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how 2020 shaped consumer trends & how it led to the significance of digital marketing

abstract

2020 forever transformed the way consumers interact with their favorite brands, and studies show these trends are here to stay. The past year has redefined the way people perform their daily activities and ultimately changed their lifestyles. Brands have adapted, and will continue to adapt, to the rapidly changing environment, especially in the digital space. This whitepaper will discuss these consumer changes and how companies can keep up, as well as the importance of implementing digital marketing into their strategies not only in 2021, but in the future as well.

KM&A

white paper

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5. introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic completely transformed the way people live and will continue to live moving forward. From children acclimating to a new way of learning, adding a mask to normal daily attire, standing 6 feet from loved ones, the pandemic has touched every aspect of ordinary life. There is no doubt that the world is forever changed, and adaptations are necessary in order to grow and advance. Not only were personal activities affected by the global pandemic, but also the world of business and commercialism were completely altered. Companies are looking to transform previous strategies to better align with today's consumers. Many industries were affected by the global pandemic and have had to evolve their day-to-day practices, especially when it involves their consumers. As a result, companies' brand strategies have put more of an emphasis on brand loyalty and maintaining overall customer relationships. Now more than ever, digital marketing is a necessity to any marketing strategy. The prevalence of digital marketing has been increasing for several years; however, the pandemic has greatly accelerated this process. The various changes that have occurred in consumers' lives have helped them determine what they value in brands, the way they interact with them and how they will dictate what product/service is worthy of their time and money.

7. understanding consumer trends

Consumer trends are the attitudes, behaviors, opinions and/or expectations a customer has. They are constantly changing, and it is crucial for brands to identify these changes and act accordingly. It is also important for brands to understand where these trends come from and why they are occurring, whether it be from a social, environmental or economic variable. With all that has happened in 2020, companies must recognize the recently developed attitudes and trends of their evolved consumers.

pre pandemic

CONSUMER TRENDS

In order to analyze current consumer trends, it is important to acknowledge the behaviors and attitudes of past consumers. Before 2020, consumers were noted as being less future-oriented, and more focused on 'buying for the now'. Favoring luxurious brands and the most current, up-to-date versions of products, these purchasers valued high-end brands at higher prices, rather than placing importance on small local companies and being frugal. Another trend apparent in previous years, was the enjoyment of disconnecting from online platforms. We would see quite the opposite attitude in 2020 and 2021, as consumers were essentially forced to have all interactions through the digital world and discovered more entertaining value within it. With the global pandemic looming on the horizon, consumers had no idea they were about to become heavily reliant on the features that the digital realm had to offer, such as communicating, shopping and even using it to escape in-person interactions as a whole.



post pandemic

CONSUMER TREND

After a year of extreme uncertainty, consumers are now looking for comfort in their favorite brands. This gives companies the opportunity to set themselves apart from their competitors. By understanding what it is that a consumer values, brands are able to market in a way that directly influences them. With the extreme rise in unemployment, the pandemic brought doubt and hesitation when it came to making financial decisions, resulting in consumers making fewer nonessential purchases. Another obstacle that brands faced was the expectation for them to speak out against national injustices, arising from 2020's social dilemmas. It was clear that customers were evolving in many facets and were looking for their favorite brands to understand their transformed values. They expected companies to then make a change within their own business activities based on these values.



11. knowing consumer concerns

According to the EY Future Consumer Index, the top five consumer priorities in 2021 are "Affordability, Health, Society, Environment, and Experience," respectively (Gramling, 2021). These five priorities have led to consumer behavior changes which have fallen into four different trends. These trends have developed as a result of consumers demanding companies to be aware of the events going on in society and to address them, businesses moving to have their products and services easily accessible, customers beginning to spend money only when it is necessary and the transition to remote work. When these trends arose, they came quickly and caused businesses to pivot to meet the needs of their consumers.

companies' societal awareness

Consumers have evolved into socially aware, politically correct and extremely environmentally conscious people. The past year has taught, or re-taught, the importance of mental and physical health, the effects of social injustices and the emphasized expectations of implementing environmental policies. Now that these topics have been brought to the forefront of consumers' minds, it has fallen on companies to ensure they address them. With companies taking a stand on the issues that have arisen, it shows their consumers that they care about the opinions they have been voicing. While doing this, it also gives consumers something to identify with.

companies' societal awareness



mental health

The pandemic and the resulting economic recession provoked an increase of mental health issues. According to a survey launched by the U.S. Census Bureau called the Household Pulse Survey, "during the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder..." which is up 30% from 2019 (Kamal et al., 2021). The article goes on to explain how people were turning to substance abuse to cope with the stress and worry caused from factors like isolation and job loss. Consequently, mental health awareness became more prevalent, and, in turn, companies needed to realize that it was going to take more than just having an amazing product or service in order for people to care about a business amid a deadly virus. Companies needed to emphasize importance on consumer wellbeing and safety to signify their priorities had shifted towards societal and personal issues.



activism

Due to a rise in national activism movements in 2020 and 2021, consumers have shifted their beliefs and feel that it is necessary for companies to address social issues as they arise. Gen Z is more likely than other generations to pick brands and retailers with shared core values, according to a survey of more than 14,000 Americans, conducted by Shopkick in 2021. Consumers want brands to be transparent and authentic. If there is not an alignment between the company's views and the consumer's views, or the company does not speak to any social issue, 42% of consumers will step away from the brand and 21% will most likely not utilize the company again (Gonçalves, 2018). By companies addressing their societal views, whether this be simply acknowledging what is going on, or giving their view on a matter, the statements give consumers something to identify with and relate to. This can ultimately be the deciding factor regarding if they want to continue to support that company.



environmental

One of the main societal concerns that has become more frequently talked about are environmental issues. The environment during the pandemic saw improvements in many areas. Due to less human travel, fewer animals were in the crossfire of cars, planes and boats. There was an evident decrease in air pollution in 2020, allowing ecosystems to thrive. A study in the Nature Climate Change journal, found that daily carbon dioxide levels decreased by 17% (Le Quéré et al., 2020). Another result from the pandemic was the decrease in natural resource depletion which had been powering trade and industry supply chains. The strengthening and restoration of the environment during COVID-19 has set a precedent for large businesses and corporations to set sustainability efforts and initiatives within their company. Consumers are in favor of supporting a brand that they know is making a difference. In Aflac's 2020 CSR Survey, 60% of consumers surveyed believe that protecting the environment is an important issue that large companies need to address to benefit the world (Aflac, 2020). Several leading technology companies like Amazon, Apple and Salesforce have adopted various environmental pledges. When it comes down to it, having clear and genuine efforts to make the world a better place will allow a company to stand out and attract consumers.



convenience

The next trend that has emerged, and rightfully so, is that consumers are craving convenience (Silberstein, 2021). The pandemic has caused the expansion of the digital realm, meaning consumers were able to participate in certain experiences, such as a virtual concert. These experiences were easy and readily available to people, as they were able to be done from the tips of their fingers. It is estimated that since the pandemic, about 60% of people aged 15-29 have used augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR), about 55% of people aged 30-44, about 30% of people aged 45-49 and a little over 20% of people aged 60 and up (Euromonitor, 2020, as cited in Silberstein, 2021). Through examining these numbers, it is clear that the realm of virtual and physical experiences has become blended. Therefore, the expectation has been set for all experiences, products and/or services to be just as seamless and easy as it is virtually. Businesses and brands need to recognize this change, maintain their digital footprint and prepare for the return to somewhat-normal life.



money spending

The pandemic left many people without a job and steady source of income. In turn, this caused many people to stop spending money. According to a recent Pew Research study, about **42% of Americans say they have been spending less money than usual since the pandemic began**. Among those who stated they have been spending less money, it was found that the main reason has been due to their daily activities changing due to COVID-related restrictions (Horowitz et al., 2021). Even though spending has decreased since the pandemic, there have been certain industries that have taken off. For example, online shopping has been flourishing since the start of the pandemic. According to the last Digital Commerce 360 analysis, U.S. consumers have spent as much as \$861.12 billion online in 2020. Without the bump in online sales from the pandemic, consumer spending would not have reached that milestone until 2022 (Ali, 2021). One of the companies that has seen the largest increase in sales has been Amazon, the world's largest online retailer. They have seen dramatic increases in traffic to their site as a result of consumers being stuck in their homes. Despite the increases in online shopping, consumers are still not spending as much money as they did before the pandemic. This has changed the way brands thought about targeting their audience. They knew that the consumers were not going to spend money on something if it was constantly being advertised to the consumers, or if it was not different and unique. Therefore, brands resorted to heavy digital marketing. By running ads through social media, search and display ads and email marketing, consumers were being exposed to companies constantly. Along with this, brands were able to create quick, creative and unique pieces that grab consumers' attention which provided more compelling advertisements.

42% Americans are spending less money than usual since pandemic began



working from home

Before the pandemic, there was a negative connotation with working from home, as people assumed it meant being lazy and saw it as an unproductive structure of employment. In American culture, it has been a social norm to have a nine-to-five office job. However, the pandemic altered this way of thinking. The introduction of working from home was the biggest change in consumer behavior. Many have been able to become more productive by working from home due to cutting out travel time and being able to stay dialed in for longer. Now that many people are getting vaccinated, some companies are requiring workers to come back to the office, but employees are fighting this. It was found in a recent study by Caprelo, a work relocation company, that **87% of people said being able to work remotely would be part of their future employment decisions**. Along with this, it has been reported that **one third of workers may quit their job if they were asked to return to the office full-time** (Detwiler, 2021). As much as brands and companies want their employees to be back in the office full time, it seems as if this will not be the case. Due to this stand being taken by working people, it has forced organizations to change their mentalities. First, they must adapt to the wishes of their employees in order to not lose them or have them unhappy. As stated earlier, with the rise in mental health awareness and activism, companies are putting an extra emphasis on keeping employees happy and satisfied. Second, brands must realize this change in attitude and behavior in order to direct their marketing efforts to reach their audiences in the right ways. Due to the increase in time spent at home, people are watching more videos, listening to more podcasts and actively staying connected with friends, family and businesses. Therefore, digital marketing is a top priority for brands to incorporate into their marketing strategies.

87%
say being able to work remotely would be part of their future employment decisions

1/3
workers may quit their job if they were asked to return to the office full-time

digital marketing

Digital marketing is a cost-effective and efficient way for businesses to directly market to their target audience through an online platform, whether it be through email marketing, blogs, social media ads, paid search media, mobile, etc. When using multiple digital marketing tactics, a company has a greater chance of reaching their audience and directing it all to one place, like their website, in a matter of clicks. Now that even more people are spending time online, it is vital for companies to focus on reinforcing and elevating their digital marketing campaign over traditional marketing. The digitalization of the world has produced new opportunities while replacing previous traditional and successful business models. Known as digital disruption, many companies are taking a look at how they can benefit from this process or how it can be their downfall if not open-minded. In order to thrive during digital disruptions, brands need to be bold, creative and up to-date on current consumer trends.

digital marketing



search engine optimization (SEO) & content

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of increasing website traffic and brand exposure through non-paid (“organic”) search results (Muller, n.d.). To take advantage of SEO, it is important to understand what people search for online and that organic search results are more frequently clicked on than paid advertisements. Companies should not try to trick search engines so that their website shows up on the search engine results page more often. Instead, websites should be geared towards users:

“Providing relevant, high-quality content on your website will help you rank higher in search results, and more importantly, it will establish credibility and trust.”

—MULLER

According to Muller, companies need to avoid automatically generated or copied content to improve search rankings. The goal of search engines is, “to provide useful answers to searchers’ questions in the most helpful formats” (Muller). Search rankings are the order of search results by relevance, and if the content is new and updated, it has a better chance of a higher ranking.

Blogs, case studies and other content pieces can provide value to brands. By supplying more content to an online platform, brands are able to reach many people and improve visibility. Writing blogs are a great way for a company to use SEO keywords to increase traffic to their site. Content pieces, like blogs, can also allow feedback from consumers and start conversations about what they like about a brand and where they could improve. Case studies can be used to inform consumers on a problem they may be facing and explain how their product or service may provide solutions that are backed by research and statistics. Content pieces can be about controlling the conversation, speaking authentically to your audience and maintaining authenticity with real people’s experience with your product or service.



a/b testing

A/B testing is used to determine which web page variant drives more conversion. The testing process consists of showing two variants of the page to website visitors at the same time and analyzing the results (Rawat, 2021). The variant that has the highest conversion rate ends up being used to draw in leads. A/B testing allows for minor changes to be made for maximum output without completely redesigning the page. A benefit of A/B testing is that it is data-driven and based on statistical significance to eliminate guesswork (Muller). Predictability is essential, and when website changes are being made, it is beneficial to have confidence in a positive outcome. In this digital age, website visitors are opportunities for business expansion, and A/B testing opens the door to more website traffic and customer acquisition.



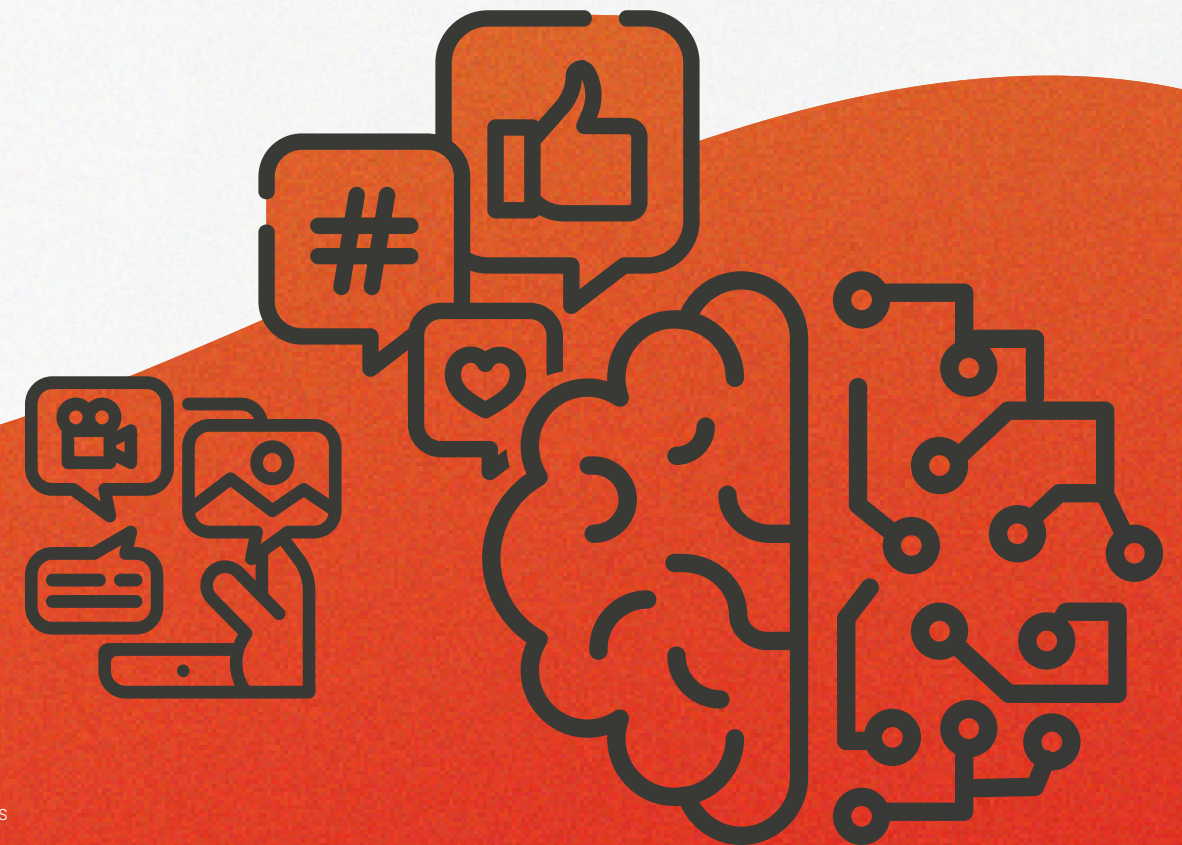
data

With digital marketing comes the new opportunity to analyze consumer analytics at a much more effective rate. These analytics give businesses insights to see the exact amount of people who click on their website and exactly how long they stay. More specifically, companies can see how these people interact with their website, which pages they visit and can even see where the consumer came from. This information is extremely helpful to understand a website's UX (user experience) and to better prioritize market spending. The ability to view data in real time, allows for it to be highly measurable and, therefore, strategies can be easily optimized based on responses from target audiences.



everything is digital

In quarter two of 2020, there was a 31.7% influx in digital app downloads (Agius, 2021). This rise in application downloads has shown that people are interacting with technology on a higher and more consistent basis. It also proves that the digital era that has resulted from the pandemic is here to stay. The power of online marketing has also led to the expansion of digital advertising agencies, increasing by 13.1% from 2020 (Agius, 2021). The virtual market is getting more crowded; therefore, brands need to focus on quality instead of quantity. If companies do this, they will be able to stand out against their competition. Businesses have realized that digital marketing presence is valuable and crucial to their continued success, which is causing them to strengthen their digital marketing strategies in order to keep up. While they can reach more customers, those same customers are simultaneously becoming more selective about which marketing messages resonate. Along with this, there is more media to be consumed by a potential customer and their attention spans are decreasing, which gives companies more reason to take a look at their current digital marketing strategies to evaluate its effectiveness.



evolving consumption patterns

Due to the change in consumption behavior of consumers, companies had to modify the experience their customer would have when interacting with their business. That included streamlining the overall user process to maintain loyalty and nurture purchasing decisions. Consumers now not only want an integrated digital experience, they expect it. Although it is predicted people will revert to some behaviors before the pandemic, like preferring physical activities over using a screen, it is important to note that digital convenience is not going anywhere. With more free time on people's hands, worldwide shutdowns and curfews, there was an increase in activity on social media channels, an upsurge in eCommerce and, thus, an enhancement of digital marketing strategies across all industries. According to a study done by Criteo, an advertising company, 70% of marketers agreed that digital marketing has become more significant in their overall strategy (Pruett, 2021). As a result of this, new opportunities emerged for business advertising. Popularity of podcasts increased, video content dominated social media and influencers held significant impact over consumer decisions. Taking advantage of these new possibilities would leverage brands in creating effective digital efforts.



evolving consumption patterns



podcasts

Podcasting is a medium that distributes audio content, with or without video, designed for on-the-go listening. There are many styles and topics of podcasts, including comedy, true crime, pop culture, sports and even paranormal. According to Buzzsprouts' article, Podcast Statistics: Growth and Demographic Data "more than one-third of Americans (104 million) regularly consume podcasts" (2021). One rationale for the growing success of podcasts is their convenience. Listening to a podcast allows for an audience member to multitask, giving them the ability to work, exercise or drive while listening. Consumers are able to decide when and where they want to listen, determine their own pace of listening and can subscribe to a show and instantly download new episodes. Advertising on podcasts is highly successful due to the audience being especially engaged. Listeners are able to be more selective with the podcasts they listen to, leading to increased loyalty with hosts and shows. This is a reason for the effectiveness of host-read ads. The blog Why are Podcasts so Popular in 2021?, by Ben Christian, mentions that

Host-read advertisements garner higher trust from the listeners and do not interrupt the flow of the episode with an unfamiliar voice.

— BEN CHRISTIAN, 2021

Consumers are more susceptible to podcast advertisements because, a lot of the time, the hosts have used the product or service that they are endorsing. The vast number of podcasts available allows for many niche audiences, which gives marketers a better idea of where their target consumers are and allows for more effective ad placements.



video content

With the rise and increase in importance of digital marketing, brands have been forced to come up with unique and eye-catching ways to capture consumers' attention and interest in their product or service. As a result, video content has been extremely popular. Video content is more engaging and entertaining than looking at static images. Therefore, when a consumer is scrolling through their social media feed, they are more likely to stop and watch a video if their screen starts to move, symbolizing the video has started. A video allows brands to put more creativity into a digital ad, which will cause consumers to want to see more pieces or products from that company. Video capability has been implemented across almost every social media platform. Along with this, platforms that were already video focused, such as YouTube, have increased the capabilities for users when posting a video. With the implementation and advancement of video capabilities it is now easier than ever for brands to utilize this feature.



influencer marketing

An influencer is someone who has the power and persuasion to affect the purchasing decisions of consumers because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship with their audience. Influencers have a following in a distinct niche, with whom they actively engage with. The size of the influencers' following depends on their level of influence and the niche they are representing (Geysler, 2021). Influencers have gained popularity recently due to the drastic increase in social media presence in everyday lives. People have taken it upon themselves to blog, vlog and/or document their lives through their social media accounts. Through doing this, they have naturally given opinions on different products or services they encounter in their lives. This began to gain a lot of positive feedback from consumers, especially when "big name" celebrities would post about their experiences with a product or service because consumers felt they could relate to and believe them. From there, influencer marketing took off. Influencer marketing "involves a brand collaborating with an online influencer to market one of its products or services" (Geysler, 2021). Brands also utilize influencers to use their platform to expand their brand awareness to larger populations. Companies have realized that using an influencer(s) to promote their brand is extremely influential because it gives their brand an authentic, trustworthy feel that consumers can relate with. It is an easy way for companies to work marketing and promotional materials into their budget. With an influencer, a marketing budget can either be split or have a heavy focus on paying the influencer. When a brand establishes a trusting relationship with their influencer(s), the company can place their marketing in their hands. Influencers are content creators. They are professionals in promoting products and services and using tactics to do so efficiently. Therefore, businesses can pay an influencer to create and market their products and services and put additional money budgeted for marketing towards promoting the influencers' posts.



agile marketing

Agile marketing is a forward-thinking methodology geared towards thinking dynamically and meeting the ever-changing demands of customers. The largest focus of agile marketing is prioritizing collaboration and interaction. According to the 3rd Annual State of Agile Marketing Report, 41% of marketers have adopted agile marketing. The report goes on to mention that 42% of companies plan to adopt the strategy this year (Timmons, 2021). The highest priority of the methodology is to guarantee customer satisfaction throughout every stage of the development process. However, marketers must embrace the changing needs and requirements of the customers. Another facet of agile marketing is transparency. When transparency and communication regarding project status are improved, problems can be identified and fixed at a higher rate, and thus agile marketers can easily change their strategy as customer needs evolve.



25. the future of digital marketing

It is clear that digital marketing is one of the most important strategies for companies to utilize. Digital marketing is not a short-lived trend, rather, it is the future of all marketing efforts. There are innumerable opportunities for brands to take advantage of in this extremely digitalized era. Companies, in order to stay relevant and overall successful in digital strategies, must focus on creating valuable content, implement creative and unique ways to attract the attention of consumers and become heavily data driven.

how to integrate digital marketing in your current strategies

While companies are highly encouraged to amplify all digital efforts, they are urged to proceed with caution. It is important for brands to heavily research how to effectively digitalize their marketing strategies before they begin implementing them. According to the article, *Thriving in an Increasingly Digital Ecosystem*, it is recommended for businesses to set up digitalization as an ecosystem, where the connection with consumers is emphasized (Weill and Woerner, 2015).

Integrating an ecosystem model will allow for businesses to directly interact with their customers, giving more opportunity for companies to instantly react and adjust to consumer concerns. The article goes on to mention that “increasing digitization offers opportunities such as the opportunity to leverage a strong customer relationship and increase cross-selling,” (Weill and Woerner, 2015). The integration of digital marketing into strategies is no longer an optional “add-on” anymore. From optimizing SEO, utilizing social media influencers, to producing unique video content, the opportunities are limitless for companies to reach their audience effectively and build deep relationships with their consumers in the digital world.

29. conclusion

Overall, COVID-19 shifted how consumers will forever perceive their favorite brands. With extreme hesitation and careful consideration, the pandemic changed the way people evaluate companies and their values. These changes have caused customers to become much more socially conscious, health oriented, fiscally cautious and environmentally friendly. The digital world also experienced a growth of users due to the restrictions of physical events. This gave brands the opportunity to take advantage of expanding strategies to online platforms and experience to new business endeavors.

Some companies adjusted their own service and product list to stay successful during the virus. Dallara, an Italian company that assembles competitive race cars, realized consumers' concerns for health and safety and used their expertise in manufacturing to produce PPE. Check out this **case study** to see how KM&A was able to utilize video content and develop a narrative that expressed Dallara's involvement in a time of global crisis.

Delta Faucet Company wanted to host exciting, interactive virtual events. Their main concern was getting their audience interested and keeping them entertained without face-to-face interaction. This **case study** shows how KM&A successfully organized a themed three-day virtual event and how Delta Faucet Company effectively promoted their products.

To find out more about how your business can gain key insight on how to effectively utilize digital marketing in your strategies, check out our blog **Top 5 Digital Marketing Techniques Every Company Should Know** and signup for **our monthly newsletter** to stay up-to-date on all things marketing.

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