TOWARDS SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE MARKETING STRATEGY: THE CASE OF TECHNOLOGY PRODUCTS MARKET IN TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Pham Lan Anh
Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology

Abstract – This article will compare the public and private sector's approaches to meet the unexpected demand surge for technological products in the emergency of Covid-19 outbreak. It aims to pinpoint areas for improvement and make suggestions on how the state and private entities could operate to deliver the desired results.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article will focus on how Vietnam's technology and telecommunications market have fared under the specter of Covid-19 pandemic. While dealing a heavy blow to the economy in general, the pandemic has brought unprecedented opportunities to the telecommunications sector as it fast-forwards digital transformation in every level. On top of that, recent national policies have taken steps to acquaint citizens with high-tech products, going as far as providing young learners with digital devices to learn from home. The ever-shifting nature of the technology industry, accelerated by the pandemic's unpredictability, calls for a

Tác giả liên hệ: Phạm Lan Anh
Email: anhpl@ptithcm.edu.vn
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revamp of current business processes. First, a service blueprint performs an anatomy of industry incumbents' common practices. The understanding of incompatibility between these firms' actions and customers' expectations will then be translated into enforceable solutions. They are comprised of modifications made to [those businesses'] present marketing strategies, ranging from adjustments in target market segments to specializations of add-on services to meet niche markets' demands.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

In doing research into technology products market in Vietnam, the writer acknowledges a lack of systematic statistics that could have helped rendering a big picture of this market. Therefore, a mixed approach is used. A timeline was created using e-newspaper articles from popular and verified sources to facilitate observation of events and explain cause-and-effect relationships. Meanwhile, statistics from foreign sources provide perspectives numerical sense.

To compare the approaches of the relevant public and private entities, Service Blueprinting [1] is deployed to break down intricate processes into single steps, allowing rooms for improvement to be identified.

III. ANALYSIS OF EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

1. Social Distancing and Its Effects on Sales of Digital Products

During the pandemic time, the market for technology products in Vietnam witnessed the rise to domination by low-to-mid-priced models. In terms of mobile phones, low-priced models from three Chinese brands including Oppo, vivo and Xiaomi claimed places in top five while established names like Samsung and Apple found themselves in heated competition and lost market shares [2]. Local manufacturers also aim to retake market shares from foreign brands in the mass-market segment rather than competing with high-end products [3]. In terms of laptops, Vietnam, like the majority of Asia Pacific markets, was a lucrative market for mid-priced models with Lenovo (a Chinese-own brand) gripping around 30% of the market [4]. Euromoniter made a similar conclusion in its report that retailers attracted customers with discount programs and products at affordable prices [5].

The latest wave of Covid-19 has forced cities to impose social distancing, ration work slots and order school lockdowns. For technology product retailers of all sizes, it comes as a blessing in disguise. Periods of social distancing have prompted parents to rethink their decisions, though not in an overnight manner. In the first wave of the pandemic in 2021, retailers, big and small, reported a spike in demands for used computers and tablets [6]. Most parents expected that lockdowns were temporary, and schooling would be back to normal in one or two months. Furthermore, the first wave was followed by school break during which those digital devices would hardly be used. Therefore, instead of purchasing brand-new tablets, they chose decent used and disposable ones. They also bought more from small retailers rather than exclusive distributors,

as these retailers often sells used devices at lower prices. The small retailers, while enjoying a surge in sales, were admittedly taken aback by this turn of event.

The second wave [of Covid-19 pandemic] in 2021 confounded those expectations. Twenty southern provinces were still deep in the battle with the Delta variant as the new school year commenced. This time, parents turn to new but economical classes of devices. Even leading distributors experienced a stock-out [7] and had to turn to overseas suppliers for extra stock.

The situation may have merely inconvenienced families with proper incomes but it aggravated the burden of poor families who struggled to improvise any possible means so their children can keep pace with the lessons [8]. There were families with only one smart device for two children or more. National statistics has estimated the number of students without a proper device for telelearning to be around one and a half million [9]. The nationwide number of students on telelearning is seven million and a half which means one out of five students is likely to trail behind.

The "Data and Devices for Students" initiative, led by the Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, has made it clear that the agenda is not for show. The sponsors of the scheme are expected to deliver products and services with deserving qualities [10]. Concerns were also raised about an effective method to prevent misuse or liquification of those resources. The contents of the online classes received attention for it was the first time teleteaching has been done on national scale [10].

2. The Government and Businesses' Attempts to Bridge the Communications Gap

The "Data and Devices for Students" initiative marked the entry of the government into the smart device market as a supplier. It is expected
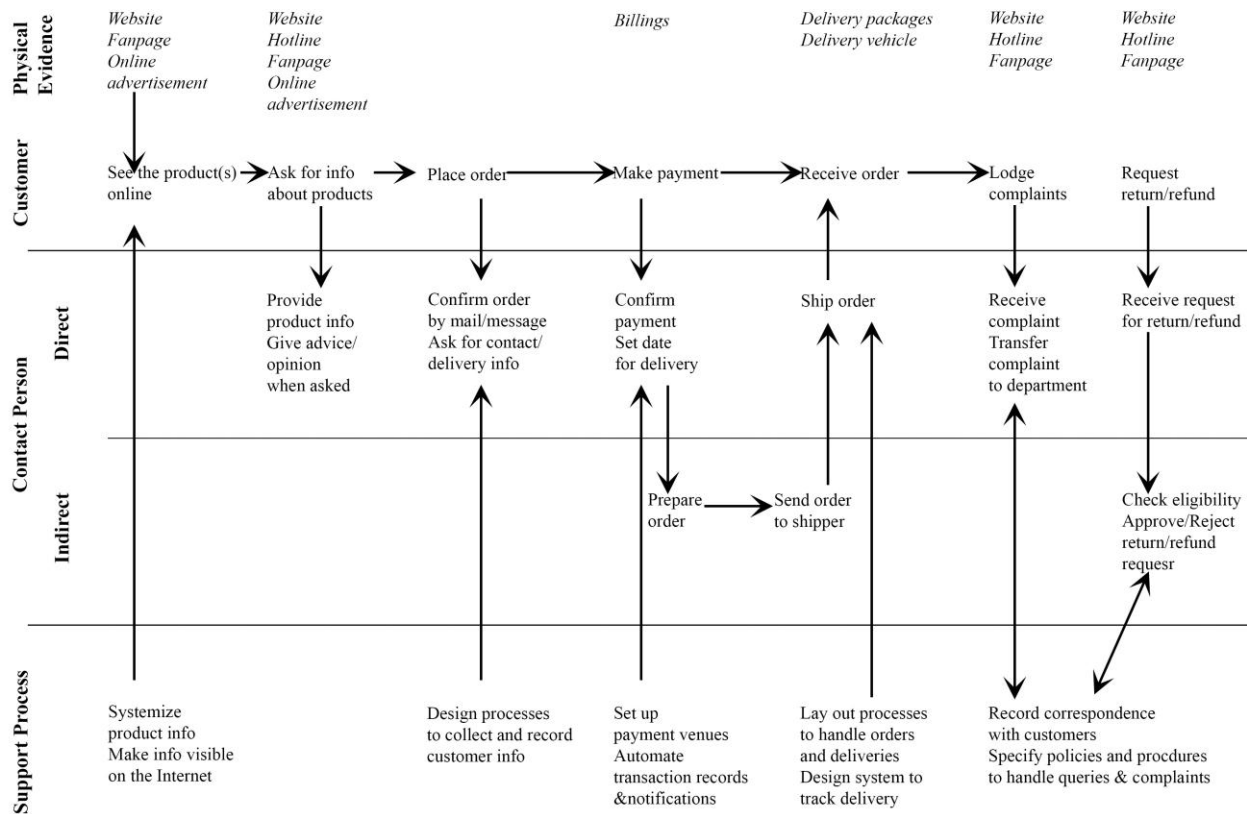
Figure 1. Service blueprint of a retailer, adopted from sales procedures of Mobile World JSC and FPT Shop.

to fill in the market void that is left uncatered by for-profit businesses. While policy critique is not the concern of this article, it is beneficial to examine different approaches of different organizations and see where each can learn from each other.

The processes of either are analyzed by translating the steps into a *service blueprint*. A service blueprint maps the service by orders and roles, explaining the values each action brings to the whole [1].

The service providers' actions are separated by a blueprint into three distinct sections which are direct (visible), indirect (invisible), and support process. Direct actions are those done by the person in contact (through various means) and in correspondence with customers. Indirect actions are those resulting from the action of one customer and serving the order of one customer. They should not be confused with support processes even though they also

support direct actions. Support processes are actions or tasks that serve customers of a system, not a single customer or a single order. When thinking of support processes, a service provider of any nature is expected to think not only of immediate actions to meet customer demands, but to build systems or infrastructures that assist those actions in long term.

The first one is the process of a digital product retailer, starting with queries from a potential customer to delivery of an order. The blueprint does not include further events which include complaints and complaint handling, warranties, and refund. A prospective buyer of a digital product only interacts with a one-stop contact, even though their order and financial transactions are handled by a multitude of departments.

The emphasis of the process embodied in the retailer's service blueprint is efficiency, which drives down costs and keeps prices competitive.
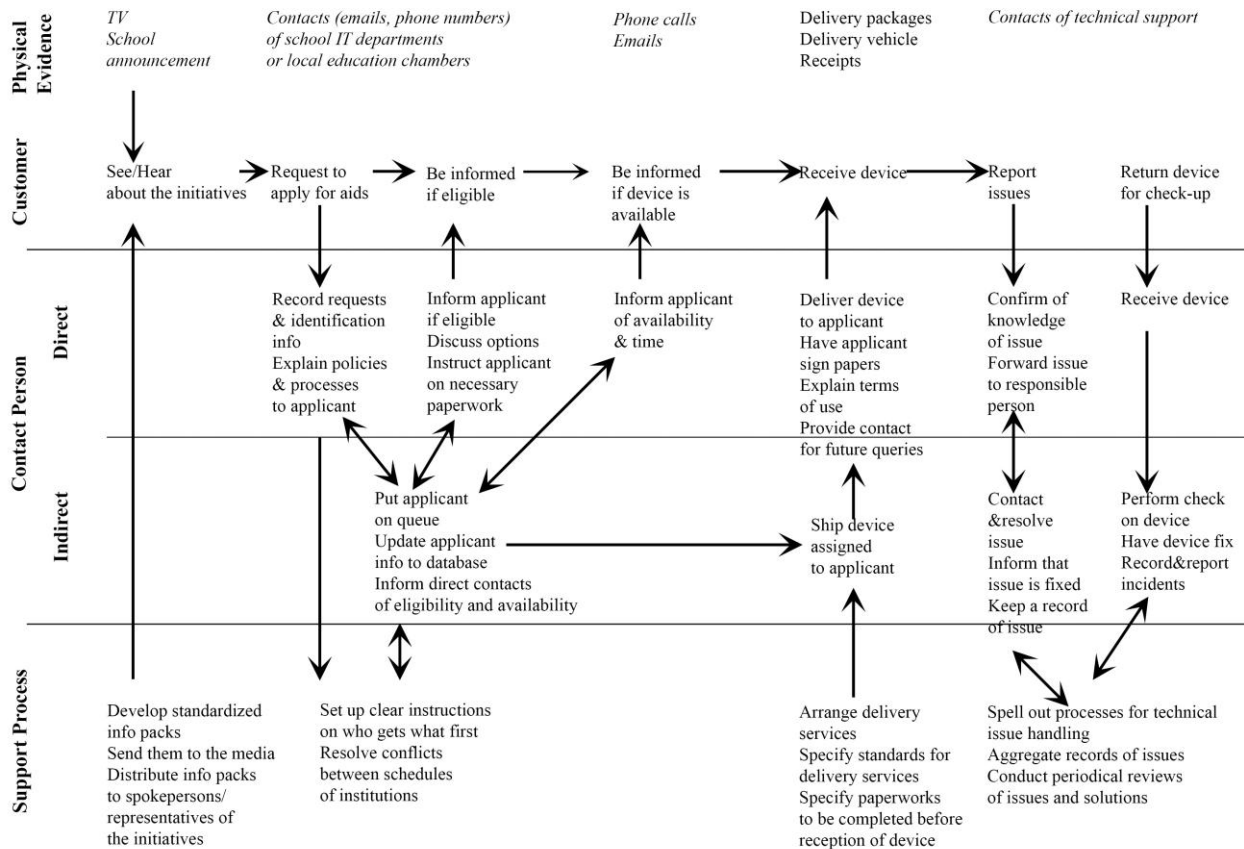
Figure 2.Service blueprint of the public initiative "Data and Devices for Students", adopted from the sketched timeline on Tuoi Tre E-newspaper [11].

As it can be observed, two-way internal communication happens only when a complaint is received. This type of inter-department discussions is handled by a dedicated customer service department. Throughout the rest of the process, roles are clearly stated so that no actor need being told what to do. Support processes define the standard of outcomes for each action and shape the success of any selling machines.

As the later part of this article will deliberate, even with an efficient process, leading digital product retailers still stumbled and struggled during the pandemic. It was because the strategy that guides the formulation of processes was lacking, and the processes ran on flawed strategic planning were bound to err. The process in the first blueprint is a pure process, and this is the most pronounced distinction when compared with the second one.

The second blueprint is for a public education institution's approach to equip students with necessary devices. The one in need here, in contrast to the one in the above case, may not be able to specify their needs or receive any counselling about which to choose. He or she is a passive recipient of information most of the time while the customer in the other case is an active actor for the whole process. The support processes take a more prominent role to coordinate and distribute the resources. As a result, there will be queuing to determine who receives what first.

Rationing and queuing put mountain of pressure on the direct contact person – who is normally the school administrator or information technician. They may not be familiar with this type of management problem, as a result, there will be chaos at first. When the supply is restricted to what the public revenue

can provide, there will probably be events of unscrupulous dealings to get ahead of the line.

Such confusions characterize the process of novel services like the initiatives. Instead of having a system that has gone through trial-and-errors, the guidelines in place are still on test phases. As a result, there are many discussions between actors of the process since roles and outcomes are yet to be clarified. Support processes and contact personnel are assuming part of strategy formulation jobs. Compared to their counterparts in the first blueprint, they are acting out of their nominal jobs. The process in the second blueprint stresses the importance of effectiveness which is giving the right product to the right person. They are not concerned with expenses which is another distinction from the cost focus of the other process.

Despite its numerous pitfalls, this scheme is, for many students, the only way to obtain a functionable digital device to not fall behind the curriculum. The initiative strives to support one million students, most of whom live in poverty or remote areas. The nature of the task and the geographic dispersion of beneficiaries make the goal unattainable without the intervention of the government.

3. Issues with two approaches to market demand: Effectiveness versus Efficiency

a) The government's initiative: Effectiveness clouds bigger visions.

The policy has overly concerned itself with students yet ignored other participants like teachers and school administrators. Teachers need a good bandwidth as much as their students. However, their needs have been overlooked so far in favor of the seemingly "more vulnerable" students. School administrators should also be included in the policy. Making telecommunication work is more than give one party good connection: it is

to map up the involved parties and make sure they all have excellent connections.

The initiative is willing to go great lengths to equip students with devices and data, but on some occasions, take away their autonomy. Choices go beyond picking the most suitable model to students' needs. The government may subsidize data package, but it should not rule out the right to choose by including pre-determined third-party providers in its programs.

Sustainable impacts of the aid program are called into question along with its unspecified duration. The policy is expected to be execute based on local preferences. While some provinces opt to give away digital devices to students, some rent. When the situation becomes safer for children to go to school, those devices may become redundant. That goes against the long-term goal of the policy which is to build the first step towards a digital education ecosystem. Therefore, a post-pandemic plan is imperative.

b) Businesses' response to market: Efficiency is a curse in disguise.

A business strategy cannot imitate the all-inclusive approach of a national policy. However, it can be a driver of inclusivity by reframing its strategic thinking. For example, the "Data and Devices for Students" project assume a broad view of connectedness which can be illustrated by its emphasis on quality devices, good bandwidth, and a wide selection of educational materials. In contrast, high-tech product distributors are often known to deploy short-term maneuvers to push sales and to be propelled by trends more than sustainable values. The products that are often advertised to students share certain traits including competitive prices and fashionable designs. In addition, these products often sell for a discounted price in back-to-school seasons.

Meanwhile, products with more advanced specifications sell at unsubstantial discounts.

The society has, for long, positioned student-grade goods at the low end. Businesses have reinforced this perception by supplying low-priced products to this segment. When the first wave caused a craze for used devices, retailers would not advise customers otherwise even though it is a consensus that used devices may pose security threats. When the second wave induce stockouts of budget-class devices, the response by leading distributors was to increase the supply of this specific type. They could have upsold by offering discounts on devices with better specifications or educated customers about long-time returns of investing in high-performance pieces. Nevertheless, they chose to subconsciously follow a belief they have perpetuated. But when global fulfillment capacity is hindered in a pandemic context, these businesses failed in short term unable to sell products in stock and even trailed in long term as the market preference will probably change from now on.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Having explored the processes, it can be said that while they are generally well thought and executed, certain modifications could make a business process more socially inclusive.

1. Introduce a more incorporating promotion program

Businesses could do good to the society and to their fortunes by becoming an extending arm of the initiative. The aim to improve disadvantaged students' access to internet necessitate a test to confirm disadvantageousness. This will add a step into the process and require extra human resources. Most importantly, it caused delay in delivery of the much-needed equipment to students. It is commendable that digital product retailers kick start promotions aiming at any student who must learn online. Promotions could come in forms of discounts, complementary data packages or lenient credit terms. In that way, students who could manage themselves would do it instead of waiting for aids from the government, relaying pressure on public spending.

Businesses can also work with the government to include all students, not only those stranded by the pandemic, in the national Internet connection program. To be fair, the pandemic spares no one, stranded or not, therefore any student should be given help during hard time. A stimulus package for students, regardless of segments, can spur spending in those who have hesitated over tight budgets. It can help the retailers themselves by creating precious cashflows that can be invested to help their business recover.

The same treatment can be applied to customers who wish to trade in their used devices for newer models. While matching supply with demand, retailers should not forget this source. Attractive trade-in programs can expand the supply of used yet decent devices, limiting retailers' dependence on oversea suppliers.

Students should not be the only ones to receive financial assistance. Parents, teachers, administrators, and educational institutions should also be the recipients of financial and non-financial assistance. Retailers can take a further step by making support to caretakers an industry norm. Giving caretakers financial incentives through their caretaking tenure is a great tool for customer retention which builds loyalty and saves long-term marketing costs.

2. Target education niche markets and prevent freeriding behaviors with monitoring software

Tracking and monitoring software have found a fertile ground in Covid-19 restriction measures imposed by governments. The need to maintain working discipline from both employees and employers gave rise to a market for employee monitoring technologies. The latest development includes records of keystroke and periodic capture of the screen to keep employees focused on their jobs [6].

Applications of monitoring technologies in the field of education management can help streamline the experience for teachers and students alike. To be able to monitor students' activities through screenshots, it is possible for educators to maintain the quality of the classes and the integrity of the exams.

Monitoring can go as far as to dictate the terms of use for students and teachers. A problem with giving students free access to the internet is that others can take advantage of students' benefits for other uses. Dictating the terms could include limiting the time students can use to browse social networking sites or video channels like YouTube. This can prevent freeriding and misuse of resources. Default specifications like location settings will deter mishandling and theft.

The creation of a network of educators and learners lays a steppingstone towards building a secure and efficient system to offer standardized education to any students in Vietnam. The secured network will help connect educational resources and bridge the gap that exists between students in cities and those from remote areas.

1. Customer services: Assistance to help teachers and students with digital transformation

More than warranties and technical supports, customer services should include providing counselling and training for first-time users of telecommunication and teleworking applications. These contents can be delivered through formats such as online seminars. Representatives can improve customer experience by assisting them in setting up and troubleshooting. They can also help by acquainting users with etiquettes in conducting businesses online. Such augmented products will solidify the decision to buy digital devices.

V. CONCLUSION

Prices have come before performances in the market for technology products in Vietnam, which has been the cause of several mismatches in concerned parties' attempts to equip Vietnamese in general and Vietnamese students, with decent Internet connections. To break this cycle, the government and the businesses need to do more than just restock. They need to renovate technological and financial aspects of the technology product industry, to deliver the right products to the right customers at the right time.

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HƯỚNG TỚI CHIẾN LƯỢC TIẾP THỊ CỘNG ĐỒNG: CON ĐƯỜNG CHO THỊ TRƯỜNG SẢN PHẨM CÔNG NGHỆ TRONG ĐẠI DỊCH COVID-19

Tóm tắt – Bài báo này sẽ so sánh hướng tiếp cận của khu vực nhà nước và tư nhân khi đối diện với tình huống nhu cầu về sản phẩm công nghệ tăng đột biến trong dịch Covid-19. Mục tiêu chính là xác định những điểm cần cải thiện và đề xuất các phương án kết hợp giữa nhà nước và các tổ chức tư nhân để đạt được kết quả tốt nhất cho toàn xã hội.

Từ khóa – gói hỗ trợ của chính phủ, thị trường sản phẩm công nghệ, thiết kế dịch vụ, tiếp thị cộng đồng.

Pham Lan Anh received Master of Business Administration at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 2016. Previously, this author received the Degree of Bachelor in Accounting and Auditing from Hoa Sen University in 2013 as well as the Degree of Sustainable Micro-Finance Management from Microfinance and Community Development Institute in 2021. The interests of research are leadership management, business administration and entrepreneurship. The writer has 9 years of experience in sales and sales management in different industries.