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THE SURGE OF CRM SOFTWARE FOR MARKETING PURPOSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract:
In this study the surge of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) management software for marketing purposes during the pandemic will be explained through the scientific research and in-depth interview method. The definitions of the Customer Relationship Management, its types, functioning processes, its new features and its working process will be explained, along with the relevance it has gained during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. An in-depth interview will be carried out with the marketing director of the US based company Protera Technologies. The interview allows exemplifying the usage for marketing process of an IT company of their CRM platform, the reasons behind its usage and its benefits. The importance of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is going to be covered in this study along with the differences between InBound Marketing and OutBound marketing. Data analytics mechanisms are going to be part of this study. A general understanding of the way that CRM applications operate is going to be further explained. By making use of the in-depth interview academic method, a case study of an American IT company is going to be explained, and out of this study, a proposed inbound marketing scheme is going to be proposed based on the case study.

Keywords:
Customer Relationship Management, Analytics Tools, e-Commerce, Analytical CRM, Inbound Marketing

Jel Codes:
M3, M31, M37

1. Introduction

The present article is intended to clarify and facilitate the understanding of the working process of CRM applications for marketing purposes nowadays and the relevance it has gained during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This study is based on literature research and the exemplification of the modern implementation of this sort of technologies by the marketing department of a particular US company. Different types of CRM platforms, its terminology and features are going to be explained briefly in order to provide a better understanding of one of the most used technologies in the marketing industry nowadays.

The working flow of a marketing department and its usage of this tool and decision-making process are going to be further explained through an in-depth interview and the answers will be provided by a marketing expert. This insight will be of great usage for those interested in learning the practical usage of CRM applications to excel their business and marketing strategy, while at the same time gather up to date strategies to implement and apply to those interested in the usage of these technologies. In the article titled Exploring the Benefits of Customer Relationship Management (Dalili & Beheshtifar, 2018) says that CRM platforms are the ways in which a firm stablishes communication with its customers, that it goes beyond the simple gathering of information of a customer but it is a mechanism that uses technology to enhance the performance of a company and improves its quality of customer service and support thanks to the data that it is able to gather. This study is going to be of great use to exemplify the benefits that using a CRM platform can bring to any firm and its broader impact.

In the work titled Challenges of Developing Effective Customer Relationship Management (Agwaye J. E., 2020), it is mentioned that during this study in order to understand the benefits of making use of CRM platforms to maximize the output for any company that makes use of these technologies.
A couple of online sources are going to be part of this study in order to better clarify terms regarding the Customer Relationship Management industry. One of them is going to be detailed research made by (SIRK, 2021) in 2021 for the website CRM.org. Thanks to this site, there are going to be clear and understandable explanations of the Customer Relationship Management industry, its types, differences, specifications, advantages and different leading companies offering their CRM platforms.
The work titled Contributions of CRM Applications to Company Performance by Duran & Ekinci, 2020 is also going to be part of this research due to its correlation with the topic and the relevant insights that this can provide. In this article, Duran and Ekinci explain that CRM tools are meant to strengthen the relations with the customer, to improve the levels of loyalty and profitability. CRM tools also improve the levels of productivity in a company according to Duran´s work. Predictions and stats from Grand View Research are going to clarify the value of the CRM industry in the world economy, its market value, revenues and forecast for the upcoming years. A chart from this investigation center will be shown in the further pages. Regarding the implementation of marketing strategies, a real-life example of a company that makes usage of the CRM platform HubSpot is going to take place in the form of an in-depth interview. In this, the working process to transform a lead into a sale or to stablish better relations with a costumer are going to be explained.
Finally, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is going to be briefly summed and the general situation of the CRM markets are going to be explained. Specifically, the effects of the pandemic are going to be based on Athens, Greece, the city in which this study took place.
The effect of the pandemic on the marketing industry is going to be briefly explained. Here the emphasis will be made on the impact that it has had on the levels of usage of CRM platforms by companies around the globe in order to improve their sales or gather data from new customers.

2. Data and Methodology

The research method used for this study is mixed, making use of secondary sources and the literature review method and also collecting primary data via in-depth interviews. The data produce will be qualitative. The steps followed are firstly the recollection of secondary data and revision of the state of the art while making use of the literature review; second, there was a recollection of statistics from previous sources as secondary sources and a case analysis focused on one particular IT company that makes use of a CRM platform for marketing purposes. Thirdly there will be an explanation on how to conduct a marketing strategy based on the collected data. The last part includes the findings and suggestions for those interested in implementing CRM strategies to excel their operations.

3. CRM Definition in Literature

CRM is the acronym of a Customer Relationship Management platform; it is a tool that centralizes a customer or client information -data- and its interactions with a firm, in order to provide better services, improve operations, retention, loyalty and convert leads into sales (SIRK, 2021).
These applications have gained momentum during the previous years and nowadays have become one of the caterpillars of any marketing department and it is seen as an essential tool in order to centralize the information of the customers of a company. These tools allow a company to track the interaction with its customers and the information is turned into quantitative data that are measurable thanks to the analytic tools that are embedded in modern CRM platforms (Kampani & Jhamb, 2020) The types of Customer Relationship Management platforms are different, as these tools are designed according to a specific target that a company might have. Some CRM platforms are focused on gathering information or data from its customers, some are focused on converting leads into sales, others are mainly focused on improving the communications with its team members or customers and others are mainly centered on improving quality of service. The necessity for companies to implement this kind of software has increase in the past decade due to its potential to improve operations and obtain revenue (Jabbari & Tohidi, 2012).

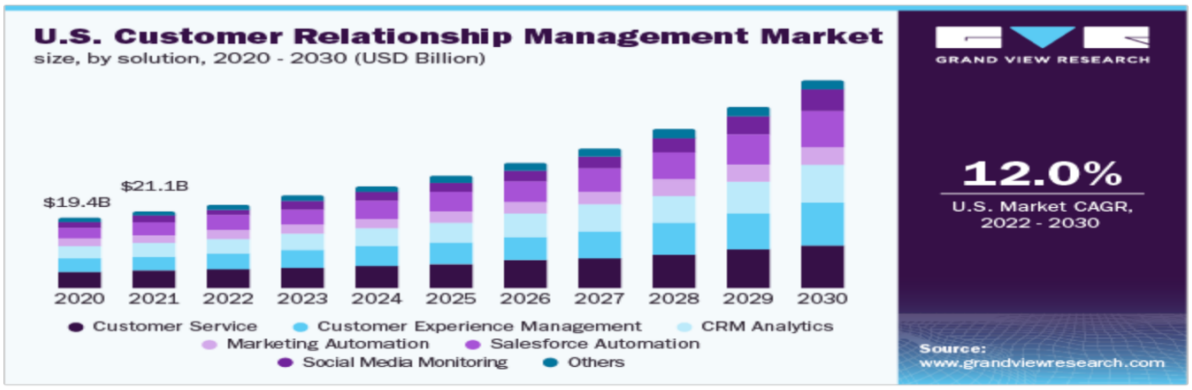

Figure 1 (Grand View Research , 2022)

(Grand View Research , 2022) mentioned in the 2021 report that the CRM industry is the fastest growing software technology currently. The economical market that these platforms are sharing is growing on a daily basis and it is providing with more marketing tools in order to centralize the communications of a company.

3.1. Centralization of communications

The process of centralization of communications has become a major role player for the CRM industry as nowadays some companies are replacing their internal communication software's with CRM tools. This allows the firms to keep track of every interaction between a customer and a company and leads to improve in different sectors like quality of service, increases retention of the customers, increases sales and allows to propagate easily the marketing campaigns of a firm via Newsletters, Landing pages etc.

The global economy, the liberal market, globalization, the spread of the mass consumption culture has led to the increase of the usage of CRM platforms to centralize customers data, to increase revenue (Agwaye J. , 2020).

Some of these platforms integrate nowadays the possibility to stablish communications and sales directly via the CRM system, bringing unification in the operations and the marketing process. An example of the analytics and reporting feature of the popular CRM application HubSpot can be seen in figure 2.

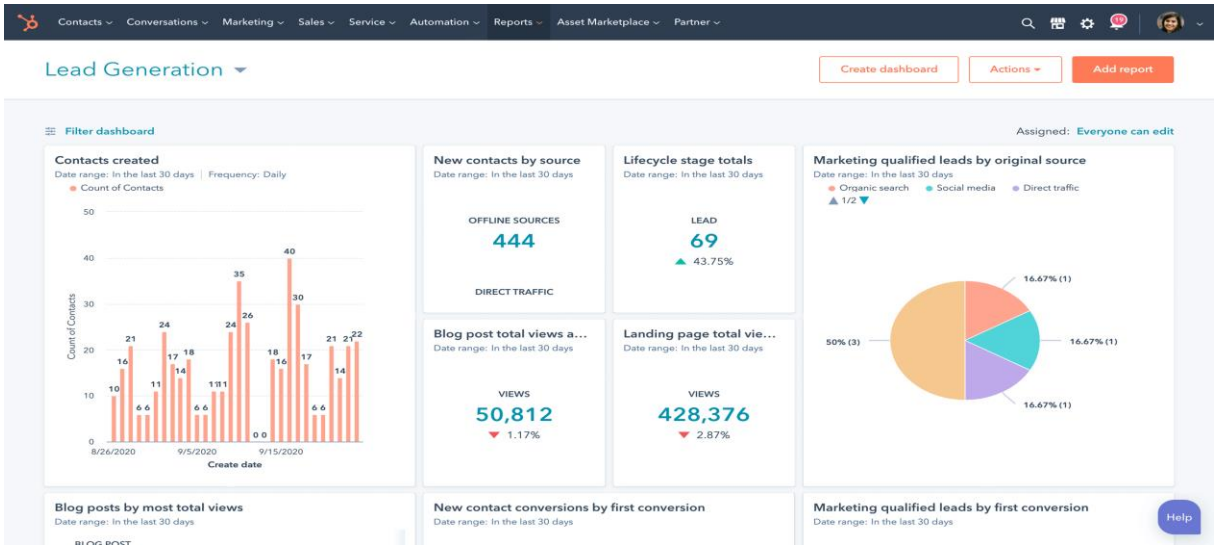

Figure 2 (HubSpot CRM, 2022)

4. Types and kinds of CRM platforms

CRM systems or platforms are often divided into two categories, open-source CRM platforms and ready to use CRM platforms; or already predesign with customized templates for the user (Duran & Ekinci, 2020). These kinds of platforms can be further differentiated by two other categories; based on their installation CRM systems and based on their functionality CRM platforms this last one has a wider level of differentiation and categories, as CRM applications are nowadays different according to the marketing target a company might pursue (Al-Homery, Asharai, & Ahmad, 2019). The previous categories can be further dived into on-premise and cloud based, as for CRM applications based on their installation, and operational, analytical or collaborative, as for the CRM platforms based on their functionality (Deshpande, 2021).

E-commerce offers different benefits to companies like cutting the prices of the communications process, improve brands positioning, generating revenue and improve the relations that it has with its customers (Kampani & Jhamb, 2020). Applications that differ by their functionality can vary in wide range of possibilities, as nowadays CRM applications evolve at the same pace that the information technologies advance. By their functionality, CRM systems can be Operational, Analytical -which has a series of sub-categories, including Descriptive, Diagnostic, Predictive and Prescriptive analytical CRM systems- and Collaborative (SIRK, 2021). These categories are going to be briefly explained in order to have a prior knowledge on the subject before the analysis of a real-life example of a firm using a specific type of CRM to excel their business operations.

4.1. Operational CRM Systems

Operational CRM platforms are generally cloud based and they have the feature of combining the sales, interactions and communications of a firm with its customers, making it a widely preferred alternative for companies (Deshpande, 2021).

Operational CRM systems have the capacity of service automation, allowing task to be handled more efficiently (SIRK, 2021). Some companies that offer these kinds of systems include HubSpot, Zoho, Really Simple Systems CRM, Accelo, Pipedrive, among others.

4.2. Analytical CRM systems

Analytical CRM systems are focused mainly on tracking the data produced by a customer's interaction with a company. This data is transformed automatically into stats and figures that can be used by a company to track sales, customer service, performance and errors in the pipeline. These systems also work as a guidance for IT companies in gathering knowledge on customer acquisition. (Xu & Walton, 2005)

1. Analytical CRM platforms are divided into a wide variety of types. These include Descriptive analytical, Diagnostic analytical, Predictive analytical and Prescriptive analytical systems. Even though these systems possess a lot of benefits, they are not fully implemented on most companies and only a few vendors offer these features thoroughly. (Xu & Walton, 2005)
2. Descriptive analytical systems are focused on analyzing the current and previous data of a customer in order to give clear insights and metrics about the current status of the operations.
3. Diagnostic systems are focused on registering the errors and irregularities during previous marketing campaigns.
4. Predictive systems use particularities of descriptive and diagnostic systems in order to predict the possible outcomes of a marketing campaign.
5. Prescriptive systems are mostly focused on giving recommendations for the user on how to lead certain campaigns according to the preexisting data (Kampani & Jhamb, 2020).

4.3. Collaborative CRM systems

Collaborative CRM systems are focused on sharing customers data among the team members of the platform in order to improve the operations and communications with third parties or other partner companies (Deshpande, 2021).

These platforms allow the companies that make use of collaborative CRM platforms to have the data centralized and accessible to different participants or users of the platform.

This platform combines social media channels, email campaigns and other communications platforms in order to improve productivity and intercommunication (SIRK, 2021).

5. Sampling

The data collected was based on previous findings by the Grand View Research and their statistics regarding their prospects for the CRM industry, along with the case study based on the company Protera technologies and in particular its marketing department.

6. Reliability and Validity of the Study

This study was carried out using the methodology of in-depth interview. For this reason, it is important to mention the significance of this and its validity. The work of Berry (1999), explained the relevance of this process. This method it is now used vastly in the academical sphere due to its capacity to extract big amounts of data from the interviewed (Berry, 1999).

The main goal of a in-depth interview is to achieve broad knowledge on one particular aspect or topic (Berry, 1999). In this format of interview, there are mainly open questions that allow the participant to express holistically his point of view or his knowledge in one particular area. It is important to mention that this is a qualitative method and it targets a small group of people in order to extract their points of view in a particular subject. (Boyce & Neale, 2006) For this reason, it is appropriate to interview experts on certain areas.

There are several types of in-depth interviews and these differ according to the methodology used, if the interview is carried out as a structured interview, as a diary interview, as an ethnographic interview or informal without structure interview (Berry, 1999). For this study, a structure interview was carried out along with a questionary. As this method can provide more information than other data collecting methods like surveys, (Boyce & Neale, 2006) it is the preferred mannered to gather direct data from an expert in this study.

7. Problem Statement

There is a lack of a step-by-step scheme on how to approach communications with new prospects via CRM applications. This study aims to provide an easy-to-follow step by step marketing communications process via a case study and a graphic proposal to better guide the final user.

8. Limitations of the Study

Some of the limitations of this study included the fact that those interviewed where in different locations along with the difficulty to stablish a method that could be implemented on every sort of company no matter their type and,

finally, the privacy regulations of companies to disclose their personal data, for this reason, there is no specifical data disclosure of the companies that participated in this study.

9. In-depth Interview and Case Analysis

In order to explain the way an international IT company makes use of a CRM platform for their marketing department; this research made use of an in-depth interview to clarify the steps taken in the highest level of marketing management. There were asked a total of 12 questions via the virtual meetings application Teams as the participant was located in the United States.

The participant selected for this study was Jamessina Hille, the marketing director of Protera Technologies, a US IT company based in Chicago that is focused on migration of a company's data and SAP applications to the cloud. The interview was conducted during a 30 minutes time.

Out of the 12 questions, that were focused mainly in the type of CRM application that the company uses and its reasons of selection, the fifth question "Could you explain what are the steps that the company uses on the CRM platform to transform communications with clients into sales?" is going to be explained in detail as it gives a clear example of a case study and offers a marketing strategy applicable for any organization.

The marketing director at Protera explained the process that they follow in order to transform their communications with clients into sales. The company makes use of several channels of communication but one of the main sources to obtain leads are via online forms. These forms are generated via landing pages; these landing pages normally lead the user to download an asset.

Once the form is completed, the user downloads the asset and all that information -the contact record and a company record- is stored on the CRM, in this case the company makes uses of HubSpot.

The company also makes use of paid ads that also link the landing pages generated with HubSpot; these too contain the forms mentioned before.

After this, the company contacts the interested lead and, if the costumer is interested, they have a meeting, following this meeting, the lead is contacted by the sales department of the company and that is how they convert interactions into sales via forms.

The sales department of the company can contact the interested leads via HubSpot, emails them, arrange meetings, tracks their movement of the costumer on the company's website, see the result of the meeting and act accordingly.

The marketing expert explained that the company makes use the most of the reporting feature of HubSpot, along with the forms feature, now that thanks to those tools, they manage to gather all the relevant information that they need in order to convert interactions into sales.

The following graphic, figure 3 provides a step-by-step process of their costumer communications via HubSpot followed by the mentioned company.

Figure 3. (Hernandez Rodriguez)

The previous graphic explains the suggested digital marketing approach to stablish effective communications with prospects.
Important level of work has to be done on the first step in order to attract a prospect. The communication asset must be informative and useful for the final user, the quality of the content is a key point at this stage.
On the second step it is important to make use of the analytics tools of the CRM of usage in order to evaluate the work possibilities that there can be with the prospect lead. Nowadays modern CRM platforms offer different visualization modules, the user can visualize the leads information in a couple of steps, making possible to visualize where the lead comes from, the number of clicks he had on certain site, what parts of that site the lead researched, etc.
If the lead is not aligned with the company's business profile, the marketing team can easily discard the profile and continue to contact the most suitable ones.

This information is of great value for the marketing team, as it allows them to prepare the right method and message to deliver to the prospect in the following step.
The third step is of critical relevance, as it is in this step where the marketing team of a company presents its initial pitch to the interested party. The message should be effective enough to guarantee a response rate that can be measurable and, if the lead is not responsive it needs to receive a certain number of follow ups.
If the lead is not responsive it is not recommendable to proceed with this, as it can damage a company's digital presence.
If the lead is responsive, it is a good practice to invite him/her to an online meeting to explore the viability cooperation. According to the work line of the company, a physical meeting can be a good strategy to close a cooperation deal.
Once the prospect has accepted further cooperation, the lead can be transferred to the sales team in order to close the cooperation agreement. In this stage, the sales department can make use of the data generated and stored on the CRM through all the communications process. This can generate an easier and smoother transition between the first and last contact with a lead.

10. Findings (Results)

On the basis of the literature consulted and the in-depth interviews conducted, it can be said that a structured method must be implemented in order to conduct effective communications while making use of a CRM platform.
Particularly, the implementation of landing pages to offer downloadable assets to the target public and advertise this kind of content is proposed as an ideal marketing campaign in order to approach and gather new data and increase the data base of prospects for a company.
Making use of the analytics tools and centralize the communications via the CRM is another proposed methodology for the interested parties.
The structure proposed on figure 3 is another scheme that is suggested for marketing teams interested in standardizing their communication strategies with its prospects. Step two would be of great help for any organization prior contacting any lead.
Advertising landing pages and including forms has proven to be an effective strategy for companies to gather new leads, hence it is highly recommended in this study.
As the concept of search engine optimization (SEO) gathers momentum in the marketing sphere, companies are flocking into CRM tool that provide with more characteristics than before in order to centralize and drive more traffic to their websites or content (Nursel & Utku, 2010).
It is necessary to consider that even the search engine is a kind of software that collects information and data bits form other websites (Nursel & Utku, 2010) for that reason, it is necessary to drive traffic to a companies website via quality content, that way, users will benefit from the final product and companies can acquire quality leads.

11. Conclusion and Suggestions

Marketing directors or managers should implement the previous e-commerce strategies while making use of CRM applications in order to acquire better results in their external communications. These kinds of applications have also proven to be an effective mechanism to replace internal communications systems like SAPs or other kind of software (Kampani & Jhamb, 2020).
Even though the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has brought a change in the way that companies conduct their business and an all-digital way of conduct operations is encouraged, leaving open the window for real-life meetings with prospects give a higher rate of lead response and level of interest.
The material offered via landing pages, let it be brochures, e-books, guides, articles, etc. must always be of the highest quality that the company is able to generate, as this is the first message that the lead (customer) will receive and it is the decisive item that separates the beginning or the premature end of business with a prospect.
If companies are interested in performing inbound marketing, which is the kind of marketing that attracts leads by offering them valuable content (Zlatko, 2015), the main approach of companies should be focused on stablishing a work scheme based on the steps proposed above making use of the CRM tools available nowadays.

If companies are interested in implementing SEO (Search Engine Optimization) they should focus their efforts on promoting their business via inbound marketing strategies and deliver quality content to their prospects while making use of CRM applications that specifically target their business objectives.
No every CRM system may be appropriate for any company; hence, the right tool must be carefully selected in order to achieve the goals of the company.
Centralizing the marketing operations of the company on the CRM application is, nowadays, possible and recommendable as the information generated in the platform can be easily be displayed on graphics and stats for the further usage of the interested parties of the organization.
The proposed scheme used in the previous chart is a practical and simplify marketing strategy that can be easily implemented by any marketing team interested in inbound marketing and obtaining new leads organically.
Each organization may need to adapt the proposed system in order to attain better results; nevertheless, the previous model displayed on Figure 3, is a practical guide that can be implemented no matter the size of the organization. Specially emerging business and startups can benefit from this model.
For further studies on inbound marketing, SEO, CRM applications and analytic tools, the reader can refer to the different sources mentioned in this study but in particular could be useful the work of Zlatko, B. (2015), titled Inbound Marketing - A New Concept in Digital Business, the work of Nursel, Y. titled what is search engine optimization: SEO? Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 487-493.
Another source that can be useful for those interested in the usage of CRM applications for inbound marketing operations and for further studies on the topic of this paper is the series of CRM and marketing courses of HubSpot, available at their website and mentioned in parts of this study.

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