

TO STUDY MEANS OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USED BY REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS IN INDIA DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The Covid 19 pandemic brought life to a standstill, but like water finds ways to flow out and reach its own level, so is the case with business houses, which have learnt to carve a way out of this pandemic to thrive and succeed. In the Real Estate sector, there has been a steady movement towards adoption of digital tools. Industry experts foresee a complete shift towards digital platforms whether it is in the process of search or shortlisting of properties. The biggest lesson learnt during this season of extended lockdown is that the only thing constant is change. Wisdom lies in adapting to change and turning towards technology is one such change. What is more heartening is that there is enough evidence that several real estate developers have registered good sales because of having shifted gears towards digital platforms? In this do or die situation, developers have innovated digital walkthrough videos of projects and attracted the attention of their prospective clients. The research will study the different marketing communication strategies adopted by developers through digital channel during lockdown period. ie websites, Facebook & Instagram account.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Tools, COVID 19, Real Estate Developers, Digital Platforms, Lockdown Period, Marketing Communication Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

The crux of any marketing is convincing, and how can convincing be done without communication? In real estate it assumes an even greater magnitude because it involves convincing the client to invest his life's savings into maybe his dream home. It provides credible ideas to reach prospective buyers in the most effective way to bring clarity in selling lots and understanding with clarity the finances involved in the project. What is most important is that it touches emotions, builds trust and stays in the minds of future buyers.

Marketing Communication mix is a powerfully integrated term where one can see personal selling, direct response marketing, sales promotion, media advertisement and most importantly public relations. Each of these marketing tools is used to conduct strategic activities to communicate with the target audience. In the present scenario, potential homeowners and buyers are using the internet to research their choices. Keeping this in mind, an innovative and yet powerful marketing strategy will help realtors to keep competition at bay.

Till not very long ago, investing in a property was an act of luxury affordable only by the richest. What is more, the process of buying or selling property involved a lengthy protocol of endless flow of documents and identifying a reliable broker who could execute the deal. With more technological innovations, this trend has seen a slow dilution. It has

been observed that buyers have started to use the online platform to research and decide virtually to create a list of properties they would like to visit and check out physically. The limitless world of the digital platform has brought about a change in the way decisions about properties are made by buyers. The blending of the digital market with the needs of the real estate is seamless as of today, a two-way conversation between the consumer and the seller which is crucial for creating and sustaining consumer engagement.

Unless the developer gets to know his buyer well and know exactly what his interests are, he will not be able to strike the deal. Real estate developers can take the next step to look beyond the urban metros to reach out to the next billion internet users.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Method Adopted for Carrying out Research

Secondary Data Source: Data Analysis from different Real Estate Website Portals, Facebook Page & Instagram account of selected developers. Data Analysis from different Real estate property portals i.e. Koltepatil, Hiranandani, Tata housing, Ana rock, housing.com,

Data is collected from Online real estate Portals, Webinars, current Articles related to Covid 19 marketing strategies adopted by developers & their viewpoints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Title: A Study on the Impact of Online Marketing on Indian Real Estate Business (Sept 2018) Yuvraj, Viral Shrivastava, Vedant Agrawal Anshuman Maggu, Avinash Agnihotri

The research paper studied the impact of online marketing on Indian real estate sector. Real estate sector is highly competitive & is acquiring lead position. It is highly organised using digital channels. Developers currently are using Search advertising, property portal listings, banner advertising, social media advertising, content marketing, video marketing & experiential marketing (Virtual marketing). Increase in online sales. Online portals help to increase brand recall value. Major B2B business transaction takes place through online portals.

Online Marketing focuses on convenience, internet usage & reviews. The research paper highlighted the disadvantage is to convince the customer & to decide between online & offline agencies. Inbound marketing is gaining major advantage in online marketing.

Title: Digital Marketing and Its Impulsiveness in Real Estate (Dec 2017) Harjyot Kaur

(Harjyot Kaur, Dec 2017) The research paper highlights digital marketing as a unique platform where marketers use to interact with consumer. Digital Marketing & ecommerce has changed the traditional transactional methods. Ecommerce when combined with digital marketing has negative impact on intermediaries & agents in real estate sector. Digital marketing which includes web marketing, internet marketing & online marketing has set benchmark across globe. Internet has created a platform for online auctions. Websites supports sales procedure in real estate, which helps in online transaction. Online Website is invading traditional methods. Listings, searching, evaluation & negotiation are practised during digital transactions. Legal System is facing difficulty in online transactions. New technological environment used customers as top priority. Internet is a way to save time and retrieve information. Customers has lot of options in today's

time, they visit website, money guarantee and easy replacement & return. Digital Marketing has 24/7 service with amount of transparency. Web Internet Marketing & ecommerce has great future in present in current market scenario.

The paper highlighted certain challenges for physical retailers. New threats & opportunities are identified in various sectors. Future of real estate is in ecommerce in real estate which is auspicious. Scope of improvement in efficiency & competency is expected. Online transaction & digital transaction will be increased, as there is a better access to data. Development of cities & e property management & CRM

Sales during Lockdown

Real time stories tell us stories to prove that the pandemic hasn't been able to dampen sales. Tanuj Shori, CEO of Square Yards vouchsafes the fact that they were able to sell about 3000 properties during this lockdown period. The search portal of No Brokers is alive with over 2000 property transactions, they are constantly in touch with owner and buyers online. During the 21-day lockdown in March, when the entire India was trying to understand how to deal with this sudden halt, Godrej Properties was able to sell 500 units. Not only Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and MMR saw maximum bookings. Mr. Anuj Puri, Chairman, Anarock Group, summed it well when he said, "Despite the coronavirus-induced nationwide lockdown and all on-ground activity halted since March 25, the group has successfully closed the digital sale of 240 homes worth ₹214.6 crore and 62 office spaces collectively worth ₹37 crore."

Marketing Strategies during Covid 19

It has been recorded that Realtors have during this crisis period, relied heavily on digital platforms for communicating with their prospective buyers through channels like Emails, WhatsApp, SMS, and Social Media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Developers have said that Online bookings, online payment schemes and lowest ever home loan interest rates have made a sea change to transactions during this period of social distancing. Some of the more innovative marketing techniques are the option of online project tours, which has enhanced the virtual experience of clients even from within the confines of their homes. A healthy exchange of online interactions with clients has helped developers create their database. Realtors have used this opportunity to make offers like 6-months EMI free and donation of booking amount to the PM Relief Fund. Manoj Gaur, MD of Gaur Groups sounds excited when he says, "Real estate sector came out with innovative online schemes through which a home seeker can easily book his home or even a commercial unit without the hassle of a site visit. Realizing this very early, we activated our digital teams and CRMs to exploit modern technology". Mr. Yash Miglani, MD of Migsun says that they had been familiar with digital platforms even earlier, but the lockdown surely accelerated sales and the digital tools came to full use during this crisis. "Lockdown did pose a hurdle, but our processes helped us to overcome it. We launched virtual tours and EMI moratorium schemes as the lockdown was extended. During lockdown 3.0 and 4.0, buyers who came wanted better living in group housing projects and were getting the benefits of flexible payment plans," adds Miglani. Mr. Puri of Anarock is realistic in his statement when he says, "Many of these sales were in the final leg of the deal and others were open. Partnering with leading developers and negotiating good bargains for buyers were our key success factors, as always." In this way, they were able to overcome the struggle in the initial days of the lockdown but were quick to take up the slack and took benefit of the emerging opportunity.

Digital Sales during Lockdown Period

This brings us to the crux of the analysis of the digital sales during the lockdown period. The observation is that digital sales have surely seen an upsurge and there are numerous examples to quote for the same. To take the case of Anarock's proprietary one-stop technology platform IDSS (Integrated Digital Sales Solution), it is seen to integrate all property sales operation, right from discovery to engagement and transactions, virtually. It is able to connect customers, developers and brokers on the same platform and delivers real time inventory updates, helps select apartments virtually, offers all the necessary collaterals like e-brochures, product videos etc., video conferences with the sales teams and maintains and assists in all necessary documentation.

Digital Sales during Lockdown Period

Pravin Jain, President at NAREDCO is hopeful of this new normal when he says, "How the activities take place in coming months will redefine and the path with which demand will come. Most of the developers have started new strategies of selling their homes through digital. All the developers are active on digital and during lockdown many people purchased also." Vikas Wadhawan, Group CFO at PropTiger.com voices a similar opinion when he says, "We will see massive adoption of technology as an outcome of COVID-19. In initial first two weeks there was decline in inquiries but then it all came back as we became more active on digital platforms. The customer is more inclined towards listening to developers and real estate representatives, which was achieved through webinars also; a lot of webinars were organized where projects were explained, and we saw a lot of expression of interest and online bookings. It is an interesting development and the digital adoption will increase here onward." Video conferencing zoom calls and all other modes of virtual meets became the buzz word in real estate marketing communication. Mohit Malhotra, managing director at Godrej Properties endorsed this fact when he said, "During lockdown, we used videoconferencing, zoom calls effectively. We reworked sales by leveraging technology. Actually we digitized sales process one and half years ago," At Shapoorji Pallonji Real estate, an integral part of the Shapoorji Pallonji Group, the massive use of the digital platform has put the sales representative on the 'driver's seat' giving him access to all digital tools like location USP, Google maps view, sample flat photos, master layout pictures and all other project related information, opines its chief executive, Mr. Venkatesh Gopalkrishnan. Bhasker Jain, head sales, marketing & CRM at The Wadhwa Group goes further to prove this point by saying, "On-call support, WhatsApp Assistance, virtual site tours and online booking features are made available to enhance the customer's experience." Godrej Properties said that it sold over 500 homes in the second half of March 2020 using digital sales tools.

Another way of adding to the customer experience is seen during the Covid crisis is that, builders and brokers have begun to offer the option to cancel online bookings devoid of penalty if the case so arises that the customer changes his decision to make the purchase once the lock down is lifted. This surely increases the comfort level of the customer, who is treading on unsure grounds when confirming a decision taken after virtual meetings. Realty firms have reinvented the new normal to enhance their online marketing campaign budget and are actively advertising on their websites as well as on online property classifieds. Social media platforms like Facebook, are also being used for marketing purposes. This has made lead generation an easy job and builders and brokers are looking forward to sales materializing in the later stages of the lock down. Hiranandani group MD, Mr. Niranjan Hiranandani says, "the lockdown has translated into no walk-ins or personal visits either to a sales office or a project site, but it does not stop the communication process. To replicate the

experience of site visits while sitting at home,” he says, “the company is using a combination of various platforms based on the internet of things (IoT) as well as leveraging virtual walk-through and 3D imaging based on artificial intelligence and machine learning. Ready digital walk-through technology and slice view technology for providing a 3D view of buildings and apartments while employees are using video calls to connect builders with customers. “Though there is a general slowdown in all aspects, technology has come in with a ray of hope into the life of marketing communication. Customers have more time at hand to research freely on these available platforms and approach the builders and brokers through virtual calls like Skype calls, zoom calls and Google meets. The smooth transition from face-to-face meetings to meetings on virtual platforms has seamlessly coordinated the sales and marketing activity, ensuring no damage to customer experience.

Model to Sustain Sales

The study has led us to realize that this new normal has brought changes in the marketing communication to keep the sales going and if one was to create a viable model to sustain the same, they would have

Model to Sustain Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digitization of entire sales cycle. Interacting customers digitally Further Investment – Digital Tools. 360* degree views. Location USP, Google maps view, Sample flat photos, Master layout pictures E-Brochures Product Videos
Lockdown Offers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovating on booking deals Transparent exits Refund clause valid – 15-30 days. Flexible payment plans Pay10 % pay rest in 2021 EMI Free till 31st July 2021
Enables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer to execute sales even during lockdown with safety cushion.
Deeper engagement with channel partners & strategic clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including them in decision making in these dynamic times is strengthening relationships which will prove beneficial over long run as well
Virtual Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New age marketing tools. Digital platforms & Apps
Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video conferencing to online project tours Digital campaigns Innovative online schemes Families to virtually interact. Skype calls, zoom calls and Google meets Webinars Project offers page Online booking Page.
Online chatbots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WhatsApp assistance Virtual site tours AR /VR – visual depiction of projects alive.
Technology driven Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online sales platform AR /VR Drone Based Surveys 3D Visualisation & Safe confines & Without need to visit project site. 3D imaging based on Artificial intelligence and machine learning Automation Software – CRM Software. IDSS (Integrated Digital Sales Solution)

Figure: 1

Conclusion: New Normal during Covid 19

Adapting to the new normal during the Covid 19 in terms of marketing communication in real estate is visible and has fetched the desired result. Social media has been used extensively to communicate. Kolte Patil Developers with a simple yet profound hashtag of #DividedWeUnite, has touched the hearts of the buyers who would look up to them as Developers who care for the country and its safety. Some of their Facebook and Instagram slogans depict the sensitive thoughts behind

their promotions that bring about their awareness of the crisis time and their care to deal with clients during that time. “Divided from the world, United with the family,” and an even more succinct one to ward off rumours, “Divided by false rumours united by the right precautions.” Taking full advantage of the lockdown they announced on social media- “YEAR Closure Deal – 20th-31st March – Big Savings, Great Surprises & Exciting Offers”, it was a very wise campaign that was bound to work on immediate sales. Their contribution during these hard times is not worthy and has been visible on all platforms-

- Kolte Patil; Group commit 25 Lakhs to CM Relief Fund to challenge the hard times and empower the affected communities.
- Extending support in hard times by feeding & sheltering labours and their families
- Providing food & shelter to 4000+ labours & their families- Across all camps present in our ongoing sites across Pune.

They have brought in innovation in their promotional videos like JAY VIJAY: Experience or home without leaving yours, 24 Star gaze Mindspace, #Gharhi Manzilhai etc., Their Hashtag #WESTEPUP to fulfil your dreams showcased 6 benefits of Kolte Patil Developers to make investing today an ideal choice-

- Zero cancellation charges
- Investment Price Protection
- User Friendly Virtual Assistance
- Irresistible deals with value pricing
- Pocket Friendly Emi
- Lower Ever Interest Rate

Kolte Patil Developers have utilized this crisis time to print articles and publish interviews in prominent platforms for media visibility. Collection trends & Construction activity amid lockdown – ET Now 25th June was a strategic move in marketing communication to be most impactful. The company hopes to make the best of the digital platforms to generate sales in the months to come by engaging with the customers online. They offer online booking pages for all amenities and documentation like payment schemes, Maha RERA number, configuration details, Project 360* view, Project walk through, Project video etc., They have made their presence felt through online and offline publications in prominent papers like Sakal, Live Mint, Money Control, Business India to name some. The result is 180 Bookings during lockdown & over 222 families have put faith in our projects in month of March & April 2020.

To showcase a few more similar examples we have, the Hiranandani Group with its popular slogans like Restart 2020 in a new home, Social distancing form EMI and Goodbye EMI see you next year. They have conducted virtual summer camps with contest alerts and prominent hashtag of # we will win. Tata Housing has also come out with lockdown slogans like Happiness is Home, Chill from Home which hints at stay safe at home while making a statement. HDFC loans have organized online property show named Dream Home Online showcasing 60 projects of 31 Developers.

Selling real estate has assumed a new garb in this time of lockdown, and that is the digital mode, which was until now not used to its fullest potential. As is with all new ventures, new strategies will evolve with time, and developers will leave no stone unturned to reach out to the millennials, who form the chunk of the buyers. Digitalization will give real estate a new face. It will bring with it added benefits like speed and transparency. Real estate marketing is now on a new track filled with opportunities.

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