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IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND EDUCATION IN DIGITAL B2B INSTRUMENTS IMPLEMENTATION

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Keywords: digital technologies, B2B marketing, marketing communications, education, human resources.

ABSTRACT

The study aims to analyse the role of human resources and education in digital B2B instruments implementation.

A major difficulty in launching B2B mobile communications lies in the age of participants which complicates education of new technologies; this requires deep involvement of companies' field employees.

Information technologies are irreplaceable in terms of finding consumers with actual needs, yet the human resources and the potential of individual communication should be connected.

The authors use field research (IDIs) and studies of open scientific sources. The comparative analysis of the theory and the practical data allows building new knowledge in digital B2B development.

Keywords: digital technologies, B2B marketing, marketing communications, education, human resources.

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INTRODUCTION.

Specificity of B2B market.

Today, B2B market is quite diverse, consisting of both small players and big corporations with their typical activities and the chains of relationship building. B2B market participants play different roles in these transactions, being sellers, buyers, or partners. These relations can be defined as a kind of exchange between the two businesses. The market exists in two environments, online and

offline, and we observe the synergy of using these environments, leading to an integrated result (Marketer's notes, 2019).

According to Sean Geehan, "it's not just necessary but vital to understand the difference between the 'consumer and business markets' (Sean, G., 2011) that is especially important for the digital communications. In an unsaturated market, the competition was mainly manifested in B2C markets, but since the 90s it moved to B2B, making it faster to introduce innovations in this segment (Lynch, 2010). Distribution channels were reformed into marketing channels with an increasingly complex structure in the digital economy (Kiryukov, S.I., 2011). However, according to Gulakova O.V., the existing researches do not prove the work with consumers at B2B markets is opposed to what exists in B2C, in spite of having peculiarities (Gulakova, O.V., Rebyazina, V.A., Smirnova, M.M., 2019).

The following B2B market peculiarities are singled out:

- Specific products and services requiring informational promotion: for example, construction equipment, software, banking or insurance services, telecommunications, sophisticated communications equipment, production lines, etc. The specificity of such products determines the fact that they will be bought only after the preliminary study of all the characteristics, instructions, nuances of use, and all the possibilities of operation within a particular business. Indication of possible problems is required for the buyer to evaluate the prospects of the transaction.
- The variety of points of contact with the client. They appear at every stage of work process: client attraction, initial contact, prerequisites, order, execution, support, signing a contract, post-sales service. According to statistics, any company in B2B segment has approximately 115 points of contact, i.e. situations and reasons for the customer to contact the company (Bobrikov, O.V., 2015).
- In relation to B2B market, the concept of product is considered in a broad sense and implies the inclusion of related services. In the marketing mix system of B2B companies, there is no sale of goods but the proposal of solutions (Baryshev, A.V., 2007).
- With the growth of competition in B2B segment, companies begin to actively supplement the sale of product with a service, and with market development, the share of the added value of services is steadily growing.
- In the marketing of corporate companies, there is a lower price elasticity of demand compared to the mass consumer demand of B2C segment, which in turn is very susceptible to discounts, promotions and other marketing tools (Furschik, A.A., 2007).
- A distribution network plays the fundamental role in B2B, expressed in its influence on all the other components of the marketing mix and in the fact that it sets in motion most of the enterprise's resources (Titarev, D.A., 2012).
- Decision time in B2B is much longer in comparison to B2C segment, since this process encompasses a large number of people and is very complex. The transactions in business-to-business segment are more serious than at

the consumer market. Therefore, the educational component plays the important role in B2B communications.

- There are also the multi directional interests of the transaction participants, when all the parties with even a small degree of decision making express their requirements: for example, the buyers want to conclude a profitable financial transaction, the production department searches to increase productivity, the managers of the security department set the task to reduce the risks. The importance of the human factor in B2B segment is extremely high. This factor is often underestimated in B2B, and mostly attributed to B2C market.

Trends in digital marketing, trade marketing and sales in B2B.

Competition at any level is impossible without technological innovations that appeared on the market in the last decade. At the same time, it is important that organizations in both B2B and B2C sphere have a clear idea of the goals for which new technologies are being introduced (Wright, R., 2007). B2B marketing is a relatively new direction, formed on the basis of a long parallel development and subsequent integration of industrial marketing, entrepreneurial marketing, and B2B marketing online. There is a reason to believe that in terms of importance in the modern economy and in the total volume of transactions, B2B markets are increasingly superior to B2C markets (Beck, M. A., 2008).

According to J.J. Lamben, traditional marketing became the ‘architect of the consumer society’, and B2B marketing can act as architect of more competitive value chains, market networks, clusters, more efficient public and private partnerships, and national innovation systems which will increase the efficiency of national economies and the global economy as a whole (Lambin J., Schuiling I., 2012). Since the appearance of first digital technologies, the major challenge for marketing is a real assessment of the boundaries of innovations in the digital sphere – to what extent companies needed them and what consequences their introduction could lead to, and how effectively they could be integrated with traditional marketing communications (Chaffey, D., Mayer, R., Johnston, K., & Chadwick, F., 2006). Meanwhile, marketing and sales are catching up with digital technologies which have taken off at a rapid pace.

- Massive spread of retargeting and lead cooking technologies, combined with the cheapening and dissemination of Big Data technologies, will allow even the small and medium-sized B2B businesses to have their own ‘Big data’, to automatically customize the heating messages and to transfer the collected user data to CRM, following the mobile phones operators, banks and large corporations. “To succeed, a business-to-business (B2B) company needs a lot of sales leads” (Boachie, P., 2018). The process of marketing automation is fragmented by using services that are poorly integrated with each other; there is a need for integrated systems that allow tracking the client’s path from the first contact to the target action, and to organize the work correctly at each stage of the sales funnel.

- The development of targeted personalization technologies and one-to-one marketing, the further orientation of B2B to Account Based Marketing (ABM) or Marketing of key customers is a concept which perfectly conveys the Pareto principle: 80% of revenue falls to 20% of customers. “In a survey of 115 marketing specialists in B2B roles, Omobono found that 79% rated social media as the most effective marketing channel, with 38% noting that if they had extra budget for the next year, they would spend it on social media” (Chaffey, D., 2018). In the ABM concept, the client is, in fact, a separate market. A list of the most important customers (accounts) is compiled and, in the context of each of them, the needs are analyzed, the action plan and the personalized offers are developed, and the personalized content is created and sent (via e-mail, social networks and other channels). In ABM, the marketing is closely integrated with sales and not only focused on attracting leads. Marketing campaigns are individual in nature, thereby achieving a higher ROI than in the case of mass campaigns.
- The content transformation (proportionality, cleanliness, interactivity) follows the principle of ‘less content, more quality’ and comes from the issue that there is so much content developed that users do not have time to process it, and the return on each new unit is reduced. This phenomenon is called content shock, coupled with active promotion through various channels: social networks, blogs, media, and e-mail. The selected content better performs the specific tasks in B2B. Content is created not for the sake of content, but with a specific goal – to engage consumers, to show the level of expertise, and to increase the brand awareness. It forces B2B representatives to look for forms of engagement that stand out from the crowd. It involves the help of rescue infographics, lead generating quizzes, calculators, pickers, online applications, etc. (Johnson, R.C., 2018).
- Virtual reality (VR) becomes the standard of work and part of the normal process of presenting the company's products and services, one of the most important demonstration technologies for B2B, which allows speaking about active development of immersive marketing. VR remains the ‘blue ocean’ for the most advanced digital companies in Russia and worldwide. It is proved by rapid growth of demonstration technologies based on virtual reality and along with them the corresponding companies that represented the classical digital in the past. This trend is very interesting for B2B, since it brings new dimensions in presenting products and services. Investments in 360 ° videos will pay off with a large amount of their use.
- Robotization of sales and service departments (raising the hopes within the business community as a revolutionary means a couple of years ago) does not pay off in a large number of business cases due to the high cost of robots and customer dissatisfaction with them; this is especially true for B2B. Despite the rapid development of digital technology, the development of sales with a human face is remaining relevant. The multiple sellers already start searching for more potential customers at different types of events presenting the opportunity of personal and much closer communication. Moreover, modern information technologies have huge potential in terms of searching for ‘warm’ customers, in other words, customers with actual needs. Generation Z does not demonstrate the best results in sales nowadays, primarily because of the widely distributed

informational-fragmentary syndrome which is the type of their communication (Mayboroda, A., 2017).

- Technologies for rapid creation of training systems are expected to improve the quality of B2B communications. Mass distribution of corporate training systems will create a large market and increase the general level of skills of sales specialists (at least in Russia). Successful sellers must 'pump' their personal sales skills through modern training technologies, master the personalized approach to sales both at the IT level and at the level of psychological techniques, and also turn to the development of their own intuition and the correct understanding of the interlocutor. Similar technologies might be integrated into communication, education and development of trade partners, especially in the field (both wholesale and retail).
- Sellers and businesses are actively looking for new lead generation channels. Today, businesses start talking about the active use of lead mining technologies, which is a well-forgotten old method consisting of three stages: 1) monitoring media and social networks by keywords lying in the area of company competence; 2) active contact search; 3) understanding customer problems via involvement into discussion with the client. Lead mining is the process where the seller is actively looking for customers relevant to solve a particular problem right now, and this trend will grow in B2B segment.
- The new stage of cooperation in SMM begins in B2B segment. Today, presence in social networks is desirable for any trading company, including B2B. Every social channel, including Instagram, is being used in B2B trade and services. B2B has its own opinion leaders, and cooperation can take various forms: brand mentioning or approval, joint content creation, and direct advertising. The main trend is concentrating efforts on the 'micro-niche' agents of influence. The agents have their own narrow audience. Working with microbloggers has its advantages: a) relatively low advertising cost; b) a higher level of confidence of 'their' audience than in case of famous personalities.
- Mobile technologies are far from providing the optimal effect expected by business yet. The mobile industry is in general a good business; however, in B2B it is unlikely to start selling independently, without the integration with other communication and trading platforms. The role of human resources is still very high here.

Digitalization of education, including B2B.

Today, the human capital is becoming a dominant factor of innovative development, and success of companies depends on the quality of formation of this capital. The fourth technological revolution, which is rapidly gaining momentum, is leading to a gradual revision of the basic paradigm and models of education, especially in the B2B segment.

Global processes of transition to the digital economy and digital society increase the importance of studying digitalization of education and of training companies' employees as well as trade partners (Straughan, 2010). Digitalization of learning means full transition to digital education with the help of distance technologies, i.e. using digital technology to change the

business model and to create new learning opportunities. Experts emphasize the significant differences between digitalization and automation in the educational process, which began much earlier.

Automation means using digital technology to simplify and standardize repetitive operations, while digitalization means using digital technology to introduce innovations in the learning process, including business, in order to increase its effectiveness. Thus, digitalization is a complex process of transformation not only of a model but also of a learning paradigm (Katkalo, Volkova, 2017).

Various scientific literature describe digitalization of the educational process as ongoing transformation of elements of the educational process, on the one hand, and digital technologies and tools used in it, on the other hand, in order to maximize the potential didactic capabilities of digital technologies. (Project of the didactic concept of digital professional education and training, 2019, p. 65). There are the three components of the digital society that became factors for digital education formation and development (Project of the didactic concept of digital professional education and training, 2019, p. 8):

1. Digital generation which has special socio-psychological and professional characteristics;
2. New digital technologies that form and develop the digital environment;
3. Digital economy and new staffing requirements generated by it.

METHODOLOGY

This research contains the sources that reveal the main trends in the field of B2B communications and digitalization, classification of digital and B2B, trends and complications of digital education as well as the authors' own developments. It includes the market studies (in-depth interviews) of retailers move to digital technologies in their work with the international companies.

The authors use the qualitative researches of 2018: surveys of 20 business owners and 20 shop assistants in retail points of sale in Moscow and Novosibirsk in regards to using digital tools in work with business partners. The study continues in 2019 and reveals the advantages and difficulties of working with digital instruments, highlighting the importance of education of pre-digital generation as well as the role of human resources (trade representatives) during the phase of tools implementation and afterwards.

The authors used the example of tobacco companies as the ones limited in channels of communication and focusing on B2B marketing and developing the relationships with their trade partners. The study consisted of the following points:

- Retailers' profile;
- Discussing current business and probable difficulties;
- Participation in trade programs in general and of tobacco companies in particular;

- Understanding types of trade programs and the retailers' motivation to participate in them;
- Discussing the importance of communication of retailers with sales representatives of tobacco companies: its pluses and minuses;
- Moving to digital tools while working with the trade programs: benefits and disadvantages;
- Possible improvements;
- Roles of sales representatives while moving to digital channels and afterwards;
- Importance of education;

FINDINGS.

Development of digital technologies (advent of smartphones, expansion and acceleration of Internet, the development of the mobile application market) helped the business community come up with the idea of transferring part of trade and trade marketing activities into the digital mobile. A major purpose here is to increase the speed and frequency of interaction among trade partners, improve business (sales) targets achievement and to save time of sales representatives.

International corporations already began moving to digital B2B as the opportunity for expanding current business and promoting new products by accelerating and improving the communication with their partners, setting clear goals, increasing control, managing assortment and investment efficiency, collecting field information, training trade partners, and increasing their loyalty to company products. However, the tools themselves are not perfect yet and do not provide with instant returns, which is partly driven by the low readiness of the market participants to new technologies and requires the additional efforts in regards to training and control.

The authors used the example of tobacco companies that have limited access to end consumers via marketing programs and mostly focus on building loyal relationships with trade partners. The authors conducted the field (market) study in relation to tobacco companies represented in Russia: Philip Morris, JTI, BAT, Imperial Tobacco, and Don Tobacco.

Generally, most retail outlets have agreements with manufacturing companies to carry out a certain number of trade programs at their retail outlets. Such programs might include (in addition to fulfilling the sales plan) creating goods' stock, building goods availability at points of sale (preventing 'out of stock'), and performing marketing tasks such as product visibility, displaying, placing promotional materials in outlets, education and advocacy (trade partners promoting products to the final consumer).

Outlet owners receive bonuses from manufacturing companies for storing an agreed stock and managing other permitted activities at points of sales, while their staff (shop assistants) usually executes the programs in sales points by getting an additional source of income that makes them more loyal to the producing companies.

Along with development of digital technologies (advent of smartphones, growth of Internet coverage, development of mobile applications), industrial companies began to include mobile technologies into B2B communication with trade partners. The major aim is to delegate them part of trade marketing and merchandising tasks, as well as to increase the quality of education and the speed of cooperation while saving time of trade representatives. Education of trade partners, as a rule, is a major responsibility of sales representatives and takes a significant part of field time (visit time to points of sale). Table 1 shows the approximate content of a mission (field visit):

Table 1. Call-mission (field visit time split).

Group of activities	Activities	Field time
Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New products introduction - Negotiations - Taking the orders 	20%
Merchandising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Product availability - Product visibility - Point of sale materials placement - Category education 	40%
Brand and field education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shop assistant involvement and education - Shop assistant activation - Advocacy - Trade programs implementation - Information collection - Building loyalty 	30%

Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coaching - Compliance check - Problem solving - Other 	10%
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Source: based on the authors' personal experience.

Such companies as Philip Morris and JTI, offering a wide range of trade programs, carry out the biggest field activity in Russia. Both companies train sales staff (owners, outlets' managers and shop assistants) according to standards and requirements of companies, as well as instruct on the company's products features and on informing adult consumers about the products.

Among the most popular trade programs used by these companies in retail outlets are creation of product stock, constant availability, product visibility and advocacy. In general, these companies have very similar trade programs, while JTI sometimes paid higher prices for the same trade programs.

To transfer the trade programs into digital, tobacco companies have developed mobile applications for desktop computers and smartphones, such as KUSpekhu!, PickAp, JTI Club, etc. Applications were initially installed on the customers' smartphones, while the companies' smartphones were provided later on in many cases.

The applications contain educational information about the companies, brands, brand features, trade programs, plans for programs, as well as entertaining content. The applications have been built to let customers get points for learning content and for taking part in trade programs (fulfilling the companies' sales plans). For example, there are tasks on the brand features knowledge in form of given information followed by quizzes, or on a product availability in the outlet via the photo of product stock linked to the GPS coordinates of the point of sale. The retailer, collecting the points, might then exchange them for money or gifts. The first pilots of digital instruments for trade-marketing activities in Russia were noted in 2014; mass launches took place in 2017.

Launching and supporting applications required additional training efforts from the tobacco companies' sales representatives due to the age of participants (50+ for shop assistants in average), their low computer literacy (especially in the regions), and poor knowledge of Russian language by migrant workers. The authors' market research was conducted in 2018 among shop owners and shop assistants in Moscow (capital) and Novosibirsk (Siberia), participating in tobacco companies' trade programs and shifting to digital instruments. In 2019, the study continued. The owners and shop assistants have different goals of participating in trade programs (see Table 2).

Table 2. Profiles of participants.

Profile of shop owner	Profile of shop assistant
Most owners have several retail outlets (small chains)	Most shop assistants are responsible only for sales
The owners signed the framework agreements with tobacco companies, which included bonuses for keeping the agreed stock. The major bonus included direct payments to companies' bank account	Often (especially in Novosibirsk) are rather computer illiterate
They delegate the routine administration to store managers and usually do not sign the regular ordering documents themselves	Need time to be trained for any kind of trade programs
Not interested in personally participating in trade programs	Participate in most trade programs
In general like/support trade programs as a good additional source of shop assistants income, making staff more loyal	Most interested in small regular awards

Source: Deryabina, G., Trubnikova, N. (2018). B2B digital instruments implementation. Market study.

Owners are mostly interested in benefits for their company: increase of sales bill and overall turnover, while they do not want to spend a big amount of time on such activities and prefer to delegate to their managers. Shop assistants, on the contrary, were quite interested in small awards provided by the companies and in most cases demonstrated readiness to learn either print materials or information on their smartphones. In many cases, there also was a third type of participants – the outlet manager (see Table 3).

Table 3. Profiles of outlet managers.

Profile of outlet manager

Is often an administrator appointed by the owner, or (more typically) a co-owner who is also an administrator and sometimes a shop assistant
Is responsible for signing ordering documents, controlling the stock, and has other important duties
Is often both a legal entity representative and a physical person in terms of participating in trade programs
Is often quite computer literate and able to take part in any kind of trade programs
Is quite promising target for trade programs

Source: Deryabina, G., Trubnikova, N. (2018). B2B digital instruments implementation. Market study.

Both owners and shop assistants confirmed high importance of sales representatives' being present in outlets for educating, training and helping with the execution of trade programs. The role of sales representative is perceived to be crucial in solving the issues related to trade programs:

- Sales representatives possess the overall information about existing and new/ upcoming trade programs;
- They explain technical issues of trade programs, and solve technical problems in the participation process;
- Sales representatives solve financial issues, e.g. problems with the number of bonus points, with the time required to get the reward (for example, the money coming to mobile phone account), with the registered number of switches in advocacy program, etc.;
- They check the stock (if the respective pictures are not sent by shop assistants);
- The value of informal relationships with sales representatives is very high, since in many occasions the sales representative is the only person to solve trade program related problems

All the participants were surveyed in regards to their attitude to digitalization and to pluses and minuses they see in moving to digital instruments (see Table 4).

Table 4. Perceived pluses and minuses in moving to digital instruments.

Pluses	Minuses
Ability to perform the task in any conditions/ at any time	Need to remember login and password

Availability of company and product information	Incorrect work of application
Perceived guaranteed reward	No smartphone (more often in Novosibirsk)
Simplicity of tasks	
For the owners: good way to motivate their staff	

Source: Deryabina, G., Trubnikova, N. (2018). B2B digital instruments implementation. Market study.

Based on the study conducted in 2018 in Moscow and Novosibirsk, following the launch of digital applications, some difficulties were identified among the survey participants (see Table 5).

Table 5. Perceived difficulties in moving to digital instruments.

Participants in Moscow	Participants in Novosibirsk
Weak Internet connection; especially poor communication was observed in the basement	
Incompleteness of applications: 'freezing', inconvenience for users (not user friendly)	
	Insufficient distribution of smartphones, prevalence of push-button type mobile phones
Low quality of smartphones provided by the companies	Low quality of smartphones provided by the companies
	Low computer literacy of participants (mostly shop assistants)
	Poor knowledge of Russian (among immigrant workers)

Source: Deryabina, G., Trubnikova, N. (2018). B2B digital instruments implementation. Market study.

The above problems required additional efforts from field employees of the companies and do not allow making a conclusion about the possibility of quick transition from human to digital resources. The majority of research participants affirmed that importance of sales representative physical presence in outlet has even increased after switching to the digital platform with the necessity to explain or assist on technical and financial issues (from helping entering logins/passwords to checking the bonuses). Many shop assistants could not work independently even several months after the digital application launch.

Meanwhile, the analysis of annual dynamics of employees number, for example, in PMI and its decline by 4% in 2018, right after the mass digital B2B implementation, allows concluding there is a certain link between transition to digital and employees reduction (see Table 6; PMI annual company reports 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). In 2017, the company presented a table demonstrating positive dynamics of company employees, which is not the case in 2018: the dynamics changed. Moreover, for the first time since the annual reports publications, the field force employees' number was not included into the report.

Table 6. Dynamics of PMI employees numbers in 2015-2018.

Quantity/ year	2018	2017	2016	2015
Total employees	77.400	80.600	79.500	80.200
Field force	?	28.700	26.700	26.700

Source: based on PMI annual company reports 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

The net revenues of the company continue growing since the launch of heating tobacco IQOS in 2016 (RRP – reduced risk products), despite the overall tobacco products quantity decline (see Table 7-9).

Table 7. PMI total cigarette and heated tobacco unit shipment volume and revenue 2015-2018.

Quantity/ year	2018	2017	2016	2015
Total tobacco unit shipment volume, bil	781.7	798.2	812.9	847.3
Net revenue, bil USD	29.6	28.7	26.7	26.7

Source: based on PMI annual company reports 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Table 8. PMI shipment volume by brand 2017-2018 (annual report 2018).

Brand/ year	2018	2017	Change, %
Marlboro	264.423	270.366	(2.2)%

L&M	89.789	90.817	(1.1)%
Chesterfield	59.452	55.075	7.9 %
Philip Morris	49.864	48.522	2.8 %
Sampoerna A	39.522	42.736	(7.5)%
Parliament	41.697	43.965	(5.2)%
Bond Street	32.173	37.987	(15.3)%
Dji Sam Soe	29.195	22.757	28.3 %
Lark	23.021	24.530	(6.2)%
Fortune	16.596	13.451	23.4 %
Others	94.583	111.720	(15.3)%
Total Cigarettes	740.315	761.926	(2.8)%
Heated Tobacco Units	41.372	36.226	14.2 %
Total Cigarettes and Heated Tobacco Units	781.687	798.152	(2.1)%

Source: PMI annual company report 2018.

At the same time, OCI started to decrease, most probably driven by high investments into the new product development and promotion (see Table 9); this might be an essential reason for human resources reduction.

Table 9. PMI Operating Company Income in 2015-2018.

Quantity/ year	2018	2017	2016	2015
OCI, bio USD	11.4	11.6	10.9	10.7

Source: based on PMI annual company reports 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

However, human resources replaced by digital technologies might generate lack of resources, provoking further sales and profit decline.

CONCLUSIONS.

Mobile applications are growing in popularity since the 2010s; many companies try to implement them in their business processes to optimize costs and to increase business efficiency. However, technologies are still far from perfect in terms of capabilities and desires of users of these applications/digital instruments (consumers, company employees, or trade partners).

Information technologies are irreplaceable in terms of finding consumers with actual needs (so-called 'warm' clients), but then human resources and the

potential of individual communication should be connected; moreover, it is essential in B2B sphere. Lack of attention to technologies' implementation and insufficient field support might decrease the quality of B2B communication and then result in sales decline. Other companies just starting the development of similar digital solutions should take this into consideration.

The recommendation here is to ensure success of pilots before mass digitalization, as well as to preserve traditional business processes while introducing new technologies, along with the maximum involvement of people in the process. The study also revealed the importance of education and training in the process of digital tools launch and afterwards. In some cases, the idea of human resources replacement by pure technologies seems being too advanced for the current stage of development as well as the readiness of participants, especially for business segments with pre-digital generation.

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