Chapter 22
Omnichannel Marketing in Ambato's SMEs

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Abstract Globalization and the pandemic showed the shortcomings that exist in the management of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Ambato, especially in marketing issues, because they do not allocate the necessary resources to design and implement strategies that allow them to satisfy the demands of consumers who, thanks to the Internet, access large information bases, and that also provides the option to buy products and services from a wide range of companies, whose mission is to differentiate themselves from competitors through the offer of unique experiences. In this sense, the objective is to determine the importance of the integration of communication and distribution channels in improving the customer experience. The methodology used is mixed, because it allows to describe and explain phenomena based on qualitative and quantitative data, which allow to understand reality in a comprehensive way. The results obtained underpin the value of omnichannel and digitalization of businesses, and the creation of company profiles to determine how they can take advantage of this type of strategy and improve consumer satisfaction levels. Finally, it was possible to know that at present, there is a hyper-connectivity of consumers, and therefore, marketing trends focus on strategies in which traditional and digital communication and distribution channels coexist and thus improve the company-customer relationship.

22.1 Introduction

Technological advances and the pandemic highlighted the weaknesses and empiricism with which small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) at the local level manage their administrative processes. This was exacerbated during the pandemic, as many companies could not counteract the effects of the pandemic, since they did not have solid management processes, therefore, they lost positioning in the market, sales

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were reduced, and there were several business closures, including some emblematic ones that were characterized by their trajectory and prestige.

SMEs are especially considered because of the contribution they make to the national economy; according to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (NISC), these represent 99.5% of the business network, and therefore, they are vital to generate wealth and jobs. Tungurahua, according to NISC, is the sixth province of Ecuador with the highest number of SMEs with a total of 39.608, of which 3.538 are microenterprises, 952 are small and 118 are medium-sized. Of these, 86.8% are concentrated in Ambato [1]. Local companies are mostly engaged in agro-industry, with sectors such as short-cycle fruit production, metal bodywork for buses, and manufacturing, especially clothing and everything related to leather products [2].

However, they face a severe crisis, due to, factors such as high competition with lower prices, tax burdens, political and economic instability, high financing rates [1], and other factors that worsened during the pandemic, causing the closure of several businesses. At the national level, before the pandemic there were 882,200 companies, but during 2022 they were reduced to 842,400, that is, there was an average variation of −4.5%. Small companies were the most affected with a variation of −18.5%, followed by medium-sized type A and B, with −13.6%, and finally, micro-companies that presented a variation of −3.2% [3].

The crisis facing SMEs is not new; administrative and management empiricism has been in force since past years, because they do not invest what is necessary in training and innovation, and therefore, there are gaps in the management of the areas and processes of companies. Other problems are the lack of liquidity and the difficulty in accessing sources of financing; they face technological backwardness and lack of innovation, which causes the possibilities of expansion to be minimal, therefore, their capacity for growth, being sustainable and developing is very complex according to the current dynamism of the markets worldwide [4–6].

Regarding marketing, the problems are more evident, only 9.6% of companies see marketing as a strategic area. 32% of entrepreneurs make decisions based on adequate marketing planning, 21% conduct market research and, for the most part, SMEs [7] are focused on production (marketing 1.0) and do not adapt to new marketing trends, which seek to integrate as many channels as possible to give a better experience to consumers, facilitating access to information and products and services without restrictions of space and time [8].

Channel integration is known as omnichannel, which refers to the evolution of multichannel (presence in several channels that work separately), that is, it creates an environment in which channels work together to allow consumers to access digital media to investigate and experience a purchase process easily from any place and without time restrictions. This strategy includes the optimization of the available channels of the companies [9] and thus provide customers with an exclusive experience that will be reflected in higher levels of conversion or sales [10].

Omnichannel is a challenge for SMEs, since consumers are more demanding and request extraordinary experiences during the customer journey. To get involved in this strategy, it is essential to understand how consumers behave in each channel, and in this way, they take advantage of their own resources and tools, the efficiency and

effectiveness of the channel is achieved. In that sense, in the context of COVID-19, the fear of contagion considerably changed the behavior of consumers, who do not only demand quality products and services [11], but also seek experiences that make them feel safe during the purchase process [12].

It should be mentioned that, worldwide, consumers are channel and brand agnostics, that is, they do not maintain their preference for only one, which hinders the processes of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, strategies must be designed focused on the new profile of the online consumer, which is characterized by prioritizing their personal security needs, interact less with people, are more aware of value propositions, and acquire products that offer quality, value, and tranquility. Strategies should be customer-centric, which reduces consumer distrust during potential lockdowns, isolations, and post-COVID-19 [13, 14].

According to the firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Internet purchases in Ecuador have increased by 15 times since the pandemic, so air services, non-personal goods such as clothing, cosmetics, electronics, and household products are the most demanded [15]. The pandemic showed that Ecuadorians have an interest in online purchases, if companies offer guarantees of return and/or confidentiality of data, more information about products and services, and attention or assistance during the purchase.

Other figures demonstrate the importance of channel integration, stating that 1 in 3 shoppers chose the online channel for the first time to generate their purchases and reported an 800% growth in website visits and 44% in orders compared to 2019. In the business case [16], the companies that have benefited from the increase in digital consumers are businesses to consumer (B2C) highlighting the food sectors, followed by home, then personal goods, games, and entertainment, that is, e-commerce and everything related is an opportunity for all types of business [17].

This means that the digitization of business is a reality that should not be overlooked, and that companies must adapt to this opportunity, otherwise, they could disappear from the market. To benefit from this, the offer must be professionalized, that is, trained so that a better experience can be provided to users; understand the demand, identify and differentiate the products that users prefer to buy online and which in person; strengthen public–private relations, which benefit electronic commerce; encourage governments to improve the scope of banking, to facilitate access to and trust to digital transactions; and access to technologies.

In this sense, the research aims to answer the following questions: What is the current situation of local SMEs with respect to marketing? How are local companies profiled to integrate communication and distribution channels in the new digital ecosystems? and What is the importance of omni-channeling in the competitiveness of companies?

22.2 Methodology

The research allowed to investigate and specify the most relevant characteristics about the phenomenon under study; it seeks to identify and demonstrate the importance of omnichannel as a current marketing trend in Ambateño SMEs. The approach is mixed: qualitative because it allows to deepen, co-contextualize and investigate the natural, holistic and flexible information on current marketing trends, especially those focused on SMEs, since as an engine of the local economy, they want cutting-edge strategies that satisfy the needs of consumers who are more demanding and request better experiences in the purchasing processes [18].

The qualitative, interpretative, and bibliography approach aimed to establish the process of selection, access, and registration of the documentary sample. A bibliographical review involves the analysis and explanation of all concepts. For this, it was used Boolean search is a way to improve search results with components, such as omnichannel marketing, SMEs, Ecuador, and digital marketing. The articles were synthesized and analyzed using bibliographic and analytical matrices designed in Excel, which made it possible to relate the articles and determine the advantages and disadvantages of integrating the communication and distribution channels, can you see in Table 22.1.

In summary, omnichannel represents an opportunity for companies, however, it is not an easy task to execute this type of strategy due to the empiricism with which most processes in SMEs are managed, in that sense, companies are required to train their staff, or in turn hire professionals who have the skills to integrate the channels available to the company and add those necessary for the execution of this type of strategies.

With regard to the quantitative approach, a descriptive analysis was carried out for the collection, grouping, presentation, and analysis of data in a clear and simple way, on the current situation of SMEs [29].

For the descriptive analysis, 1076 small and medium-sized companies were considered as population, however, 18.50% and 13.60% were discarded, respectively, due to the closure of companies in the context of the pandemic, in that sense, 883 SMEs were worked with; in addition, only companies that are registered in the database of the Chamber of Commerce of Ambato were considered, and a total of 355 companies were obtained. Subsequently, a sampling was performed with a confidence level of 95% and an error of 5%, obtaining a sample of 185 SMEs. The samples were distributed in service companies (68%), commerce (24%), and manufacturing (8%); the years of operation have an average of 12 years, and together, they create 2469 jobs, with an average of 13 employees per company.

In addition, factor analyses were carried out on the organizational aspects of the planning of marketing and the importance of investing in marketing strategies; the objective was to discover clusters of variables that are correlated and thus identify company profiles according to the importance they give to each of the items of the data collection instrument.

Table 22.1 Advantages and disadvantages of omnichannel according to different authors

Advantages	Disadvantages
Integrate multiple channels to keep consumers informed	If the channels are not synchronized properly, it can lead to confusion [19]
It allows interaction with customers through various channels, adapts the offer and affects the consumer experience	It is incompatible with cross-selling, that is, this strategy that usually gives good results is lost [20]
Contributes to the achievement of leads	It requires the implementation of several channels, which represents a high investment, and not all SMEs have the resources [21]
Creates a global communication experience between consumers and brands	There are limitations due to the necessary resources [22]
Companies connect and empathize with customers (empower customers)	The obsolescence of the channels is immediate due to technological advances [23]
It allows you to manage data and know consumer behavior	Companies often confuse the multichannel idea, they have several channels, but are not integrated [24]
There is an incalculable potential of customers who are hyper-connected, and therefore, it is crucial to use the channels where they are	It represents costs that not all companies can cover [25]
It allows the effective coexistence of on and off-line channels, to improve the experience of consumers	It requires the expertise of marketers in omnichannel issues, which in the local environment is uncommon [26]
It helps predict and project sales more accurately and reliably	Demand for prior knowledge of data analysis and other techniques that are little known [27]
It allows direct interaction between companies and consumers	It requires a full-time person to serve the people who contact the company through each of the available channels [28]

Factor analysis was performed in the SPSS statistical software; it began with the correlation matrix, to determine the relevance of the analysis and was integrated by the Bartlett sphericity test that was 0.000, determining that the variables are correlated; the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin index (KMO) obtained was 0.939 and 0.758, values that are between 0.5 and 1; therefore, the sample is adequate, and the analysis is appropriate. The rotation of the initial factors that facilitates the interpretation of the results, for this the Varimax rotation method is used which allowed to group the variables and obtain two profiles of SMEs [30].

The data collection instrument applied was an adaptation of the marketing audit tool proposed by McDonald and Leppard [31], which consists of several aspects that measure the effectiveness of marketing management in companies [32], however, 14 items referring to key factors of the organization were taken into consideration related to the planning of the marketing area, because others are not adaptable to the reality of SMEs. Aspects related to traditional marketing versus the digital part, and the importance of investing in digital assets, were increased to the collection instrument.

The survey items were structured according to the McDonald and Leppard instrument, and refer to: (a) interest in planning; (b) planning for decision making; (c) allocate sufficient resources; (d) information and data; (e) set aside enough time; (f) detect opportunities in the market; (g) members contribute to planning; (h) sales staff supports planning; (i) priority aspect; (j) preparing to learn; k) frequent research is used; (l) periodic evaluation; (m) control mechanism; and (n) meeting objectives. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 being "if you strongly disagree with the statement" and 5 being "if you strongly agree with the statement".

On the other hand, the items added are divided into two parts: first, the importance of the marketing mix variables in the planning of content for the marketing strategy; and second, the importance of investing in the following variables: (a) new marketing channels; (b) banners, fliers, etc.; (c) paid media or channels; (d) digital assets; (e) online advertising; (f) off and online strategies; (g) e-mail marketing; and (h) marketing departments. The scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 being "very important" and 5 being "not important at all".

Finally, questions were asked about the type of strategy used by the SMEs, whether they have a marketing department or an external manager, whether the campaigns are carried out based on strategic planning, what digital assets they currently have, among other questions that provide information about the current situation of the companies.

22.3 Results

According to the diagnosis made to SMEs in the city of Ambato, the following results are obtained, so that the items referring to the importance of the variables of the marketing mix, it was possible to know that the determining variable is the price (76.8%), followed by communication (63.8%), the product (56.2%), and finally, distribution (49.2%). It is important to mention that those who responded in each "very important" item were taken into consideration. In addition, the average was 4.5, which means that entrepreneurs are aware of the importance of variables.

Additionally, SMEs were enquired about the type of marketing strategies they used, and it was found that 42% use traditional and digital strategies, the same percentage apply digital strategies, 10% have opted for traditional strategies, and 6% have not applied any type of strategy. The variation of type of strategies is given by the lack of knowledge that exists about the benefits of each of them; also, many entrepreneurs focus on the digital part and have neglected other traditional alternatives that according to the target audience can be of great benefit, for example, the PoP material.

Likewise, companies are investigated if they have an internal marketing team, or if they are looking for external advisors, it was found that in 56% of SMEs they have one internal person in charge of marketing strategies of the company, while 44% hire external advice, however, at the city level there are no companies that really provide marketing services—most of them are graphic design agencies, which are

only responsible for the visual part and do not focus on the strategic part, therefore, the results are not usually as expected and this is what has caused entrepreneurs not to trust 100% in the implementation of marketing strategies.

In relation to the digital assets that companies have, it could be evidenced that at the local level, there is a predominance of social networks: 168 companies have a presence in networks, 88 companies have web pages, 68 have databases, 21 have some type of application, and 7 companies have assets related to the subject of artificial intelligence. Obviously, social media marketing is the most used by local SMEs, and Facebook is the most used network, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp Business, and with less presence YouTube and TikTok.

The average investment in marketing strategies in general is $703, but as mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is mostly done solely on social media. It was evidenced that companies use informative content and have not managed to create communities in their networks, because most of them show on average less than 1000 followers in their accounts, therefore, it can be understood that they do not take advantage of the tools of each of the networks, and this makes it difficult to implement omnichannel marketing.

With respect to the factor analysis on the organizational aspects within the marketing planning in SMEs, a value of 0.939 higher than the level of significance 0.5 was determined in the KMO and Bartlett test, that is, there is a correlation between variables and the analysis could be carried out, for which a "rotated component matrix" was elaborated that allowed to identify two profiles of SMEs. In Table 22.2, the first profile shows the correlation between the variables: meeting objectives, control mechanism, frequent research is used, set aside enough time, allocate sufficient resources, members contribute to planning, information and data, sales staff supports planning, and priority aspect; while, second profile shows a correlation between the variables, set aside enough time, allocate sufficient resources, members contribute to planning, preparing to learn, interest in planning, planning for decision making, detect opportunities in the market, information and data, sales staff supports planning, and priority aspect (Fig. 22.1).

The analysis allowed to correlate the 14 variables of the applied audit tool; in this case, Table 22.2 shows that profile 1 is made up of SMEs that strongly agree with periodic evaluation, meeting objectives, control mechanism, frequent research is used, etc. On the other hand, Profile 2 is made up of SMEs that strongly agree with: preparing to learn, interest in planning, planning for decision making, followed by other variables with less impact. In both profiles, there is a positive correlation between the variables, and they differ in certain cases, for example, in Profile 1, the determining variable is periodic evaluation, while in Profile 2, the most important variable is interest in planning. In summary, factor analysis allows us to profile the companies based on the importance they give to each of the variables.

With respect to the average in both profiles was 3.16 and 3.69, respectively, it is the reflection of the lack of knowledge or empiricism with which marketing strategies are worked, since in some components such as the issue of resources, contribution of the members of the company, among others, a considerable percentage answered that do not know if they agree or disagree. However, they recognize the importance

Table 22.2 Rotated component matrix to (organizational aspects)

Variables studied	Profile 1	Profile 2
Periodic evaluation	0.913	
Meeting objectives	0.872	
Control mechanism	0.868	
Frequent research is used	0.851	
Set aside enough time	0.699	0.524
Allocate sufficient resources	0.618	0.610
Members contribute to planning	0.539	0.465
Preparing to learn		0.873
Interest in planning		0.870
Planning for decision making		0.797
Detect opportunities in the market		0.771
Information and data	0.602	0.641
Sales staff supports planning	0.424	0.632
Priority aspect	0.515	0.621

Extraction method: principal component analysis
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization
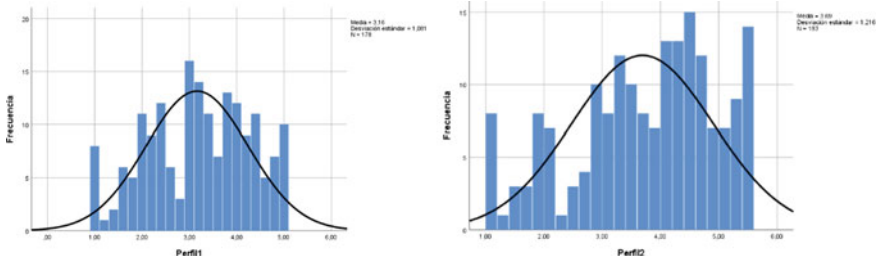a. The rotation has converged in 3 iterations

Fig. 22.1 Histogram profile 1 and 2 of SMEs

of all organizational aspects within marketing planning, but as has been insisted, it is not applied technically, therefore, it is complex to talk about marketing in local SMEs.

Additionally, six items were added to the collection instrument, related to the importance of investing in traditional and digital strategies, these refer to online advertising, on and off-line strategies, digital assets (web pages, databases, applications, etc.), payment and communication channels, and advertising material such as fliers or banners. It was important to add these items, as they are the most used at the local level, and the objective is to know the current situation, to have a base that allows companies to integrate their current channels and assets, with new alternatives that are at the forefront and allow companies to be competitive.

In this sense, a factor analysis was carried out on these components, and the results obtained in the KMO and Bartlett test were 0.758 higher than the significance level 0.5, therefore, there is a correlation between variables; in the first profile, the correlation exists between the variables online advertising, on and off-line strategies, digital assets, new marketing channels; while in the second profile, the correlation is between the variables new marketing channels, channels or means of payment, banners, flier, among others. And the analysis could be continued, the "rotated component matrix" was applied and two SME profiles were formed (Fig. 22.2) (Table 22.3).

Based on the factor analysis, it was possible to identify two profiles of companies according to the level of importance they give to the use of marketing strategies, the average was 4.31 and 3.61, respectively, this allows to identify that in profile one there is security to affirm the importance of each of the components, and the profile was constituted by entrepreneurs who consider online advertising decisive, online and off-line strategies, digital assets, and new marketing channels. On the other hand, profile two, there is evidence of a certain degree of doubts in the selection of the components, in this case, the profile is constituted by those entrepreneurs who consider the new marketing channels, the means of payment and the banners.

Both profiles show an acceptable percentage of the acceptance of the importance of marketing for companies today, however, sometimes unawareness and lack of resources could be the cause why no type of planning or strategies were applied. It
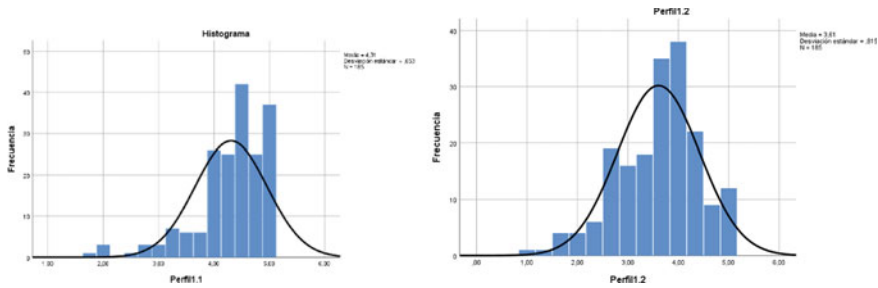

Fig. 22.2 Histogram profile 1.1 and 1.2 of SMEs

Table 22.3 Rotated component matrix (importance of investing in digital strategies)

Variables studied	Profile 1	Profile 2
On-line advertising	0.826	
On and off-line strategies	0.812	
Digital assets	0.733	
New marketing channels	0.547	0.404
Channels or means of payment		0.867
Banners, flier, among others		0.734

Extraction method: principal component analysis
Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization
a. The rotation has converged in 3 iterations

was evidenced that certain strategies have been executed that are mostly focused on social networks, which should only be part of the strategy, since the integration of the largest number of channels in an appropriate way allows to improve the experience of consumers and, therefore, makes the company stand out from its competitors.

22.4   Discussion

The findings obtained in this study show that the current situation of local SMEs with respect to marketing presents several drawbacks, especially due to the empiricism with which most of these types of companies are managed.

In other research, this is ratified, as they mention that 80% of SMEs do not reach five years and 90% do not exceed ten years, the main cause, from the point of view of entrepreneurs are high financing costs, excessive government control, and high tax rates. On the other hand, several analysts state that the reason is the lack of administrative management capacity [33].

Regarding the marketing area, in a previous study carried out on 127 SMEs, it was determined that less than 50% of companies have a real interest in carrying out marketing planning, and most of them are still focused on marketing 1.0 trends, that is, they focus all their attention and resources on the product, therefore, the other variables of the mix marketing have not been efficiently integrated, which is reflected in the loss of competitiveness and other problems that were exacerbated during the pandemic [8].

It is important to note that the application of omnichannel marketing strategies represents an opportunity for companies to generate unique experiences for consumers and profitable relationships for business; it also allows a direct relationship with customers [28]; it helps to make predictions of sale or demand more accurately [27]; and due to hyper-connectivity of consumers, it increases the ease of viralization of information and brand positioning.

However, there are still difficulties in creating synergy between the channels available to companies, therefore, it is required that managers or managers of the marketing area are trained and incorporate in their businesses various theories that transcend international and cross-cultural perspectives, in order to explore and implement new trends related to omnichannel environments [34], without neglecting the traditional part, since it is necessary that distribution and communication channels coexist and be integrated to improve consumer experiences [26].

It is important that companies take into account that the application of this type of strategy has had great results in companies such as Starbucks, Walgreens, Bank of America, among others, however, these are multinationals that have sufficient economic resources to be able to invest in omnichannel marketing strategies but the local reality is different because Ambateño SMEs may not have available the necessary resources to implement them, therefore, a more exhaustive analysis of the cost–benefit ratio must be made, to determine if it is practical or not to invest in this type of marketing [25].

The implementation of omnichannel marketing strategies must be carried out progressively, that is, SMEs can use the available channels to carry out pilot tests, and at the same time increase new channels or strategies; in addition, they can analyze the cost–benefit ratio of the results obtained for future planning. Some alternatives to start working with these strategies are the buyer persona, CRM, and market research, and this allows you to have information about the preferences and behaviors of consumers, to define the appropriate channels and, based on this, manage the use that will be given to each one.

After the analysis, strategies can be carried out, for example, online communication and sales channels in which the consumer can know the availability of a product or book an appointment to acquire a service, these channels can also receive traffic from the company's social networks or through QR codes that are scanned from the point of sale or a means of communication channel such as the newspaper.

22.5   Conclusions

The main one is that local SMEs manage their processes empirically, therefore, the results they obtain are negative, and this was evidenced in the closure of several businesses during the pandemic, which did not have the strategic capacity to deal with this situation and therefore had to close their businesses.

It was determined that omnichannel is essential for all companies, as they provide a variety of opportunities that improve the quality of the user experience, thus, for example, it allows predicting consumer behaviors, and projecting demands accurately, in addition, it allows companies to have direct contact with consumers, which helps to obtain information about their behaviors and preferences and consequently, identify the ideal channels for planning strategic marketing.

Additionally, it allows companies to adapt to the new scenario that is a product of the pandemic and that requires the presence and use of digital media, for all marketing processes, however, it must be considered that investments are required both in knowledge, that is, training, as well as in digital assets and other tools that improve the effectiveness of strategies.

As mentioned, the traditional part should not be neglected, it is still essential that traditional marketing strategies are applied, as these serve as support for the digital part and vice versa. The coexistence of off and online strategies means that the results of planning are as expected.

Finally, two profiles of SMEs were formed, the difference between these is the importance they give to each of the variables related to the organizational aspects of marketing planning, as well as the categorization of the variables related to digital marketing; however, in both cases, it is evident that there is an interest in designing marketing strategies, which is why entrepreneurs must train and innovate their businesses.

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