THE ESSENTIALS OF TODAY'S MARKETING

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ETHICS OF DIGITAL MARKETING

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Ethical Issues in Digital Marketing

Ever since the internet began to be used, people have been looking for ways to profit from the people who use it. This tendency started with online sales, continued with online ads, and moved into a few different marketing areas such as mobile, e-mail, and sms. In today's business world, more and more entrepreneurs and firms are using digital marketing. Digital marketing, also known as internet marketing, is how businesses promote a product/service on various online platforms. These platforms include social media, mobile applications, websites, commercial marketplaces, blogs, and other digital applications. While the technology-enabled marketing process offers many benefits for customers, it also confronts marketers with several ethical issues. Digital marketers are mainly faced with dilemmas originating from artificial intelligence. The main critical questions on this topic summarize the concerns about promotional ethics;

- Can every method on the internet be used to reach the consumer?
- How can we best explain the product benefit to the consumer?
- Are marketers manipulating the consumer using technology?
- Do digital pricing strategies create injustice?
- How should consumer data be used in ad targeting?

Based on these questions, this study reviewed the digital marketing ethic by classifying traditional marketing mix elements. Product, price, place, and promotion, which are elements of the marketing mix, constitute the skeleton of marketing activities. The health and balance of this skeleton depend on the management of all aspects in interaction and harmony with each other. Each contains key points in ethical decision-making. Ethical issues associated with the product significantly impact the consumer-brand relationship. The user expects the product information provided by SEO/SEM tools to be complete and truthful. Pricing is also an essential part of the marketing strategy, and the consumer's primary goal is to buy a product/service at the right price.

On the other hand, destructive pricing, illegal pricing, and fraudulent pricing practices cause price injustice discussions and put the pricing issue in focus from an ethical point of view. The growth of internet retailing causes ethical concerns in consumers about accessing the product. Distribution is also an essential element that digital marketing should consider on moral grounds.

The online customer cares very much about the fast delivery of his order and prefers these brands. Promotion, the integrative element of the marketing mix, requires examining many ethical-oriented issues such as a multi-branched tree. These topics are the most potent marketing tools, such as data usage, digital advertising, e-mail, and social media.

Ethical decision-making in digital marketing should be applied at all stages. The primary moral responsibility of marketing practitioners is to plan the "profitable" for the business and do the "right thing" for the consumer. Research shows that digital consumers prefer to buy products and services from brands that promote them and pay attention to ethical considerations in their marketing efforts. Digital companies must take all precautions not to violate privacy rules. Companies should effectively use various security tools and applications such as privacy policy statements, SSL certificates, quality website designs, consumer reviews, reference group recommendations, and money-back guarantees to increase their perceived reliability. Adopting ethical philosophy at every point of the marketing process will enable brands to gain high sales by increasing their market share and brand value and gaining customer trust and loyalty. A brand that acts according to ethical rules and guidelines becomes a center of attraction for all its stakeholders. Raw material suppliers, current and potential employees, customers, dealers, and all other stakeholders are pleased to be with these businesses and believe their values increase in this way.

Ethical Concepts in Marketing

Marketing is an important management function that connects businesses with their target audiences. For companies' marketing efforts to be acceptable to the consumer, much more is required today than effective promotion and advertising. The freedom provided by digital tools to consumers has removed them from being passive buyers. It has made them a factor that freely criticizes the product/service and forces them to change. Consumers respond more quickly to marketing strategies that are morally grounded. An insecure market environment affects customer loyalty. Brands that reduce uncertainty and risks can promptly gain customer loyalty. (Gürbüz 2018, 177.) The issue of trust, which is so important, makes it compulsory for ethics to dominate the marketing field in every sense.

It is difficult to conclude and state whether marketing is ethical or not (Dole, 2021). Ethics refers to the moral principles and rules behind

companies' marketing practices. Ethical principles, which are acceptable standards of promotional strategies, guide the production process of marketing. It is possible to find clues about ethics in definitions related to marketing. The American Marketing Association's (AMA) definition of marketing emphasizes the value-creating and beneficial aspect of marketing and draws attention to social responsibility. The definition emphasizes a holistic approach that covers all actors of marketing.

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes of creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offers that value customers, partners, and society. Marketing ethics goes beyond everyday, traditional and legal marketing issues and determines the norms and limitations that help to establish long-term marketing relationships (Dinçer & Dinçer, 2014). The most important factor causing this change is the evolution of marketing to digital.

Digital marketing is developing and implementing marketing strategies using artificial intelligence-supported applications. Today, the digital consumer needs help to understand whether a company behaves ethically in the internet environment where there is no physical interaction. Academicians are doing further research on this subject. Many studies investigating the ethical behavior of online sellers and consumers' ethical perceptions of online marketing and sales reveal different findings.

It is no longer a secret that companies collect and analyze information about consumers and competitors through various digital tools. On the other hand, there are suspicions that the consumer's personal information is breached. Studies examining the ethical concerns of online consumers reveal that consumers are most concerned about information privacy, web security, fraud, retailer reliability, and quality when purchasing online. According to the findings of Limbu et al. (2011)'s research that revealed the effects of the ethical elements associated with the websites of online retailers on the website satisfaction and loyalty of the consumers, perceived online ethics consists of four dimensions; security, privacy, non-deception, and fulfillment.

A perceived violation of these four dimensions can raise ethical concerns about online retailers. Ferrell et al. The analysis results of the surveys conducted by Ferrell at al.(2019) on 351 people reveal that 74.9% of the respondents value ethics and social responsibility equally. Furthermore,

consumers tend to develop greater loyalty to brands that maintain their ethical sensibilities.

It is possible to examine the ethical problems in functional areas of marketing. This study will evaluate digital ethics by classifying traditional marketing mix elements. In fact, product, price, place, and promotion, which are elements of the marketing mix, constitute the skeleton of marketing activities. The health and balance of this skeleton depend on the management of all elements in interaction and harmony with each other and the environment to respond to the demands of the target market (Gürbüz, 2018, p. 168). As each contains key points in ethical decision-making that will be examined separately in the next section of the st

Product Related Issues

Due to the interactive and connectivity capabilities of the internet, a new product concept emerged: the "virtual product"(Devi, 2021). The digital consumer is fortunate to research the best virtual product or service to meet their needs. Websites and other digital platforms are environments that live 24/7, promote the product and brand to online consumers, and where freely browse and purchase products, unlike physical stores. On the other hand, since consumers have chosen to procure their needs from the internet instead of physical stores, their interaction with marketing or sales personnel has decreased. While traditional marketing channels provide the opportunity to touch the product, compare and try its features, the opportunity to try the products offered in virtual marketplaces is limited. Since online shopping does not offer the opportunity to experience the product in addition to its numerous advantages, purchasing decisions are based mainly on the information available on the website (e.g., product images, description and graphics, and customer reviews). According to Limbu et al. (2011), this situation brings with it the possibility of dissatisfaction among online shoppers after purchasing. For this reason, brands are responsible for reaching digital consumers, who guarantee their future, to eliminate the worries and uncertainties about the purchasing process, especially the product.

Honesty is not a choice for brands, it is a necessity, and the first point to be frank with the consumer is what precisely the product/service is and what benefits it offers. Visual and audio elements that add value to the product by providing realistic, engaging, and reliable information about the product in a wide variety of online environments (forums, blogs, websites, and social

media) enable businesses to reach a much wider target audience in a short time (Coban & Dündar, 2020).

One of the most recent examples is the story of the test rabbit Ralfin. This anime character was started by Humane Society International, one of the world's most influential animal protection organizations, in early 2021 and spread on the internet with the "SaveRalpf" hashtag.



Source: https://www.hsi.org/saveralphmovie/

The institution drew attention to the use of animals in chemical poisoning tests in the production of cosmetics, and the campaign spread globally, causing cosmetics brands to turn their attention. In addition, information on companies that do or do not test on animals in their production has been announced, especially on social media.

The study of Saçan and Eren (2021), which aims to determine the marketing strategies that play a critical role for companies, determines that the most crucial factor in customers' expectations of the product they buy is product quality. Product quality means that the product design is designed to match the customers' wishes. Increasing expectations for the product have forced digital marketing to be more innovative than ever before. Product photos (color, layout, size, animation) are critical for web shops to reflect product quality because they help entice online shoppers. However, some brands go far beyond that:



Source: https://www.allbirds.com/products/womens-wool-runners

Known for its commitment to environmentally friendly manufacturing, Allbirds tracks its emissions throughout materials, manufacturing, and transportation and even publishes sustainability reports on web site. The brand even advertises the carbon footprint of each product.

The user expects the product information provided by SEO/SEM tools to be complete and truthful. Visual product presentations that do not reflect reality, are exaggerated, and inflated will negatively affect the purchasing decision-making process of the consumer or increase post-purchase dissatisfaction. The online store customer develops e-loyalty when the presentations of the products he/she examines on the web page are remarkable and the text information is legible. There is no difference between the product he/she sees and the product he/she buys.

Ethical issues with the product significantly impact the consumer-brand relationship because the attitude towards a company is formed with ethical considerations in mind. Consumers are always willing to purchase a product with high safety and quality, well-designed packaging, and environmental friendliness. (Lee et al., 2019). Digital consumers, who are frequently faced with disinformation, will maintain their loyalty to the product and the brand as long as accurate information comes from the brand.

Price Related Issues

Pricing is an essential part of the marketing strategy, and the consumer's primary goal is to buy a product/service at the right price. However, pricing has also gained a personalized and dynamic structure with digitalization. The digital user, who conducts price research from many channels daily, makes a purchase decision by comparing instant price offers in person or using comparison applications.

The technology used extensively for customer differentiation is an essential competitive tool used in price determination processes. Businesses gain an edge over their competitors by implementing planned dynamic pricing strategies that increase profitability. Dynamic pricing is an e-commerce pricing strategy that provides flexible prices to consumers by monitoring the real-time demand and competition situation in the market with the software, taking into account product costs, targeted profit shares, and competitor prices. Flexible pricing, special pricing, discount pricing, and psychological pricing policies specific to virtual marketing provide the customer with the desired flexibility and are used to ensure customer loyalty (Yurdakul & Kiracı, 2008).

On the other hand, destructive pricing, illegal pricing, and fraudulent pricing practices cause price injustice discussions and put the pricing issue in focus from an ethical point of view. Furthermore, consumers, who see that the prices of the products and services they examine are constantly changing, experience a loss of confidence (Avunduk, 2020). Nunan 2022 identifies digital pricing strategies as one of the promising areas. However, it emphasizes that policy and communication methods on how to obtain consent from consumers for the use of dynamic pricing techniques should also be developed in order to eliminate ethical concerns.

Today, industries and businesses, such as airlines, tourism, car rental, and e-commerce platforms, benefit from dynamic pricing to adjust product/service prices according to market trends, customer behavior, and competitor environment. Uber is a remarkable example at this point.



Source: https://research.aimultiple.com/dynamic-pricing-examples/

Uber's dynamic pricing algorithm, one of the ridesharing service providers with more than ~93,000,000 active users worldwide, adjusts ride fares based on the route's duration, distance, hours, and traffic density. Despite criticism for unfair pricing, Uber stands behind its algorithm, claiming the system helps it manage supply and demand issues and encourages drivers to work in harsh conditions. Uber is also blamed for something much more salient: it is argued that transportation charges tend to be higher for Chicago neighborhoods with high populations of color. However, again, Uber claims that it does not tolerate discrimination on its platform.

Place Related Issues

"Place" word refers to the distribution channels that enable the products to reach their buyers. These channels are intermediary businesses such as wholesalers, brokers, and retailers, responsible for delivering the product to the customer and undertaking the risks that may occur together with the seller (Yurdakul & Kiracı, 2008). Online selling has significantly reduced the number of such intermediaries acting as warehouses. Today, logistics is the customer's only contact point for virtual merchandising. Logistics is managing a series of operations, including the storage, transportation, and delivery of the product to the buyer.

The spread of digital transformation and commerce has made it necessary to adapt logistics to technology. E-Logistics has become a critical part of the online shopping chain thanks to real-time logistics information system applications, web-based inventory control and ordering system,

customer database applications, and many digital innovations (Gunasekaran et al., 2007, p. 20). Since the success of online marketing is directly proportional to the success of the logistics process, the positive increase in the logistics performance of the enterprise also greatly affects the marketing performance and customer satisfaction. Digital consumers are more demanding and time-sensitive on delivery time than traditional commerce. Therefore, meeting delivery deadlines is crucial to customer satisfaction and can improve or damage companies' reputations.

Technologies and tools such as sensors, the internet of things, cloud systems, mobile systems, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence are used in digitalized logistics management, just like in intelligent production. Technology-assisted logistics provides real-time and complete transparency in the supply chain and creates an efficient transport chain. E-logistics offers competitive benefits such as high optimization with big data analytics, access to information anywhere and anytime, better automation with decentralized and autonomous decision-making, fewer errors in complex processes, customer satisfaction, and flexibility in the supply process. On the other hand, the growth of internet retailing causes ethical concerns in consumers about accessing the product. Customer reviews on distribution are an essential determinant of marketing success. The online customer cares very much about the fast delivery of his order and prefers these brands. For this reason, it will be possible to overcome the problems by informing the buyer about the reasons for the stock error, late delivery, and information update errors that may occur in the logistics process (Limbu et al., 2011).



Source: https://www.shopify.com/retail/what-causes-a-stockout

According to Shopify, one of the world's largest online sales platforms; stockout is among the most frustrating experiences for online shoppers.

Bad customer experience with owning the product is frustrating for retailers. It does not only cause loss of revenue, but it can also cause damage to the brand. That is why e-commerce companies prefer to cooperate with successful and fast distribution companies.

Promotion Related Issues

Promotion, the integrative element of the marketing mix, requires examining many ethical-oriented issues such as a multi-branched tree. These topics are the most potent marketing tools, such as data usage, digital advertising, e-mail, and social media.

Adapting to digital is not a choice but a necessity for brands. Advertising trends are also changing rapidly by keeping up with the digital transformation, forcing brands to adapt to it simultaneously. Personalized advertising is the most crucial advertising strategy today - but also shortly. Today, digital advertising, especially personalized advertising, is one of the most debated ethical issues. Research shows that consumers find digital advertising intrusive, prefer to avoid repetitive messages, and think that the advertising messages they see in digital environments are not relevant to the product and service. On the other hand, online advertising enables businesses to reach a wide range of potential customers, unlike the cost and time-consuming nature of traditional advertising.

Webs Advertisements aim to promote the product and increase sales by attracting traffic. On the other hand, it is an unethical practice to set up "clickbait" to attract users using Ads. The most common example is the "Accept Cookies" and "Reject" confirmation windows that appear before the user can access a website when he or she visits a website. In addition, click traps create "digital temptation" by attracting individuals to entertaining and attractive advertising content on digital platforms. This situation, in contrast to the liberal creation of the internet, makes consumers vulnerable to realistically identifying their needs and controlling their spending.



Source: https://www.npr.org

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, explained how companies target users through their data at a Congressional hearing in 2018. To target something, Facebook also ranks and determines which ads will be interesting to which people.

It is essential to be as accurate as possible when advertising on social media. However, today, the separation between news and advertisements has become unclear. Bloggers and influencers share many commercial purposes, companies acquire fake followers, and users are heavily exposed to advertisements to create advertising pollution. Furthermore, advertisements not published in traditional media due to legal obstacles or social reaction concerns find their place in new media by taking advantage of legal loopholes.

Companies collect customer data to improve their products and management strategies. A successful digital marketing strategy means successful use of data, but data security is the most fundamental problem of the internet today. The method of obtaining the data is essential, whether it is obtained by business efforts or by unethical means. Every step designed to capture and segment the potential customer has to get the approval of the interlocutor. The responsibility here must depend on the consumer's consent, not on the request of the data collector. The consumer, who gives consent for the use of data, will play an active role in creating more exciting and meaningful content for him. The mutual and long-term results of the benefit created in this way will be satisfactory for both sides.

As a global brand, Netflix has been subjected to intense criticism due to its data usage ethics. In 2018, many black Netflix users realized that the player in the suggestions they encountered was a black actor. They argued that black actors were used for racial profiling despite having minor roles.



Source: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/

Like father is presented with black actors Leonard Ouzts and Blaire Brook as the stars instead of Kristen Bell (right)

Sending e-mails promoting products to current and potential customers is one of the most common marketing tactics today. The subject that leads this practice to ethical questioning is sending e-mails without permission. Sending spam mail to people unrelated to the product is an inappropriate method. The consumer, unaware of and manipulated by the marketing tactics, is the victim of a significant ethical violation of digital marketing. While corporate companies know that such methods will negatively affect their commercial activities, medium and small-sized digital sellers have yet to reach the ideal level of awareness in this regard.

Thanks to the internet, humanity is more interconnected than ever, and people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, beliefs, and lifestyles are exposed to different forms of digital marketing. In order to operate in a global market, digital content creators need to understand the ethical and moral values of different cultures because a marketing strategy that is considered successful and ethical in one culture may be the opposite in another. It is the marketers' responsibility to identify these differences before their campaign planning. Companies should objectively reveal the characteristics of these groups before planning campaigns for target audiences with unfamiliar demographic characteristics.

Digital marketing is independent of the ethical awareness of the practitioners. It is an area with ethical rules that depend on national and international legal regulations. There are many principles, rules, and guidelines in this field. In particular, the regulations of the professional associations on marketing ethics put pressure on businesses and hold them responsible for their actions. At this point, the subject of discussion is their

enforcement power. Therefore, when the control mechanism works correctly, it will be possible to reach the ideal application results regarding promotion.

Conclusion

It is impossible to consider digital marketing problems separately from traditional marketing. Ethical issues related to digital marketing are new technology-oriented problems added to the general inquiries of traditional marketing.

Although some researchers explain digital marketing as the realization of traditional marketing practices through digital channels, it has more significant advantages for businesses when compared to traditional marketing practices. First, it provides a tremendous economic benefit. It offers a competitive advantage thanks to its differences, such as simultaneous interaction with the target audience, updates ability, creativity, and innovation openness (Bulunmaz, 2016). On the other hand, the need for more ethical principles and legal regulations on personal information, privacy, and consumer protection in new media environments and the low awareness of users unfamiliar with new technologies leave ethical responsibility to the initiative of marketing practitioners. In the age of big data and AI marketing, marketers need more precise boundaries on what is and is not a privacy breach. (Limbu et al., 2011) In most cases, more is needed for consumers to take precautions to ensure their data security. For this reason, brands should not see personal data as a marketing tool but should treat it as "consumers' privacy."

The digital consumer, who believes that the internet is an area of freedom and takes full advantage of its comfort, is more conscious of modern marketing tactics than in the past and trusts what he sees on the internet less than before. This situation forces marketers to develop new methods to reach the target audience. On the other hand, marketing practitioners working under the pressure of creativity have a vital responsibility to convince the consumer that new methods and strategies are ethical. Therefore, ethical decision-making is a critical issue to consider before implementing a digital marketing strategy.

Ethical decision-making in digital marketing should be applied at all stages. This state of honesty should be reflected in the marketing mix elements, including everything from raw material information used in the

product to the logistics process and advertising content, from sincerity in social media to approaches to competitors. As shown in Figure 1, ethical sales and marketing will have positive effects on all elements of the marketing mix (product, price, place, and promotion), thereby increasing the customer value proposition (Madhani, 2020).

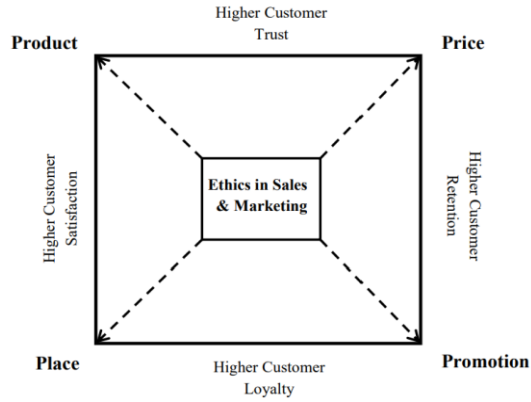

Figure 1: Ethics in Sales and Marketing: Customer Perspectives, Madhani 2020

The primary ethical responsibility of marketing practitioners is to plan the "profitable" for the business and do the "right thing" for the consumer. Research shows that digital consumers prefer to buy products and services from brands that promote their products and pay attention to ethical considerations in their marketing efforts. Digital companies must take all precautions not to violate privacy rules. In this direction, companies should use various security tools and applications such as privacy policy statements, SSL certificates, quality website designs, consumer reviews, reference group recommendations, and money-back guarantees to increase their perceived reliability (Peterson et al., 2007: 657).

The truth has to be the standard parameter of all marketing processes. Adopting ethical philosophy at every point of the marketing process will enable brands to gain high sales by increasing their market share and brand value and gaining customer trust and loyalty. In addition, a brand that acts according to ethical rules and guidelines becomes a center of attraction for all its stakeholders. Raw material suppliers, current and potential employees, customers, dealers, and all other stakeholders are pleased to be with these businesses and believe their values increase in this way.

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