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COMMUNICATION TO CREATE IMAGE OF SERVICE BUSINESS IN THAILAND CASE – COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ekachat Tansiri¹, Rojana Phungsuk², Sirivimol Devahastin³

¹Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Thailand

²Head of Social Media and Digital Content Department

³Department of Innovative Organizational Communication and Brand, Faculty of
Communication Arts, Kasem Bundit University, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This article examines communication to create image of service business in Thailand, which is well-renowned for marketing, using unique, interesting, and well-responded communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. Literature review and examination of corporate image communication during crises show that communication is a major factor in accessing the mind of the target group, especially during abnormal situations. Therefore, service businesses must employ communication strategies to promote positive corporate image in order to build reputation and selling point for marketing communication, in addition to unique added value for business competition. This article examines concepts pertaining to image of service business, management of service business image communications during crises, and scope of communications to build service business image in 10 aspects: Corporate Social Responsibility, Business Practice, Employees, Product and Services, Marketing Communication, Distribution, Executives, Working Environment and Artifacts and Price. This paper present cases of adaptation by service businesses with strength in communication to create image during COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, such as Thai Airways, MK Restaurant, Kasikornbank PCL, Terminal 21, etc. Examples in this paper shall serve as a guideline for service businesses to plan and apply corporate image communication during crises in response to context of future changes.

INTRODUCTION

Service business has a major role in driving and developing the economy, because it is a major source of income for many countries. Its size reaches 2/3 of the entire

world economy (Lacobucci, 2001: 320) as service market is part of the economy that affects development and stability of the national economy. Service sector contributes much to the national revenue in each year (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011: 27-28).

In Thailand, service business is likewise a major source of national revenue. Despite this, the COVID-19 pandemic and increased number of cumulative infections results in the pandemic being classified as a “crisis” and national agenda. The Thai government founded the Centre for the Administration of the Situation due to the Outbreak of the Communicable Disease Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) to manage and control the crisis. The nationwide emergency is declared, affecting all businesses. There are two phases (1) lockdown (March-April 2020), which businesses were shut down temporarily depending on risks and (2) successive lifting in multiple phases (since May 2020) which allowed business to reopen under the “New Normal” practices focusing on social distancing, and hygiene measures to contain the pandemic (National Research Institute, 2020).

In 2020, impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Thai economy is that economic recovery is slow, in the second quarter (April-June 2020), the economy shrunk by 12.2%, the worst in 22 years (Brandinside, 2020) while the GDP of this quarter likewise shrunk by 12.2%, continuing from the recession of 2.0% in the first quarter, as export of service and product dwindled due to both domestic and international pandemic. Furthermore, activities of service sector shrunk by 12.3% compared to 0.9% in the first quarter as the number of foreign tourists sharply declined and COVID-19 quarantine measures were enforced, resulting in reduction of major service activities such as hotel, food, wholesaling, retailing, transportation, warehousing, art, entertainment and recreation. 570 enterprises applied for temporary closure, 121,338 persons were suspended with pay, 394,520 or 1.03% were out of work compared to 0.92% of the previous year. 448,050 were underemployed, an increase of 17.7% from the previous year. It is estimated that after the pandemic, 8.3 million could be at risk of unemployment, of this, 2.5 million out of 3.9 million in tourism would be affected (due to decline of both domestic and foreign tourists). Likewise, other related service sectors such as commerce, restaurant, and hotel are under severe pressure (Office of the National Economics and Social Development Council, 2020).

Due to the crisis, service businesses are forced to adapt to survive. Aside from improvement of product and services to gain competitive advantages, new innovations and strategies are formulated to handle fluctuating social and economic factors, access and meet as much of customers’ needs as possible. Operation of service businesses shall depend on providing reputable, standardized service to create good image and eventually brand loyalty (Nguyen, Leclerc & Leblanc, 2013: 96-109). Image of service business is adjusted in various ways, such as replacement of man by technology, New Normal-based service with emphasis on hygiene, provision of support and social responsibility with the original service. Image is important for customer awareness and can be used to attract more customers (Kim,

Lee & Prideaux, 2014). Thus, service business image communication strategy is a media between the business and consumer, and a major factor behind driving of marketing communication and creation of uniqueness in fierce competition between various service businesses to survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Service Business Image

Concepts of service business image

Harris (2010) defined a “service” as something that grants the customer a good experience. Each customer has a different expectation from the service provider. Thus, the service provider must have good understanding and attempts to meet the expectation. Lehtinen (1983:21) defined a “service” is an activity or set of activities arising out of interaction with the person or machine, leading to customer satisfaction.

Gronroos (1990) added about difference between service and general product sale that service is an intangible activity or set of activities which occur upon interaction between the customer, service provider and the tangible resource (product) or system of the service provider.

Service has four characteristics that make it distinct from normal products: (1) Intangibility, (2) Perishability, (3) Inseparability and (4) Variability & Heterogeneous) (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011: 37). These characteristics result in difference of each service due to different expression (Payne, 1993).

Regarding service business, Tatheethorn Theerakhwanroj (2546: 26-27) mentioned main players as consisting of two main parts (1) service providers or businesses such as companies, shops or organizations (including employees at all levels) that provide service to customers, and (2) customers, such as consumers taking the service. This results in constant relationship at all steps from before buying the service (before engaging), during the service (taking the service) and after buying the service (becoming the customer).

Therefore, service business has relationship between the service provider and customer, to deliver service that best meets the customer’s expectation and keep the latter satisfied. The World Trade Organization (WTO) makes the Services Sectorial Classification List based on the UN Central Product Classification (CPC). The list has 12 branches of services: (1) Financial Services (2) Business Services (3) Communication Services (4) Construction and Related Engineering Services (5) Distribution Services (6) Education Services (7) Environmental Services (8) Health Related and Social Services (9) Tourism and Travel Related Services (10) Recreational, Cultural and Sporting Services (11) Transport Services (12) Other Services not Included Elsewhere (Thailand National Trade Repository, 2020)

Meaning and characteristics of service business image

According to the meaning of service business, the new business administration shall take image as a major factor in management in order to operate the business with prosperity, stability and success, especially large businesses that see a large part of the population. Furthermore, the service business image is considered an invaluable asset (Morley,1998).

Kotler (2000), a famed marketer, defined the word “image” as an overall picture of belief, thought, and impression of one person toward something. Attitude and action toward that thing is related with image.

Robinson and Barlow (1959) added that image is a picture of an organization or institution forming in the mind of a person through direct or indirect experience.

Therefore, an image is an overall picture of something a person thinks about, due to experience. This image is connected with the organization. An image of a service business is thus an overall picture of the business in the eyes of people, as they know, understand, or experience with the organization. Image creation might be done by presentation through the corporate identity, such as symbols, logos, employee uniforms, or advanced technology. Perception of image pertaining to product, service and any other component in the organization’s operations (Nguyen, Leclerc & Leblanc, 2013) may be used, eventually forming into judging the image of that organization (Sintusiri, 2010).

Source of service business image

In image management, or corporate reputation management, source of service business image is a basis, such as “how the company conducts”, or “how the company is perceived as conducting its business” (Morley,1998: 8). The image, within marketing context, can occur from various factors under business control (Kotler and Keller, 2009). In service business, image is an overall picture of management, goods, and services that will attract reputation, faith and confidence from other people in the future (Boulding,1975). Corporate image in each consumer’s mind may be different depending on experience, knowledge and understanding of the organization, therefore one organization may have many images, depending on each consumer’s perception and attitude (Dowling, 2004). Example could be stability of the business, or fairness toward the customer.

Type of service business image

Business corporate image is what consumer and customer will perceive about the business itself, or its product and services. Scope of the service business image used as a factor in marketing management can be divided into three main groups (Kotler, 2000: 296):

(1) Product or Service Image, is a picture of the product or service in the consumer's mind. In this type the image does not include the corporate image. Each business might have product or service under various brands in the market, thus this type of image is an overall picture of all products, services and brands belonging to the business.

(2) Brand Image is image of the brand or trademark that express personality or characteristic of the product and service. By emphasizing unique characteristics or selling points, the brand image is unique, depending on positioning of such product and service as the business wants to differentiate its products from its competitors (Kotler, 2000). Good and positive brand image will affect decision to buy the product and service, in addition to build consumer confidence in the business (Christodoulides and Chernatony, 2009)

(3) Institutional Image is image of the business itself within the consumer's mind. This type of image covers only the institute or organization itself, excluding products or services provided. This type of image therefore reflects the business' operation and management, whether in management, personnel (management and employee) and social responsibility (Kotler, 2000: 296)

The need to create service business image

In service business, corporate image affects loyalty, satisfaction and confidence of the customer. This can cause changes and innovations within the organization, and improve business productivity (Baines, Egan and Jefkins, 2004). For this reason, service business needs to create a corporate image. Its necessity can be summarized as (1) make the image a sum of trust and impression of the customer or consumer toward the organization, (2) Good image will lead to customer confidence (Kim, Lee & Prideaux, 2014) (3) image will differentiate the organization from its competitors in the eyes of the consumer or customer (4) effective corporate image will generate attractiveness and reputation, along with sales, and (5) image will stimulate creativity, innovation, and define behavior and addition of business value (Amini et al., 2012: 192-205)

It can be seen that currently, image creation is given huge attention by service businesses, as they attempt to systematically develop strategies for image creation and integrate various communication methods to support their businesses and generate desired images.

Crisis and management of service business image

Concepts about crisis

In crisis, management of service business image becomes critical. Timothy (2012) defined crisis as an unexpected event that can threaten and create negative feeling in people related with the organization, and can strongly affect reputation and

image. Thus, in case of crisis, the organization needs to prepare and manage the crisis at all relevant sectors, or persons through communications.

Newsom et al. (1992, 540) proposed classification of crisis by severity, property damage and personal intention: (1) natural crisis such as pandemic or natural disaster, (2) deliberate act such as terrorism or rumor, and (3) unintentional act such as accident or negligence.

Management of service business image during crisis

Management of service business image or corporate image during normal times or crisis is a very sensitive topic as the business must be able to communicate with consumers using three main principles: type of organization, what to do, and how to do. Factors in management of service business image during crisis are (1) the management must be mindful, and see value, of corporate image as a factor in business operation, (2) employees must have good image and loyalty to the organization, in addition to willing to create positive information for the organization, (3) communication team must use proactive public relations in presenting facts such as use of event, activity or other creative means to create positive corporate image, leading to correct understanding, trustworthiness, faith, and cooperation between the business and public. Therefore, management of service business image must give attention to consequential feeling or behavior due to fierce competition. To be successful, having a clear, desirable image in addition to satisfaction in production and social acceptance (Pornthip Pimolsin, 2013).

When facing a crisis, management of service business image must be changed. In such case, following factors are considered: (1) the public, (2) culture and operation of the organization, (3) understanding of human nature (emotion and hierarchy of basic needs) related with the crisis, especially security as crisis usually happens quickly but can cause severe physical and mental damage, and can lead to desperation and suffer (Jackson and Center, 1995: 422)

Communication to create service business image during crisis

As mentioned about management of service business image, it is found that in case of negative factors or crisis affecting the corporate image, if the organization had created and maintained a solid image, it will serve as a prevention and shield. Therefore, having an appropriate communication strategy is important in creating and changing image to positivity with sustainability and longevity (Pornthip Pimolsin, 2013).

Use of marketing communication strategy to create corporate image

In businesses including service business, it is generally accepted that in normal situation, businesses would use marketing communication in exchange marketing

activities to create understanding, perception and acceptance between the business and consumer, with the goal to stimulate sale and loyalty with the customer.

The marketing communication is developed into an even more effective strategy, focusing on intense and integrated communication target, thus named Integrated Marketing Communication or IMC, which is mixed use of communication tools for optimal benefit such as advertisement, salesperson, promotion, announcements, direct marketing, packaging and others to disseminate clear marketing news and create impression toward the business and product (Kotler and Armstrong, 1999:439).

Communication of service business image during crisis

For this reason, creation of service business image during crisis or emergency needs application of all mentioned marketing communication in consistency with crisis communication management, which is an important means to solve and manage the crisis. During the management, communication is used as a main pillar to drive with speed, accuracy and directness, and can be divided into three phases: **(1) before the crisis** which is a period of preparation to minimize the likelihood of crisis expanding out of control, **(2) during the crisis** is the period when communication pertaining to the crisis must be done correctly, starting from locating the source of crisis to the organization using honest communication and monitoring of the crisis and **(3) after the crisis** is the recovery period, focusing on solution, and winning back public faith and confidence (Timothy, 2007).

Concept of communication to create service business image

Communication to create business image, including services, during normal times and crises have ten aspects of communication concept as follow (Keller, 2008).

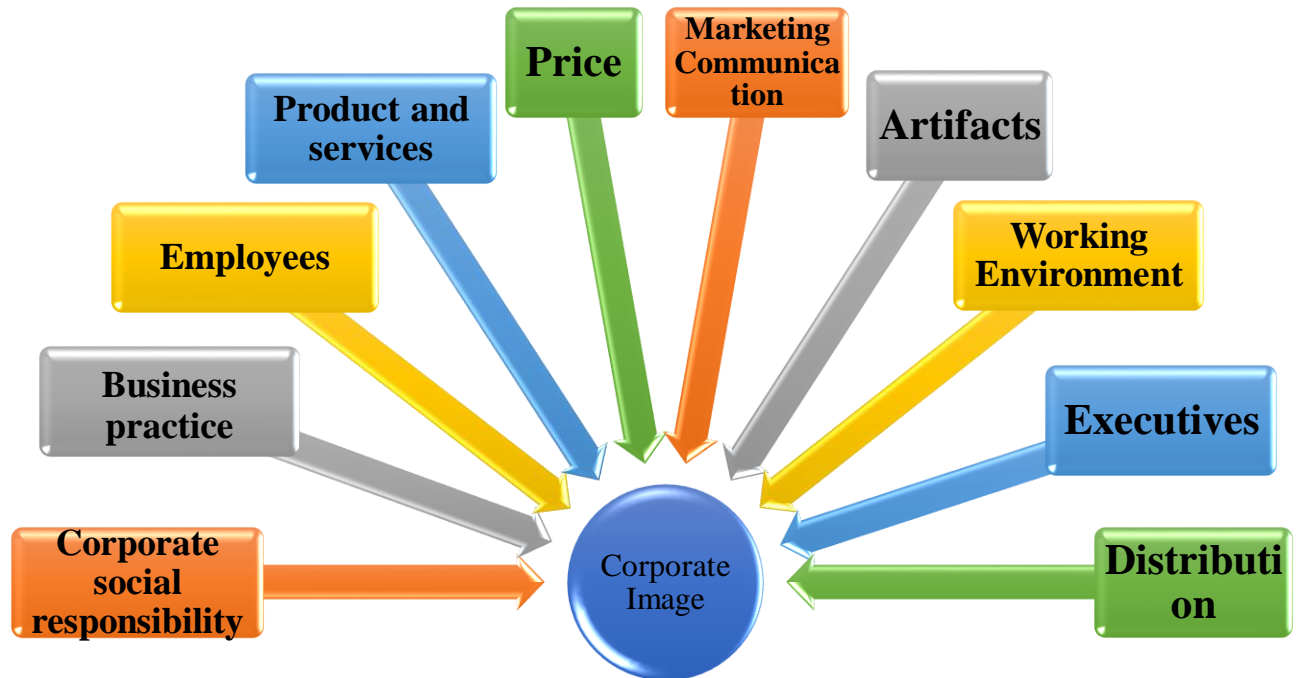


Fig. 1. Concept of Corporate Image Creation

Source: modified from Keller, K.L. (2008). *Strategic Brand Management*. 3rd edition, NJ: Prentice – Hall.

Corporate Social Responsibility or CSR which is presentation of important issues, namely role of the business in the society (Vilanova, Lozano & Arenas, 2008: 57-69). The role covers the economic, legal and ethical roles, including product safety, care, customer complaint management, support of employee career opportunity, and expression of responsibility toward state agencies (Turker, 2009). This reflects “giving back” to the society and participation in solving problems such as providing support for nearby communities and executing socially-creative activities that meet communities’ needs (Keller, 2008).

Business Practice, business operation should maintain good ethics, transparency, accountability, honesty, integrity, and fairness toward employees, consumers and other related people in the business (Keller, 2008). Example of this can be employment, or appropriate pricing.

Employees must have good image with the customer and other related people in the business inside and outside the organization, in addition to professionalism and service mind (Keller, 2008). Image of successful business starts from its employees as they have an important role in connecting the service, brand and communicating with outside customers (Argenti, 2007).

Product and Services must be reputable and reliable, as in having good quality, service and worthiness compared to price (Keller, 2008). Service business might have management of product and service quality by designing or innovating new

product and service to differentiate itself from competitors, in order to allow the consumer to perceive service image of the organization (Tianthai, 2009: 361).

Marketing Communication, is the use of marketing tools and channels through media accessible and appropriate to each customer group to create good corporate image (Keller, 2008). Example of the tools are websites, social media, personal media or events.

Distributions, use of effective distribution channel can improve accessibility to the target, community and society while concurring to consumer behavior (Keller, 2008). Examples of distribution channel include online shops, shops, franchises, dealers, etc.

Executives must have vision, social acceptance, principles, transparency, public mind, creativity, and image of social and community support (Keller, 2008) in addition to leadership, principle and clarity in delivering corporate goal to subordinates. The executives should make decisions and exchange ideas with the team, and develop and manage new technology to drive the business toward the goal (Kananurak, 2011:127).

Working Environment, image of the environment, ability to facilitate visitors, and good environment for work and providing service will create positive business image (Keller, 2008). Example of this can be designing the building to be modern and well-decorated.

Artifacts, such as modern tools or technology to work or provide service to customer (Keller, 2008). Development, creativity and innovation within the organization are present to differentiate the organization in the market, such as online transaction (Watjanapukka & Arunsrisopon, 2010).

Price of the product or service should be presented fairly by the organization to maximize customer satisfaction (Keller, 2008). Example of price can be discounting during economic recession.

As mentioned, in normal situation and crisis/emergency, communication of service business image may be used proactively or passively as a competitive edge.

Examples of communication to build service business image in Thailand during COVID-19 Pandemic

From the COVID-19 pandemic that affects businesses worldwide, this paper shall present examples of service businesses in Thailand that employ communication strategies to build corporate image during crisis in interesting manners, along with marketing communications at various phases, i.e. during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to win back consumer trust, faith and visit, resulting in the organization surviving the crisis. Studying period is between March and September 2020. Examples of studied service businesses can be presented as follow:

Transport Services: Air

Example of airlines are Thai Airways and Nok Air.

Thai Airways (Thai Airways PCL)

Strength of image communication: Marketing Communication (Brand Communication)

Communication method: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, airlines were unable to provide normal service. Thai Airways desired to initiate brand communication to maintain customer connection, therefore it used its famed THAI Catering Department to open a restaurant “Tasty food without flying” with the concept “Think of Passengers, Think of Planes” at the main office for customers and other people to enjoy the atmosphere of flying. Onboard equipment is used as decoration such as seats, parts, spares, wheels. Each part has a QR code showing its history. There were cooking demonstration and serving sessions “Chef’s Signature” in which business and first-class food were served, including signature dishes of Thai Airways like “River of King” and “Rattanakosin”. The food was served by flight attendants, and in the event, there were replicas of check-in counters simulating service process of Thai Airways (Thairath online, 2020).



Fig. 1. Image Communication (Brand communication) of Thai Airways, Project “Tasty food without flying”

Source: <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/bangkok/1924341>

Nok Air (Nok Airlines Public Company Limited)

Strength of image communication: Product and Services, Artifacts (Service innovation)

Communication method: In addition to preventive measures against COVID-19 according to international service standard, an additional measure is that all passengers are provided with a set of disposable seat covers prior to boarding. One

set has a cover for the backrest and armrest to improve hygiene and safety. This is considered innovation in using equipment for service (Manager online, 2020)



Fig. 2. Image Communication (Service innovation) – one-use seat cover by Nok Air

Source: <https://mgronline.com/travel/detail/9630000044>

Tourism and Travel Services: Restaurants

Examples are Boonta Flowers and Cafe and MK Restaurant

Boonta Flowers and Cafe (Company: Boonta Flowers and Café)

A café with unique design and decoration with fresh flowers, along with use of flowers in decorating dishes.

Strength of image communication: Corporate Social Responsibility

Communication method: during the COVID-19 pandemic, the café invited everyone to participate in donation to hospitals, by “purchasing hydrangea from Rai Boonta to fight COVID-19”, with a starting price of 500 baht per one bouquet. All remaining profit after cost was donated, along with fresh flowers from Rai Boonta by the café to hospitals to motivate the medical staff and patient in hospitals. The concept of this activity was that the café “believed in the brighter and more beautiful tomorrow like a flower that blooms in an appropriate day and time #We Are In This Together” (Find glocal, 2020).



Fig. 3. Image Communication (Corporate Social Responsibility) - Boonta Flowers and Café

Source: <http://www.findglocal.com/TH/Nonthaburi/246204892713553/Boonta-Flowers-and-Cafe>

Mk Suki (Company: MK Restaurant Group PCL)

A major restaurant chain in Thailand, MK was affected from the lockdown and forced to adjust its service during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in customers not being able to receive normal service.

Strength of image communication: Product and Services, Distribution, Marketing Communication

Communication method: MK presented a new form of marketing adjustment by opening a fresh mart to sell fresh vegetables (MK's signature product) online with delivery service. The vegetables came from royal projects that were selected according to MK's freshness and safety standards for cooking at home (Tech sauce, 2020)



Fig. 4. Image Communication (Product and Services, Distribution, Marketing Communication of MK Brand) - Boonta Flowers and Café

Source: <https://news1live.com/detail/9630000043520>

Furthermore, MK constantly engaged in image communication to imprint the customer's mind, with the promotion "Free pot per order" to compensate for lack of dine-in option, as only take-home and delivery were allowed during the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Image communication of the "Red Otto Pot" as a signature pair with MK receives highly positive response from customers. As a result, the pot inventory was depleted in a very short time (News1live, 2020)

Tourism and Travel Services:

Hotel: examples are 130 hotel & Resident Bangkok, and 3199 Kanchanaburi, in Kanchanaburi Province

130 hotel & Resident Bangkok

Strength of image communication: Price, Product and Services

Communication method: The hotel had over 50% discount to help customers during the COVID-19 pandemic and introduced a new service, using strength of the hotel such as good location in the city, extensive public transportation, proximity to offices, the parking lot, and ability to accommodate large number of tenants as advantages to attract monthly residents, in addition to the original daily and overnight accommodations (Brand inside, 2020).



Fig. 5. Image Communication (Pricing and new service) to help customers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: <https://brandinside.asia/thai-hotel-monthly-rental>

3199 Kanchanaburi

Strength of image communication: Executives, Business Practice

Communication method: As the business was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hotel owner worked with the hotel employees to keep the hotel open, by designing "Rod Phum Puang 3199", a mobile grocery/delivery truck to deliver

food and grocer to communities and villages in the province. The project received acclaims from customers (Matchon online, 2020)



Fig. 6. Image Communication of 1399 Kanchanaburi. The owner personally drove the “Rod Phum Puang 3199) to generate income and assist employees during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: https://www.sentangsedtee.com/exclusive/article_146196

Recreational Services: Entertainment

Example is

SF World Cinema, Central World (Company: SF Corporation Public Company Limited)

Strength of image communication: Artifacts, Product and Services

Communication method: a “New Normal” service was introduced, the business was leaned and risk of exposure to COVID-19 was reduced. In this case a “robot” was used as a worker in risky operations instead of humans. SF cooperated with AIS (a leading Thai information technology and communications) in using four 5G robots in SF World Cinema CentralWorld (as the first in SF chain). The robots were ROBOT FOR CARE (ROC), AIS K9, LISA and PP and they were used to provide information to the customers, in addition to guide the customers to predesignated spots, measure body temperature and dispense alcohol gel prior to entering the cinema (The standard, 2020).



Fig. 7. Image Communication by using robotics to reduce risk by SF World Cinema during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: <https://thestandard.co/ais-with-sf-bring-5g-robot-help-cure-coronavirus-at-sf-world-central-world>

Distribution Services: Shopping Mall

Example is

Terminal 21 Asok Shopping Mall (Company: L&H Retail Management Co., Ltd.)

Strength of image communication: Product and Services, Working Environment

Communication method: a “New Normal” service was introduced under the name “Safe at Terminal 21 Asoke with New Normal”. The shopping mall was decorated with different themes, and anti-COVID 19 measures were used such as check-in with Thaichana App, automatic body temperature scan, hand gel dispenser, and periodic cleaning. All walkways, seats and escalators had cartoon stickers warning visitors to maintain social distance. Shops had visitor limit, and plastic sheets were used to protect the customers (True id, 2020)



Fig. 8. Image Communication of New Normal Service by Terminal 21 Asoke, Thailand

Source: https://cities.trueid.net/bangkok/asoke-terminal-21/A-new-normal-trueidintrend_142608

Financial Services: Bank

Example is

Kasikornthai Bank Public Company Limited or KBank

Strength of image communication: Product and Services, Distribution

Communication method: KBank worked with Kasikorn Business-Technology Group of KBTG in introducing “Khun Thong”, an innovative online financial service. Khun Thong is a social chatbot on LINE (@KhunThong) under the concept of “Khun Thong, the new Treasurer with good keeping” to assist in financial management of friends in the LINE Group, including calculation, bill sharing, demanding payment, online payment and payment confirmation, by reading e-slip which had mobile banking QR Code of banks nationwide. This facilitated service and connection within a friend group, thus was well-received by customers during the Work From Home period, and the policy of “Stay Home, Stop Virus, For Country” that promoted social distancing to prevent COVID-19 from spreading (Marketing oops, 2020).

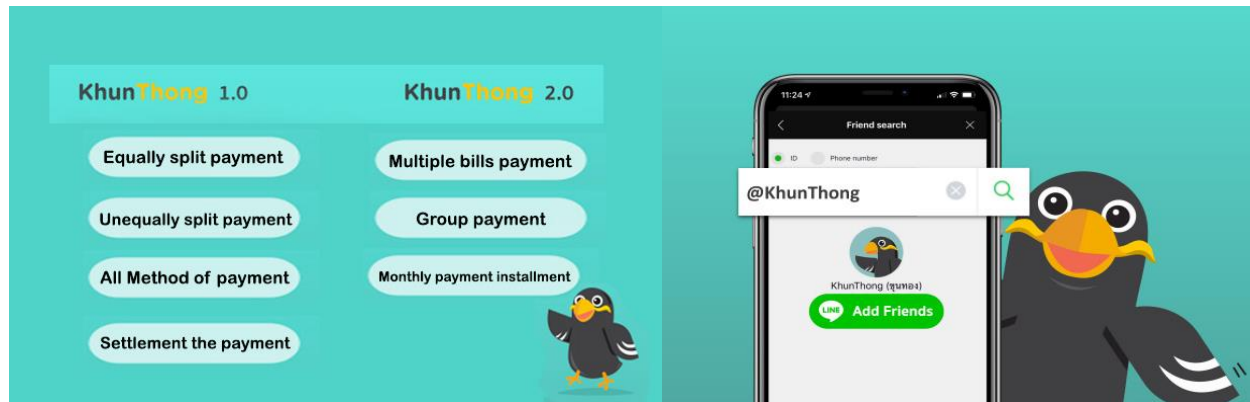


Fig. 9. Image Communication of Innovation of KBank, “Khun Thong, the new Treasurer with good keeping” social chatbot

Source: <https://www.marketingoops.com/news/brand-move/khunthong-new-social-chatbot-for-line-group-friends>

CONCLUSION

The study finds that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, communication to create corporate image is critical for service business due to its distinct characteristics compared to general goods such as intangibility and inconsistency. During crisis which can be unexpected, academic concepts of marketing communication explained that planning and application of creative communication strategy as a marketing tool can be a media in creating positive image for the business with high efficiency both in normal times and crisis. This would win trust and confidence from the customer, in addition to communicate the brand to increase its strength and impression, leading to continuous decision to use the service in every situation, and added value over competitors. Successful communication to create image of service business that is well-received usually focuses on the image of presenting various marketing strength depending on the business that desire to communicate, such as New Normal service, use of technology, brand promotion, and corporate social responsibility. In the face of changing factors in the country and abroad, service businesses will be able to survive future crisis by evaluating business risk and preparing a communication plan to create corporate image, proactively and passively beforehand. Lessons from the pandemic may be learned to manage business image communication in the next crisis in an efficient and timely manner.

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