud solutions. The typical technological solution is a cloud application complemented with a subscription service business model. This allows customers to access the computing power on-demand, benefit from data storage space and save money on maintenance. From the legal point of view, disregarding the form of monetisation (usually a subscription model), SaaS providers continue to be owners of the software, being responsible for its upgrade and maintenance. Saltan and Smolander identify traditional software vendors (*Adobe, Google*) and newly "*born-in-the-cloud*" SaaS companies for which just one cloud app is typical (*Dropbox*).[9] There is a substantial change of categories from goods to services, from a customer to a client, from a one-off purchase to continuous relations with the service vendor. Closer and more frequent relations with clients offer more opportunities for augmentation by offering added value. As a rule, clients appreciate it and even start actively looking for it. Consequently, there are more opportunities for marketing communications with customers based on educational content.

Avramescu offered his opinion on changes related to cloud solutions: "*The Cloud didn't just change how people used software; it changed the way people learned. Instead of getting trained in classrooms, customers' learning experience could align to their product experience through single sign-on (SSO). Customers could be trained through online academies and earn certificates.*"[10]

As a result, technology brands do not just sell their "software-as-a-service". They sell an augmented product. Their marketing teams complement the usual portfolio of content marketing outcomes (e-books,

2     COX, D. R., RASPIN, P. G., TEECE, D. J.: Plotting Strategy in a Dynamic World. In *MIT Sloan Management Review,* 2020, Vol. 62, No. 1, p. 28.
3     WHITING, K.: *These Are the Top 10 Job Skills of Tomorrow – And How Long It Takes to Learn Them.* Released on 21st October 2020. [online]. [2021-03-05]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/>.
4     WEILL, P., WORNER, S. L., SHAH, A. M.: Does Your C-Suite Have Enough Digital Smarts? In *MIT Sloan Management Review,* 2021, Vol. 69, No. 3, p. 64.
5     AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION: *Definitions of Marketing.* [online]. [2021-03-05]. Available at: <https://www.ama.org/the-definition-of-marketing-what-is-marketing/>.

6     LEWNES, A., KELLER, K. L.: *10 Principles of Modern Marketing.* Released on 3rd April 2019. [online]. [2021-03-10]. Available at: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/10-principles-of-modern-marketing/>.
7     KOTLER, P., KARTAJAYA, H., SETIAWAN, I.: *Marketing 5.0: Technology for Humanity.* Hoboken : Wiley, 2021, p. 10-12.
8     PINE, B. J. II., GILMORE, J. H.: *The Experience Economy: Competing for Customer Time, Attention, and Money.* Boston : Harvard Business Review Press, 2019, p. 227.
9     SALTAN, A., SMOLANDER, K.: Bridging the State-of-the-Art and the State-of-the-Practice of SaaS Pricing: A Multivocal Literature Review. In *Information and Software Technology,* 2021, Vol. 133, 106510. [online]. [2021-03-05]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2021.106510>.
10    AVRAMESCU, A.: *Customer Education: Why Smart Companies Profit by Making Customers Smarter.* Seattle : Amazon Digital Services – KDP Print US, 2019, p. 25.

blogs, and whitepapers) with educational content which becomes the basis for designing, strategizing and formulating education-based marketing campaigns. Avramescu believes that content marketing and customer education should not contradict but, rather, enhance each other.[11] Customer expectations are high. So, the portfolio of services within the augmented products sold as "software-as-a-service" can serve more purposes. Above all, product augmentation is a marketing strategy which makes the particular brand more valuable for the customer, usually by adding a set of intangible features and additional services.[12] It is a powerful strategy which can differentiate a brand from competitors.

Apart from the SaaS business model, technology companies adopted a further approach towards educational content and its barrier-free and free-of-charge dissemination among their customers. The new trend can be exemplified by the growing popularity of *Today at Apple*, an education-based campaign by *Apple*,[13] along with numerous education content marketing campaigns emerging shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with focus on a variety of educational topics, including social distancing. Their impact was huge and their authors and marketing teams used various types of educational content and platforms for distribution (including educational videos distributed via *YouTube*).

In the next chapter, the study focuses on the latest developments in the theoretical background of the customer education phenomenon. The chapter aims to identify the key concepts and evaluate the progress of knowledge in the researched area. It is necessary to adopt a structured approach to address the issue in all its complexity. Apart from the frequently researched topic of customer loyalty, the author introduces the phenomenon of customer education encompassing customer expertise, customer engagement and customer readiness as stages on the customer journey to embrace and use cutting-edge technologies with confidence.

# 3 Theoretical Background

In recent years, scientific research has studied technology brands' corporate practice, especially looking into their marketing communications. One of the most popular variables on the researchers' agenda is customer loyalty, viewed in the context of the relationship involving the company and its customers. An international team of researchers has examined customer loyalty in terms of the impact of proactive customer education on a company's ability to retain customers.[14] The term "proactive customer education" refers to educational opportunities that take place long before the customer subscribes to a particular service or buys a product (e.g., when considering buying a complex software programme, clarifying its features and creating a unique user experience can be a strong motivation to buy). Based on the results of their experiment in customer technology support, the study has revealed two positive findings: (1) the churn rate, i.e., the number of outgoing customers in the first week of using the technology service, decreased by half, and (2) the number of questions to which technical support had to respond decreased by 19.55% in the first week of using the purchased technology service. These figures transparently prove the important economic impact of proactive customer education used in technology-oriented service providers' promotional activities, notably focusing on proactive educational opportunities for customers.

Barrier-free access to analytical data (*Google Analytics* complemented by *Google Tag Manager* or *Facebook Pixel* and/or similar apps) provides companies with precise data. This includes data that serves as an early warning signal, pointing towards changes in customer loyalty. Nowadays, it has become more difficult for companies to retain customers and maintain customer loyalty. This might be one of the reasons why marketing managers focus on *customer engagement*. However, we have to understand that *"(...) unlike traditional relational concepts, including 'involvement' and 'participation', customer engagement is based on the existence*

of a customer's interactive, co-creative experiences with a specific engagement object (e.g., a brand). The concepts of 'involvement' and 'participation,' therefore, may be viewed as customer engagement antecedents, rather than dimensions."[15]

Behavioural psychology, as a cross-disciplinary social science, provides the theoretical background to an individual's reactions to external stimuli and responses to environment. Behaviour analysis, as a comprehensive approach, focuses on discovering principles and laws that govern the behaviour of organisms.[16] Behavioural psychologist, Brian Jeffrey Fogg, the founder of *Stanford University's Behavior Design Lab*, developed the "Fogg Behavior Model". According to this model, engagement in certain behaviours depends on *motivation, ability and a trigger*.[17] In the process of designing a compelling digital learning experience, customers are in an identical situation to any other learner. Therefore, when transferring the model into marketing communication, marketing professionals should understand their customers' *motivations* (a desire to do something), *abilities* (the means to do something) and *potential triggers* (a prompt, an event that causes a behaviour) underlying customers' learning behaviour[18] (see Figure 1).
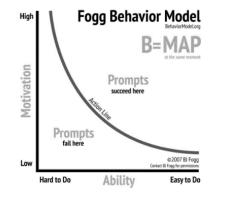


*Figure 1: Fogg Behavior Model*
*Source: FOGG, B. J.: Fogg Behavior Model. [online]. [2021-01-12]. Available at: <https://behaviormodel.org/>.*

In his explanation, Fogg writes: *"High motivation will result in action even if ability is relatively low (but not zero) and actions that are easy can occur even if motivation is relatively low (but not zero). The model provides a framework to understand the idiom 'willing and able'."*[19]

Educational content and free educational opportunities help customers increase their customer expertise. Consequently, customers' readiness to invest money into complex technological solutions becomes an informed decision, in contrast to their more intuitive decision-making process if no educational support is provided. Expert customers are even less sensitive to price.[20] The individual stages of *customer expertise, engagement* and *readiness* represent key concepts within customer education, as shown in Figure 2.

11     AVRAMESCU, A.: *Customer Education: Why Smart Companies Profit by Making Customers Smarter*. Seattle : Amazon Digital Services – KDP Print US, 2019, p. 37.
12     RABEEL: *5 Best Examples of an Augmented Product*. [online]. [2021-03-05]. Available at: <https://inaugment.com/augmented-product/>.
13     *Today at Apple at Home*. [online]. [2021-03-05]. Available at: <https://www.apple.com/today/>.
14     RETANA, G. F., FORMA, C., WU, D. J.: Proactive Customer Education, Customer Retention, and Demand for Technology Support: Evidence from a Field Experiment. In *M&SOM: Manufacturing & Service Operations Management*, 2015, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 34-50.

15     BRODIE, R. J. et al.: Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research. In *Journal of Service Research*, 2011, Vol. 14, No. 3, p. 264.
16     PIERCE, W. D., CHENEY, C. D.: *Behavior Analysis and Learning: A Biobehavioral Approach*. London : Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, p. 3.
17     DAM, N., MASIE, E.: *Elevating Learning & Development: Insights and Practical Guidance from the Field*. New York : McKinsey & Company, 2018, p. 143.
18     DAM, N., MASIE, E.: *Elevating Learning & Development: Insights and Practical Guidance from the Field*. New York : McKinsey & Company, 2018, p. 144.
19     FOGG, B. J.: *Fogg Behavior Model*. [online]. [2021-01-12]. Available at: <https://behaviormodel.org/>.
20     ZHANG, J., ZHANG, J., ZHANG, M.: From Free to Paid: Customer Expertise and Customer Satisfaction on Knowledge Payment Platforms. In *Decision Support Systems*, 2019, Vol. 127, 113140.

**Customer education**

Key concepts



*Figure 2: Customer education – key concepts*
*Source: Own processing*

If delivered properly, educational content lying in the core of a marketing message can be perceived and appreciated as an added value by prospects and customers. There are more studies dealing with customer engagement. For example, in the recent empirical analysis by Chen et al. on the impact of customer expertise on customer engagement, the authors claim that *"customer perceived value has a positive impact on customer engagement; customer expertise has a positive effect on customer perceived value and customer engagement; perceived value plays an intermediary role in customer expertise and customer engagement"*.[21] We fully agree with the study's authors that the above-mentioned research results are of great significance for companies to guide the implementation of customer education.

In 2014, in their study, Jaakkola and Alexander attempted to conceptualise the role of customer engagement behaviour in value co-creation. They aggregated four types of customer engagement behaviour and their connection to value co-creation: (1) *augmenting behaviour* (manifested in customers posting in social media or e.g., customers inventing alternate uses for a product); (2) *co-developing behaviour* (manifested in customers giving ideas for new or improved products and services, or customer participation in the test use of a new product); (3) *influencing behaviour* (e.g. customers provided word-of-mouth or blogging about their experience with certain products or firms, or recommending them), (4) *mobilising behaviour* (e.g. customers influencing/convincing other customers to donate money or boycott a product). This study is a clear manifestation of consumer engagement, be it in the form of user-generated content or a model example of engagement behaviour.[22]

Our study deals with technology brands' digital communication. Therefore, "customer readiness" – the third key concept examined by the author within the scope of customer education – can be translated as "technology readiness". For marketing professionals working with technology brands, this means understanding people's propensity to embrace cutting-edge technologies and use them with ease, e.g., software-as-a-service delivered as cloud solutions. This idea is well-documented in the research on technological readiness by Blut and Wang.[23] The authors conceptualised "technology readiness" as a two-dimensional construct, differentiating between motivators (innovativeness, optimism) and inhibitors (insecurity, discomfort). Managerial implications suggested by the authors highlight the idea that *"service firms introducing technologies to mass markets must educate customers about the benefits, otherwise customers only*

rely on their general technology beliefs when deciding about technology use".[24] In harmony with the findings of this research, customers in a state of high technology readiness benefit more from customer support than do customers who are low in technology readiness.

We are fully convinced that the idea of "customer readiness" (here, technology readiness) as a result of customers' education is fully transferrable to any business sector. Before proceeding to the key chapters on the state-of-the-art developments in technology brands' educational content-focused digital communications, it is worth mentioning customer education at premium technology brands. For example, the global company, *Apple*, has been extremely active in customer education. Since 2017, it has organised 18,000 free educational labs worldwide weekly under the programme *Today at Apple*. Locally, *ACREA CR*, an exclusive provider of IBM SPSS statistical software and other 'software-as-a-service' technological solutions, can serve as a typical example of a technology brand which has been deeply involved in customer education for more than two decades, offering free seminars and webinars related to the context in which their products can be used.

# 4 Customer Education Provided by Premium Technology Brands

An educated customer is a better customer. As a result of education, the customer journey can be dramatically shortened, conversion rates are higher and product adoption is faster. A long time ago, technology companies in general – and software vendors specifically – realised the importance of customer education. Marketing strategies based on content marketing with a focus on customer education has proved beneficial for many software brands. Aiming to build a strong and high-quality relationship with customers, many software vendors organise free seminars and webinars for potential customers long before their customers seriously consider purchasing their 'software-as-a-service' solutions.

Industry-specific customer education has existed for more than two decades. It is generally acknowledged that software vendors find it difficult to sell their products unless they work intensively on the content and promotion of their professional training and other educational events. However, currently, there is a remarkable shift in educational activities from those that were originally exclusively focused on accompanying customers through their journey to purchase a product, to those that are more relevant to building deeper relationships with the customers – often a long time before the actual purchase. At the same time, the corporate educational activities' portfolio provided by the company is much wider, more attractive and oriented to customers' specific current needs. For marketing professionals, it is important to realise that technology brands/companies are engaged in creating educational content that is focused on a much broader context than merely concentrating on the company's products and their functions. Accordingly, it is their task to design education-based marketing strategies for these clients. Many technology brands offer free educational seminars and webinars at both pre-purchase and post-purchase stages by their subject matter experts, or they hire experienced professionals in their field of expertise. These technology brands implement educational content into their marketing strategies with huge success.

Other important aspects of the successful implementation of educational content are timely managerial decisions on the selection of an efficient mix of innovative platforms and formats, e.g., e-books, educational blogs and vlogs, educational e-mails, online forums, social media channels, live video on *Facebook* or other platforms, educational/explainer/animated/whiteboard videos on *YouTube*, webinars, podcasts, seminars, full-scale video production, hybrid formats of 'documercials' or 'infomercials', etc.

However, it is important to realise that technology is just the first step. It is a vehicle that can help create and deliver compelling digital experiences. It provides tools that allow marketing professionals to use their creative juices to build new types of customer relationships. In their article for *MIT Sloan Management*

21      CHEN, J., LIU, J., CHEN, M.: A Study on the Impact of Customer Expertise on Customer Engagement. In XU, J. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Conference on Management Science and Engineering Management*. Chişinău : Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020, p. 243-258.
22      JAAKKOLA, E., ALEXANDER, M.: The Role of Customer Engagement Behavior in Value Co-Creation: A Service System Perspective. In *Journal of Service Research*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 254-255.
23      BLUT, M., WANG, C.: Technology Readiness: A Meta-Analysis of Conceptualizations of the Construct and Its Impact on Technology Usage. In *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2020, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 649-669.

24      BLUT, M., WANG, C.: Technology Readiness: A Meta-Analysis of Conceptualizations of the Construct and Its Impact on Technology Usage. In *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2020, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 666.

*Review*, Lewnes and Keller characterise this relationship as follows*: "The reality of customer-brand relationships today is that they have evolved from single, interspersed interactions to always-on, symbiotic, and immersive relationships."*[25] Building immersive relationships in the process of informal immersive learning with the use of state-of-the-art educational content is an innovative marketing approach which is beginning to take shape. Although the term "education-based marketing" is still embryonic, education-based marketing strategy is worth implementing in a wider context than merely in technology brand marketing. 'Software-as-a-service', cloud solutions and/or subscription models, together with educational, inspirational and good cause campaigns, have been standard marketing practices for many technology brands for some time. Among these brands, there are global players including *Adobe, Netflix, Samsung* and *Apple,* as well as Czech technology brands represented by *ACREA CR* (also operating in Slovakia), or *Solitea Czech Republic* (formerly *Cígler Software*). However, prior to creating, delivering, curating and sustaining educational content, it is advisable to assess the overall digital communication readiness and maturity of a company.

# 5 Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model (DCMAM)

One of the most comprehensive studies on digital transformation, with numerous examples from business management as well as academic research – *New Trends in Business Information Systems and Technology: Digital Innovation and Digital Business Transformation*[26] offers the following insight into this complex topic: *"Everywhere, examples of good practice in the field of digitalization appear again and again, which aim to promise a change of the world, stimulated partly by new technologies, partly by business/management/societal needs, often by both. A promising way to identify possible next disruptive leaps in today's age of digital change is to continuously and profoundly explore a broad variety of examples."*[27]

The process of companies' digital transformation is inevitable – in line with *Apple*'s iconic claim of "Think different". In today's digital era, if they want their companies to survive, business leaders must learn how to perceive things differently, act differently and deliver engaging digital communication within omni-channel marketing. Digitalisation penetrates all aspects of business operations, from strategy to technology. Digital communication is an important part of the whole process. However, before taking any strategic decisions on transforming a particular brand's digital communication, it is important to carry out an audit of the existing digital communication's maturity level.

In line with the focus of this study, the author would like to highlight the importance of a brand digital communication assessment in relation to its customers' digital maturity. This should precisely identify customer requirements through their typical behaviour patterns, e.g., mainly on social media. As a result, we can identify digital customers' needs regarding content, formats and digital communication platforms. Besides, we can decide with confidence on the most suitable social media presence for our company.

Although there are differences in the design and focus of companies' digital marketing communications, common ground for assessing their digital communications can be established. Therefore, we propose a Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model (DCMAM). This has been devised in the form of a set of closed-ended questions, Likert scale questions and multiple-choice questions, as shown in Table 1, Parts 1 – 3 below. Based on the literature review, the thorough examination of educational content formats and platforms, and inspired by *Scriptura Engage* and its 5-item questionnaire dealing with digital maturity assessment of customer communication in SMEs, the DCMAM was substantially extended and focused on

educational content. It has been proposed (1) to enable an internal audit of a company's readiness for digital communication and (2) to serve as a benchmark for competitor analysis.

By allocating weighted points to each research question, the Digital Communication Maturity Index (DCM Index) can be calculated as explained below. Due to the dynamic development of marketing communication, the DCMAM should be revisited and updated at regular intervals.

*Table 1: Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model – Parts 1 – 3*

**Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model – Part 1**
**YES/ NO/ PLANNED**

| | Sample questions<br>YES = 2 points; NO = 0 points;<br>Planned = 1 point; W = weighted average question | YES | NO | PLANNED | ScoreN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Do you integrate content marketing into your marketing strategies? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 2 | Do you use customer education within your content marketing? (W) | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 3 | Are there education experts in your marketing team? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 4 | Do you use a content management system? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 5 | Do you operate your business' *YouTube* channel/channels? (W) | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 6 | Do you measure the impact of each of your digital communication channels separately? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 7 | Are your communication messages mostly devised as an interactive exchange? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 8 | Do you personalise your communication messages? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 9 | Do you use advergaming? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 10 | Do you use e-commerce? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| 11 | Do you use shoppable posts on social media (*Instagram*, *Facebook*)? | x/2 | x/0 | x/1 | |
| | **Total score 1** | | | | xx |

**Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model – Part 2**
**LIKERT SCALE***

| | Sample questions | 1 point | 2 points | 3 points | 4 points | 5 points | 6 points | 7 points | ScoreN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *7 point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 7 = all the time) | | | | | | | | |
| 12 | To what extent do you use digital advertising (display ads, digital banners, PPC advertising) in your communication strategy? | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 13 | To what extent do you use product-related promotional videos focused on product features? | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 14 | To what extent do you use digital content marketing focused on a product in the context of its use rather than its features? | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 15 | To what extent do you use brand-related digital content marketing? (focus on brand awareness, brand affinity, brand trustworthiness)? (W) | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 16 | To what extent do you use digital customer education focused on general topics, knowledge and skills with a significant added value? (W) | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 17 | To what extent do you use social media in your digital communications? (W) | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 18 | To what extent do you use mobile apps in your digital communications? | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| 19 | To what extent do you use cloud applications for customer education? | 1<br>0 | 2<br>1 | 3<br>2 | 4<br>3 | 5<br>4 | 6<br>5 | 7<br>6 | |
| | **Total score 2** | | | | | | | | xx |

25      LEWNES, A., KELLER, K. L.: *10 Principles of Modern Marketing*. Released on 3rd April 2019. [online]. [2021-03-10]. Available at: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/10-principles-of-modern-marketing/>.
26      See: DORNBERGER, R.: *New Trends in Business Information Systems and Technology: Digital Innovation and Digital Business Transformation*. Cham : Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021.
27      DORNBERGER, R.: *New Trends in Business Information Systems and Technology: Digital Innovation and Digital Business Transformation*. Cham : Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021, p. 6.

**Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model – Part 3**

| Sample questions | Multiple choice answer options (circle/highlight) (number of points) | scoreN |
|---|---|---|
| 20 What is your current ratio between digital/print marketing communication? | 0 – 20% digital (1), 21 – 40% digital (2), 41 – 60% digital (3), 61 – 80% digital (4), 81 – 100% digital (5), | ScoreN |
| 21 If you personalise your communication messages, which of the following variables do you use? | gender, age, geography, previous purchases, customer journey, language, education, other | |
| | not at all (0), very rarely (1), occasionally (2), sometimes (3), frequently (4), very frequently (5), all the time (6) | |
| 22 How many software solutions do you use to generate and deliver your communication messages? (W) | 1 system (2), 2 – 5 systems (2), 6 – 10 systems (3), 11 – 15 systems (4), 16+ systems (5) | |
| 23 How fast can you generate new communications to respond to market changes? (W) | within hours (5), within 2 days (3), within 1 week (2), within 2 weeks (1), within less than 1 month (0) | |
| **Total score 3** | | **xx** |

*Source: Own processing based on How Digital Is Your Organisation? [online]. [2021-01-12]. Available at: <https://www.scripturaengage.com/digital-communication-scan/>.*

### ScoreN – Score normalisation

Score normalisation is achieved by dividing the number of points of each question by the maximum attainable points of the question,

$$ScoreN_q = \frac{point_q}{\max(point)_q}$$

where $ScoreN_q$ is normalised score for a question $q$ and $point_q$ is number of points received from the answer. Hence the normalised scores lie between 0 and 1 and they are easy to combine into total index.

### Weighted Average Questions

The author of this Model works with the weighted average of individual normalised scores. The weights are summarised in Table 2. A weighted average is used in the situations when certain questions are more important than others.

*Table 2: Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model – Questions' weight*

| Question No. | Weight | Question No. | Weight | Question No. | Weight |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 9 | 1 | 17 | 2 |
| 2 | 2 | 10 | 1 | 18 | 1 |
| 3 | 1 | 11 | 1 | 19 | 1 |
| 4 | 1 | 12 | 1 | 20 | 1 |
| 5 | 2 | 13 | 1 | 21 | 1 |
| 6 | 1 | 14 | 1 | 22 | 2 |
| 7 | 1 | 15 | 2 | 23 | 2 |
| 8 | 1 | 16 | 2 | SUM | 30 |

*Source: Own processing*

### Calculations

Digital Communication Maturity Index (grand total of Total scores 1 – 3) can be calculated as the weighted average of individual scoresN (see Table 1, Parts 1 – 3) multiplied by 100. The resulting index will be on the scale 0 – 100.

$$DCM = 100 \frac{\sum_q w_q ScoreN_q}{\sum_q w_q}$$

### Digital Communication Maturity Index Classification/Verification/Modification

The following index classification has been proposed by the author.

*Table 3: Digital Communication Maturity Index Classification*

| 0 – 24 | 25 – 50 | 51 – 74 | 75 – 100 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Low digital communication maturity | Average digital communication maturity | High digital communication maturity | Excellent digital communication maturity |

*Source: Own processing*

The initially proposed index classification will be verified and/or modified and the index may be re-calibrated based on the internal audits' findings and data acquired during the digital communication maturity assessment. The results of the survey will be analysed using common reliability measures (e.g., Cronbach's alfa) and Factor Analysis (PCA – Principal Component Analysis) to verify consistency of responses. The survey will be alternatively modified to achieve acceptable reliability.

### DCMAM – A Pilot Study Results

Currently, the conditions to carry out extensive research aiming at the Model verification are not favourable due to the ongoing pandemic caused by the coronavirus COVID-19. However, the author wished to test the Model to determine its feasibility. Therefore, the author submitted the Model to five companies/ business entities to obtain preliminary data used as a basis for verifying the index calculation. These business entities include (1) *Harley-Davidson*, (2) *Coca-Cola HBC*, (3) *ACREA CR*, (4) *STADA AG Global* and (5) *Bob Little PR*.

With any type of extensive research, a pilot study is one of the essential stages with high impact on the success of the research project. The questionnaire, designed in the *SurveyMonkey* professional online platform, encompassed 23 questions plus contact information. The web link to the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents by e-mail. The pilot study with the active participation of selected companies has produced the results summarised in Table 4.

*Table 4: Digital Communication Maturity Assessment (results published with the consent of the pilot study participants)*

| Digital Communication Maturity Index | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0 – 24 | 25 – 50 | 51 – 74 | 75 – 100 |
| Low digital communication maturity | Average digital communication maturity | High digital communication maturity | Excellent digital communication maturity |

| DCMAM pilot study results | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Company/Business Entity | Date | Digital Communication Maturity Index | DCM INDEX |
| Czech Republic | *Harley-Davidson* | 24th March 2021 | 68.87 | HIGH |
| Czech Republic/ Slovakia | *Coca-Cola HBC* | 25th March 2021 | 60.40 | HIGH |
| Czech Republic | *ACREA CR* | 25th March 2021 | 54.10 | HIGH |
| Germany/CIS/ Russia | *STADA AG Global* | 25th March 2021 | 42.56 | AVERAGE |
| United Kingdom | *Bob Little PR* | 24th March 2021 | 69.67 | HIGH |

*Source: Own processing*

Once the digital communication maturity assessment has been carried out and the data analysed and interpreted, marketing managers can proceed to the next step, e.g., based on the findings, they can start developing new educational content in various digital formats. The content will be delivered through an innovative mix of digital communication channels. The newly developed educational content will focus on the most critical points in brand communication revealed by the audit carried out with the help of the Model. Thus, the brand can be well-prepared for the inevitable new challenges.

# 6 Discussion

Customer education at the core of a digital marketing strategy is an innovative approach. On the basis of content marketing, it is an emerging trend with the potential to boost great organisational achievements. This study aims to bridge the gap in the scholarly literature which has focused exclusively on customer education related to a product and its features. New ways of implementing customer education in digital marketing strategies have only been examined sporadically. For example, in their research, conceptualising digital content marketing (DCM), Hollebeek and Macky believe that, despite the growing number of studies and research into digital content marketing, the topic remains poorly understood.[28] The same applies to education-based marketing as an offshoot of digital content marketing.

The suggested Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model (DCMAM) serves as a guideline for an easier implementation of customer education into digital marketing strategies. It will help companies to focus on key issues and allocate funds to the most promising digital communication channels in their communication mix. Due to the dynamic development of marketing communication, the DCMAM should be revisited and updated at regular intervals.

The model is devised as an index and a regular internal audit of the composition of the used digital communication channels might help companies to improve their digital communication readiness for the new challenges and stay ahead of their competitors. The sample questions included in the model represent the prevailing portfolio of digital communication channels, apps and platforms currently available for companies. To stay abreast of the dynamic development, new communication channels, especially in social media (e.g., *TikTok, Clubhouse*), should be monitored and carefully evaluated for possible implementation both to the Model and in practice.

The wider the portfolio of digital communication channels, apps and platforms used with confidence by a company on daily basis, the better chance to reach outstanding business achievements. The role of customer education is crucial because it has the potential to boost customer engagement and drive business results, unlike the declining ad performance in traditional media on the media fragmented market. Thus, a company's digital communication readiness, offering flexibility and prompt reaction to changes, may represent the difference between success or failure.

Another advantage of getting acquainted with the DCMAM and using it regularly lies in the fact that the answers to the questions included in the Model not only offer a snapshot picture of a particular business entity and its digital communication processes. By their self-explanatory nature, the questions themselves broaden respondents' horizons, leading them to evaluate new digital communication channels, apps and platforms which might not yet have been included in the company's communication mix. This might prompt a valuable extension to the use of the existing digital communication tools. The Model's author deliberately opted for the use of the seven-point Likert's scale.[29] The main reason for this is its greater degree of accuracy and better reflection of a respondent's evaluation offering a more granular response.

Digital communication technology, serving the needs of barrier-free customer education, is an ideal combination to lead customers on the customer journey. Today's digital customer expects a customer experience which is above-average, valuable and customer-oriented. Educational content delivered to customers through state-of-the-art digital communication channels may be at the core of digital marketing campaigns. Such a combination is not only feasible and viable but can significantly contribute to the bottom line and boost companies' economic growth.

When looking to drive business growth via the use of educational content, it is important to be continually open to adopting new ways of pursuing current objectives. Digital marketing strategies based on educational content marketing are changing the traditional scope of marketing activities. Education-based marketing strategies focus on human insight which drives digital customers along their customer journey, yet without directly pushing these customers to purchase. Barrier-free educational content not only inspires customers but also leads them sensitively and empathetically along their decision-making process. Basically, customer education as a marketing strategy triggers an emotional *why* much earlier than a behavioural *what*.[30]

Hunsaker and Knowles suggest reconsidering *"a fundamental assumption underlying traditional approaches to strategy, i.e., that industry boundaries and economics remain broadly stable over time"*. They believe this assumption is no longer realistic: *"Business leaders need to evolve how they think about strategy in two important ways to be relevant in today's dynamic and complex environments: first, their focus needs to shift from what is stable to what is changing; (...) second, they need to broaden the number of stakeholders whose needs and potential contributions are evaluated during the strategic planning, review, and refinement process."*[31]

As suggested above, to assess an organisation's level of digital transformation, it is advisable to carry out an audit of digital communication processes, channels and levels of digitalisation. The Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model (DCMAM) can help marketers as well as business leaders make evidence-based decisions on where to allocate money in their organisation's digital communication activities. Based on their findings from using this Model, they can prioritise their goals and goal statements.

The viability of the innovative approach – using educational content in digital marketing strategies designed for technology brands – has been proved by the success of many global brands including *Apple,*

28      HOLLEBEEK, L. D., MACKY, K.: Digital Content Marketing's Role in Fostering Consumer Engagement, Trust, and Value: Framework, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2019, Vol. 45, p. 27-41.

29      BRYMAN, A., BELL, E., HARLEY, B.: *Business Research Methods*. 5th Edition. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 170.
30      CAREY, G.: *Is Your Brand Purpose at Risk of Being Obsolete?* Released on 27th August 2020. [online]. [2021-01-12]. Available at: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/is-your-brand-purpose-at-risk-of-being-obsolete/>.
31      HUNSAKER, B. T., KNOWLES, J.: *The Essence of Strategy Is Now How to Change*. Released on 17th December 2020. [online]. [2021-01-14]. Available at: <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-essence-of-strategy-is-now-how-to-change/>.

*Google, Facebook* and *ADOBE*, along with locally important brands such as *ACREA CR*. These companies are succeeding in seamlessly integrating digital customer education into their content marketing strategies. Besides, compelling digital customer experiences were being created for their customers in the pre-pandemic period (exemplified, e.g., by *Apple*). Many other companies that launched education-based communication campaigns soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 are already reaping the benefits.[32]

The key concepts which have been discussed in this treatise regarding customer education encompass *customer expertise, customer engagement and customer readiness* as stages on the digital customer journey to embrace and use cutting-edge technologies with confidence. Attempting to advance the magnitude of customer support through educational content, the author is confident that this study can serve as a base for future studies and research into customer engagement, the role and importance of user-generated content (UGC), content curation and content marketing with a focus on educational content (serving as an efficient tool for SEO),[33] along with branding with a focus on brand attachment.

Further studies, which will take into account the causal relations between high quality multimedia educational content and revenue growth, are needed to estimate the extent to which education-based content can serve as an efficient KPI.[34] Another significant gap in the existing research could be closed by studies focusing on new marketing terminology encompassing state-of-the-art terms and phrases, as well as their meaning and usage. These studies are needed to help common understanding of inconsistent terminology used currently by different professionals and researchers. Standardising the use of technical terminology in marketing communications will significantly help the further development of the field.

The author of this study is fully aware of the specifics of technology brands' digital communication, along with the limitations of generalising findings related to educational content's role which have not yet been fully underpinned by robust primary research data. However, thinking critically about the research problem, the author is convinced that the accomplished pilot study (while more extensive research is somewhat problematic under the pandemic and lockdown due to COVID-19) with participating companies operating in different countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, Germany and Russia) has produced the first valuable results demonstrating, in large measure, high digital communication maturity among the participating companies and business entities.

Although the term "education-based marketing" is still embryonic, education-based marketing strategy is worth implementing not just in technology brand marketing. 'Software-as-a-service', cloud solutions and/or subscription models, together with educational, inspirational and good cause campaigns, which have been standard marketing practices for many technology brands for a long time, are transferable into any business sector. Further research into this topic is much needed – as is the wider dissemination of ideas and research findings related to education-based marketing emerging from content marketing as a new, promising trend.

# 7 Conclusion

Technology brands have been in the vanguard of customer education for more than two decades and their expertise in this field is invaluable. As a rule, they are engaged in selling rather complex products and software – frequently offered as 'software-as-a-service', with cloud solutions and subscription monetisation models.

The objective of this study was to identify, analyse and interpret the state-of-the-art digital communication practices of technology brands focused on educational content and customer education. Based on the literature review, the thorough examination of educational content formats and platforms, and inspired by *Scriptura Engage* and its five-item questionnaire dealing with digital maturity assessment of customer communication,

the Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model (DCMAM) was devised and its role explained. An international pilot study complementing the research has produced thought-provoking results.

These results would seem to confirm our view that things not only needed to change (in the light of the pandemic among other things) but have, in reality, changed – and are continuing to change. Marketing professionals and brands will benefit from marketing research studies on digital educational content marketing. Besides, mutual collaboration of academia and business practice in this field can produce valuable findings offering brands and their customers better orientation in this complex and ever-changing world.

Carefully crafted customer education opportunities, related to both pre-sales and after-sales services, have been complemented by a scalable system of 'always-on' and 'always-accessible' suggestions for learning opportunities in different digital formats. These are made available via various digital content sharing platforms. Technology brands have been proven innovators in this field and companies including *ADOBE, APPLE* and *ACREA CR*, with their focus on modern customer education, can serve as sources of inspiration for marketing experts from many fields and business sectors. The Digital Communication Maturity Assessment Model represents a contribution to both marketing theory and practice.

Redefining the classic marketing approaches and complementing the portfolio of digital marketing strategies by education-based marketing could change the marketing mix for ever. Customer education, provided in the form of compelling digital customer learning experiences, means that companies are the triggers of their customers' success because they invest time, funds and energy into their customers' better future. Together with Albert Einstein's famous quote that *"in the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity"*, technology brands – with their complex products – can leverage education-based marketing strategy to craft a unique opportunity. In the time of banner-blindness and advertisement fatigue, paving the customer journey with remarkable educational content is a way well worth taking.

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