



When upheaval leads to elevation

Marketing and customer insights from the
year that changed everything

Designit
a wipro company

Obsolete

ob·so·lete

ADJECTIVE

It's a word no marketer wants to hear. Yet, in 2020, practically overnight, entire categories of products and services, at times encompassing entire industry sectors, were no longer in demand or even accessible. Business budgets were reduced, customers couldn't or wouldn't shop in person, and many businesses had little to no digital presence.

Amid the upheaval, some brands came out relatively unscathed, and some were even better positioned than before and flourished. What was it that enabled them to not just survive, but thrive?

In the past year and a half, brands have had to react to unforeseen global changes. Customer and employee needs and expectations changed rapidly, and priorities were redefined. In the face of a public health crisis that pulled us in many directions, authentic connection became the key ingredient to brand survival.

A photograph of two female airline cabin crew members in a dimly lit aircraft cabin. They are both wearing white surgical masks and clear plastic gloves. The woman in the foreground is looking directly at the camera, while the one behind her is looking down. They are wearing grey uniforms with patterned scarves. The background shows rows of airplane seats and overhead storage bins.

What has emerged is a distinct before and after

During 2020, the human drive to come together around shared experiences, ideals, needs, desires, and goals intensified. In response to so much change and uncertainty, brands that delivered a sense of community and shared purpose endured.

The pressures of the pandemic accelerated shifts in how companies in general—and marketers in particular—do business. So what are the critical challenges and open opportunities for brands to sustain this momentum in 2021 and into the future?

To get a pulse on the changing ethos, we connected with marketing and customer experience executives in leading organizations all over the globe. We wanted to understand how these leaders are faring and what is top of mind for the coming year. In this report, you'll find the results of our research, which uncovered five key areas where brands are called to build on the work they've already begun.

01

Turn a
moment into
a movement

Momentum for real change has been created over the last 12 months. So now what?

02

Lean into
humanity as a
brand strategy

Now, we witness the emergence of the authentic, purpose-driven brand.

03

Make your
way through the
data labyrinth

It has never been more important to be able to access, understand, and make the most of data.

04

Foster
connection as a
two-way street

Thinking outside the virtual "box" is key to engaging meaningfully with customers and employees.

05

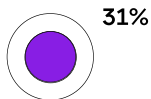
Demystify
customer
experience

Splintered, immature customer experience (CX) is no longer viable, and a holistic approach is the way forward.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that no one knows what's around the next bend. But what *is* clear is that it's no longer business as usual. There's a powerful momentum right now. Here's where you can dive in and learn from those who are already making the most of it.

Marketers met the challenges of 2020 differently

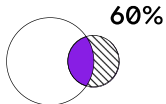
In our research, we met three personas—Traditionalists, Progressives, and Disrupters—that took three different approaches to navigating the journey and responding.



Traditionalists

managed a changing market by employing tried-and-true methods in test-and-learn scenarios.

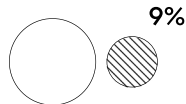
"I mitigate risk by learning from others' mistakes and making full use of tried and tested methodologies to meet our targets."



Progressives

applied a blend of risk and caution in a turbulent market.

"I look ahead for inspiring ideas and innovative new ways to market, while still ensuring we meet our targets."



Disrupters

were either ready to meet the moment because the demands of 2020 often led to changes they had long wanted to make, or they had to step up because the new realities and demands of their industries gave them no choice.

"I turn all the marketing rules upside down, shake things up, and change the game to meet our targets."

In this paper, we'll uncover areas where all three types of executives agree on the need to reassess their growth strategies. Some may be further along than others on their paths forward and may differ in how they manage their priorities along the way.

01

Turn a moment into a movement

In 2020, many marketers made the most of the moment. Tasked with leading their brands through an unprecedented year of global change, some executives found that they were often able to address long-standing challenges and innovate amid the tumult.

Due to global shutdowns, brick-and-mortar stores had to expand their digital reach or risk precipitous loss of revenue. Safety concerns for employees changed how employees worked, customers interacted, and goods and services were collected or carried out.

As brands evolved in response, customers quickly adapted to the changes, which in some cases were preferred to the status quo. Signs indicate that this may be the beginning of a tectonic shift in how we do business.

“COVID has, across industries, compressed decades of digital adoption into just a few months.”

—Chief innovation, product, and marketing officer, technology company



There is no more business as usual

Over the past year and a half, each brand marketing personality worked to overcome the challenges they faced in their industry and strove to transform how they did business during the pandemic and into the future.

Traditionalists applied tactics they may not have customarily taken and were willing to take more risk than prior to the pandemic. They pressed to streamline processes, reduce bureaucratic decision-making, and update their product and service offerings.

Progressives were the largest percentage of the entire population we surveyed. Even in sectors that were previously much less risk-averse, there was a drive to strike a balance between mitigating risk and managing constantly shifting circumstances.

Many Disrupters seemed to be less impacted by the chaos of 2020 than the other segments. They worked to break down silos not only within their companies but within their industry peer groups—something never seen before—to improve communications, products, and services and to streamline processes with a continued focus on their **primary** goals: growing their customer base, long-term brand health, and innovation.

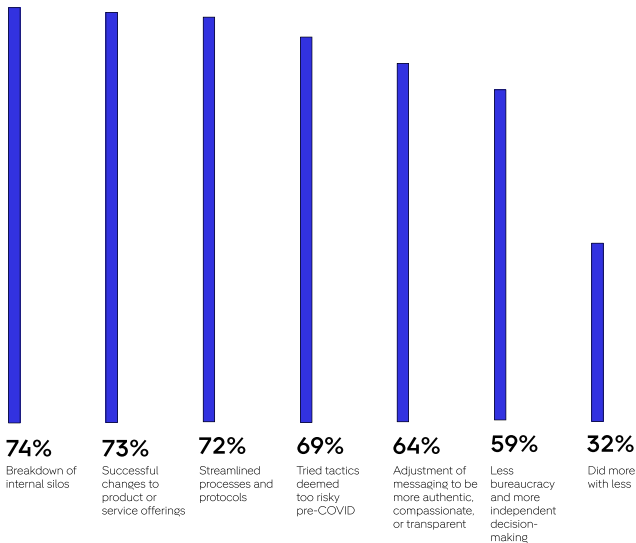
No matter what role brands played, in the wake of all the upheaval, marketing and CX emerged more important than ever. To support this finding, nearly three-quarters of all executives we surveyed expected their budgets to increase in 2021.

80%

60%

40%

20%



**Strategies
and tactics
undertaken
to improve
business
performance**

Now is not the time to let up

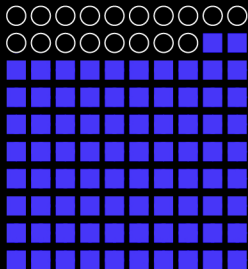
Marketing and CX leaders acknowledge that the challenges and market accelerations of 2020 are not yet behind them. They want to use this opportunity to impact organizational change, move beyond legacy systems and thinking, continue to break down silos within and outside their organizations, and continue to build their brands to differentiate for the future.



Within the next
12 months,

82%

of organizations will align their offerings with new or changing customer sentiments and expectations.



Within the next
two to three years,

82%

of marketing and CX leaders plan
to create a new breed of content
and generate experiences to gain
a sustainable, long-term
competitive edge.

02

Lean into humanity as a brand strategy

In the first few months of the pandemic, the world slowed, and, in some places, entirely shut down. Communities pulled together to support each other, sending encouragement to those in isolation, taking the time to recognize the heroic efforts of health care workers, and rallying around essential workers.

Accordingly, people craved that same level of transparency, empathy, and understanding from the brands they supported. Consumers realized that “business as usual” was no longer possible and were happy to accept the necessary pivots and compromises so long as companies communicated in a human, transparent way.

“The word we used for the whole year was ‘empathy.’ The customer does not need their problem to be solved, but they need to be heard and understood.”

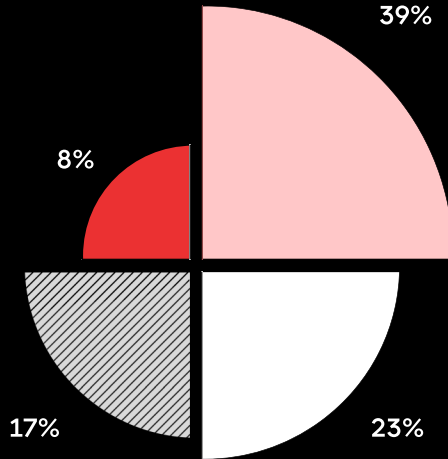
—Executive vice president and
chief marketing and
communications officer,
delivery services company



Tear down the walls

Moving forward, brands can no longer hide behind corporate walls. The veil between company and customer continues to dissolve. Rather than putting their values on a landing page and forgetting about them, many brands today are aware of the need to work toward actually living their ideals.

Some brands used to think that transformation could wait, or that their product or service was “good enough.” But better-informed customers have demanded more, judging a company not just on its end product but on how that product came to be. Brands that allow customers in on their story and purpose are viewed as more trustworthy and human.



Characteristics seen as critical for brand success

- Transparent
- Authentic
- Empathetic
- Purpose-driven

03

Make your way through the data labyrinth

Marketing and CX executives can paint a comprehensive picture of what marketing technology they should employ and the data required to elevate their business. But it's not unusual for them to have a suboptimal set of tools or to not have the support to fully optimize their current tool set and align it to that vision.

So, marketers want (and need) a cohesive tool set to provide personalization for their customers. And companies strive to have data solutions that provide real-time, actionable insights and analysis. But currently, executives have little access to data, too much unstructured data, or not quite the actionable data they need. Bringing their vision to life is a big opportunity.

The executives we surveyed are challenged with defining a true data strategy and a clear road map to implement it. Rather than understanding the data and unifying it with a seamless integration, too many businesses have applied Band-Aid solutions to address the data challenge in disparate silos.

“Marketing without data is just fluff.”

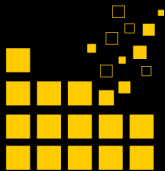
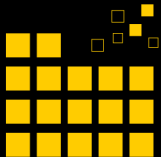
—Global head of marketing operations, biotechnology company



A plan of action is in order

For leading marketing and customer experience executives to be successful, a defined, aligned plan of action for making their way through the data labyrinth is essential. Among those executives who share the responsibility and decision-making around data and analytics within their organizations, coming to internal alignment is a first step. Then a data strategy is essential, with the customer at the center.

Once a customer-focused data strategy is defined and socialized with the executive team and stakeholders, companies must then streamline and connect it to the appropriate systems and channels.



Looking ahead to the next
two to three years,

81%

of marketing and CX leaders
believe personalization and ease
for the customer at every digital
touchpoint will be critical.

62%

cite a need for a 360-degree,
data-driven view of their customers.

80%

60%

40%

20%

63%

Artificial
intelligence

55%

Machine
learning

42%

Headless
commerce

32%

Digital
marketing
software

28%

Chatbots

24%

Augmented
reality

21%

Voice
interfaces

17%

Virtual
reality

15%

Spatial
computing

3%

Blockchain

**Technologies
anticipated
to change
how businesses
operate
and perform**

04

Foster connection as a two-way street

When customer interactions were suddenly all digital, it became harder than ever to meaningfully connect. In talking about the challenges of making this shift, marketers made one thing clear: people need to be heard.

Online fatigue is real, and it has made it more challenging for marketers to engage customers virtually. The modern customer requires two-way dialogue. Identifying the right ongoing content and experiences to satisfy that need is key.

To meet the new cultural landscape, our interviewees had to adjust messaging and content. Overwhelmingly, they emphasized the need for conversation, storytelling, and connection with colleagues, prospects, customers, partners, and vendors.

“We saw massive fire drills. A lot of our marketing plans were thrown out the window. [Our efforts became] more about relationship-building than selling.”

—US marketing leader, health care company

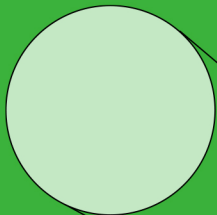
A man is seen from the side, wearing a headset and looking at a computer monitor. A young child with curly hair, wearing a red and white striped shirt, is sitting on his back. The child is looking at a tablet held by the man. The background is slightly blurred, showing a home office environment.

Companies need to look inward too

Marketing and customer experience executives and chief experience officers are also realizing that the need for connection as a way to drive business success is not just about customers. With 81 percent of them betting on employee engagement as a competitive strategy, building relationships with employees is also key.

When remote work became the norm for many organizations, employees craved the same two-way dialogue and connection that customers want from the brands they support. In the absence of watercooler and breakroom conversations, everyone has had to work harder to be more than just a voice on the phone.

Employees also want to know that the vision, mission, and core values of their organization are an integral part of their day-to-day and reflected across how the company does business. They want opportunities to engage, to feel that the company they work for cares about them, and to see that the company's values mirror their own.



360-degree communication is key

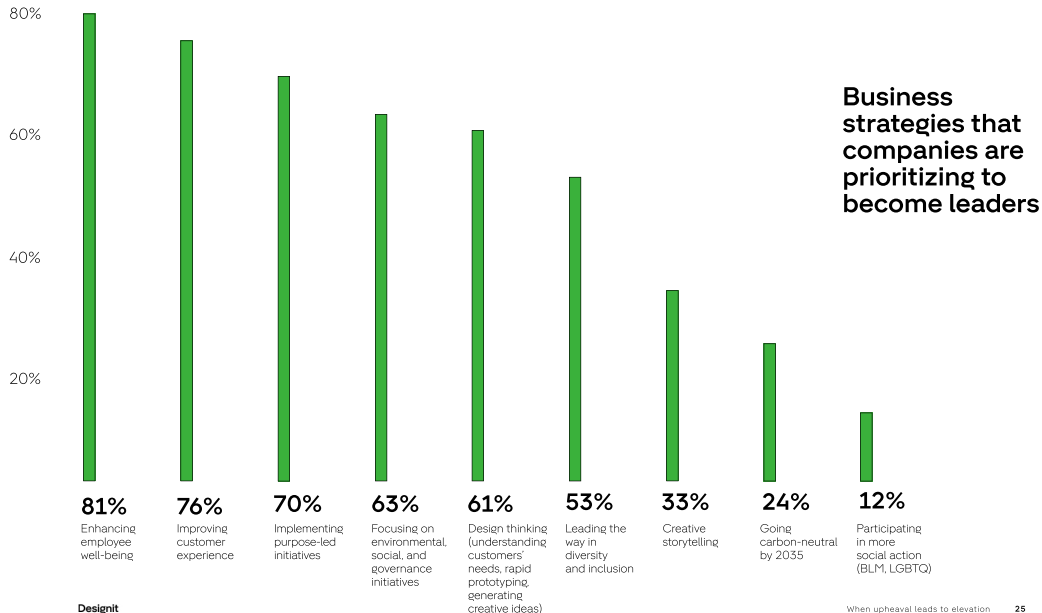
In keeping with this need for authentic communication across the spectrum of stakeholders, brands that enabled customers, clients, and employees to connect in a shared space fostered true engagement and provided opportunities for change-making conversations. Creating virtual roundtables to facilitate industry problem-solving and relationship-building was an impact-making strategy in 2020.



70%

of executives are prioritizing implementing purpose-led initiatives to become or stay industry leaders.

63% are focusing on environmental, social, and governance initiatives.



05

Demystify customer experience

Many brands lost ground in 2020, and even brands that thrived saw how the collective experiences of the last year changed customer expectations. Thus, implementing a framework to deliver end-to-end CX that meets constantly shifting customer needs, expectations, and delivery options has become key. As a result, companies that don't have an integrated customer experience management (CXM) program and approach keenly **feel the growth gap** between themselves and those that have mature, embedded CXM programs.

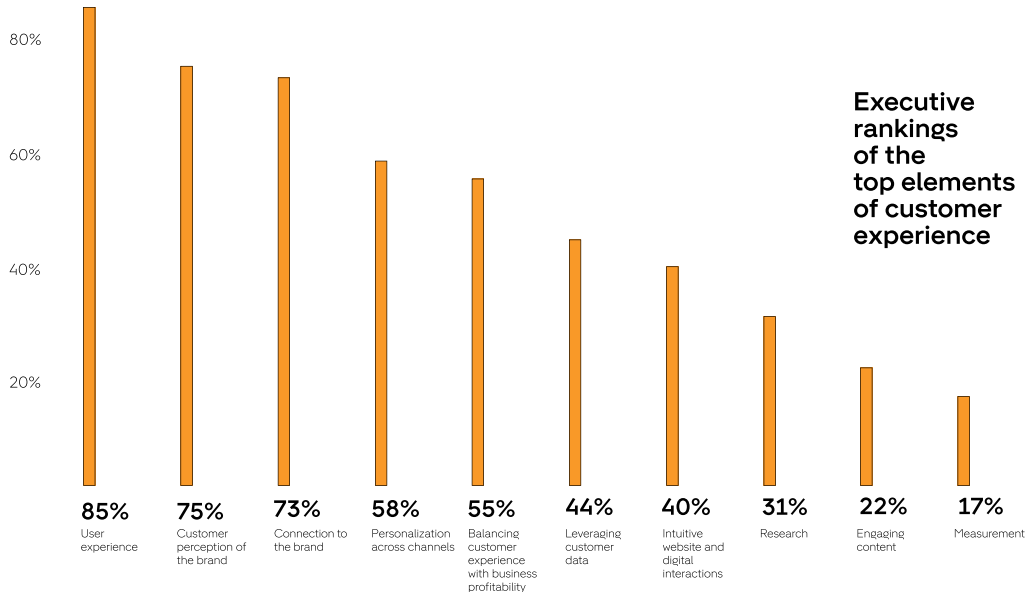
Because they don't want to be caught unprepared again, executives are shifting priorities to address the need to execute a broad CX strategy. There's a desire to instill organizational capabilities to readily react to changing customer expectations. In fact, companies are committing more budget to improving customer experience this year, and the majority of brands (90 percent) already have or are actively recruiting a chief experience officer.

Although prioritizing CX as an essential growth strategy was consistently mentioned as a first step, most leaders admit to struggling with where to begin to implement organization-wide CX improvements. And, as we look to 2022 and beyond, Progressives and Traditionalists are prioritizing CX lower than technology, with less than half of each group selecting it over personalization or emerging technology.

As we've seen throughout our research, Disrupters are charting their own course. Staking their brands' success on differentiation, they effectively employ CXM best practices to deliver intentional (and exceptional) product and service experiences.

“We need to have conversations with our customers. We need to change the way we do business. Everyone knows customer experience is needed, but they don't necessarily know how to get there.”

—Chief marketing officer,
technology company



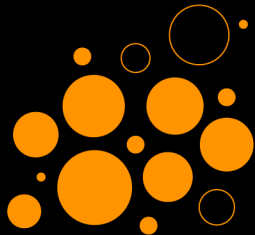
A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue surgical mask and a dark grey coat over a grey sweater, holds a black smartphone in her right hand. She is standing in a crowd of people, with others visible in the background, some also wearing masks. The background is slightly blurred, emphasizing the woman in the foreground.

CXM isn't an experience; it's a holistic strategy

One reason for the CXM struggle of so many brands may be that most executives equate customer experience with user experience and "personalization across channels." This confusion and ambiguity is commonplace in companies with less mature CXM practices. The challenges **remain in** how to establish an end-to-end, fully operational CXM framework that is embedded in the organization.

That said, many executives did share isolated efforts to improve specific experiences. We heard stories of sales programs being switched off so all focus could be on helping customers keep their lights on, and of bankers helping small businesses set up e-commerce platforms. But for too many brands, a holistic approach remains elusive.

Today, the importance of making CXM a priority is clear. One place to start is to understand that CXM isn't just a matter of building better experiences. It starts with defining a "North Star CX" vision that helps guide a holistic, data-driven customer experience strategy, grounded in a cross-channel voice-of-the-customer program. And then it's pairing that with a corporate culture that emphasizes continuous improvement and always puts the customer first.



71%

of organizations are committing more budget to improving customer experience this year.

Ride the wave

Managing the impacts of this tumultuous year pushed many leaders toward unconventional thinking, but will they maintain it?

To solve the problems on the horizon, marketers and CX leaders must remain bold, far beyond one moment of crisis. Every decision they make must build a connection with customers and break down walls. Without a genuine focus on creating an honest, human brand, the gap between what marketing departments deliver and what customers actually want will only grow.



A person in a dark coat and hat stands on a dark path at night, looking at a glowing smartphone. The sky is filled with stars, and a few bare trees are visible in the background. The overall mood is contemplative and futuristic.

Follow your North Star

Marketers and CX leaders are already working to bridge this gap. As we've seen, throughout 2020, they tailored messaging to be more empathetic, sped up digital transformation, and engaged with customers in new ways, which has created palpable momentum.

So, with robust data driving ways to **meaningfully** connect with customers, and content and experiences that inspire and unite, marketing and CX leaders are on the right track. Now they must go even further—because being purpose-driven has become an expectation, not an option.

It's no longer enough to simply make a product, deliver a service, or provide an experience. Leading brands understand the need for a clearly defined purpose that's embodied and consistently delivered in every conversation with their customers and employees.

The strength of their purpose should inspire and unite all their constituents—customers, employees, partners, and stakeholders. To make the most of the energy generated by the extraordinary challenges and opportunities of the past year, every action that marketing leaders take has to propel them toward that purpose—and let it serve as **their** North Star.

A photograph of four people sitting around a campfire at night. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the fire. The people are dressed in casual outdoor attire. The background shows a dark forest with some blue light filtering through the trees.

Ignite shared progress

To meet the challenges of today for the success, achievement, and growth of tomorrow, brands of the world must turn **change** into **progress**. Progress that recasts our current challenges as extraordinary opportunities. Progress that builds and improves indelible customer relationships. Progress that creates cohesive customer experiences with every communication and at every touchpoint. Progress that brings empathy to brands, **utilizes** data as a clarifying lens, and **enables** adaptation in the endlessly complicated flux of the market, culture, customer mindsets, and daily life.

With every step in the right direction, new future paths are charted for the benefit of brands and the world alike.

80%

60%

40%

20%

80%

Accelerated digital transformation plans

70%

Focused on marketing tactics that delivered the biggest ROI

63%

Worked to understand changing customer behavior

61%

Adapted messaging to the current situation

60%

Developed greater e-commerce, sales, direct-to-consumer, and online capabilities

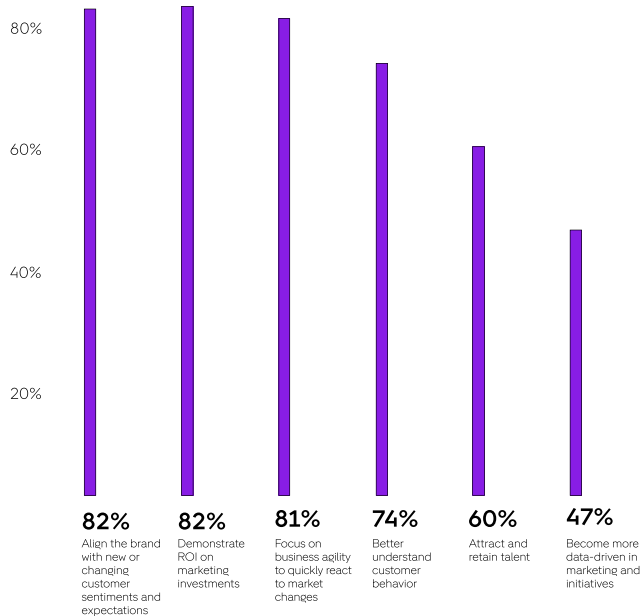
53%

Adapted marketing and experiences mix

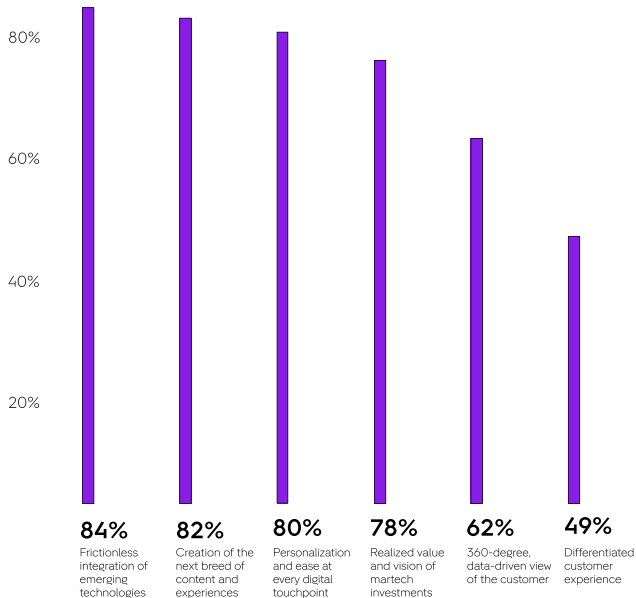
50%

Focused on employee well-being

Successful strategies implemented during the pandemic



Top priorities over the next 12 months



**Strategies for
gaining a
competitive
edge over the
next two to
three years**

Methodology

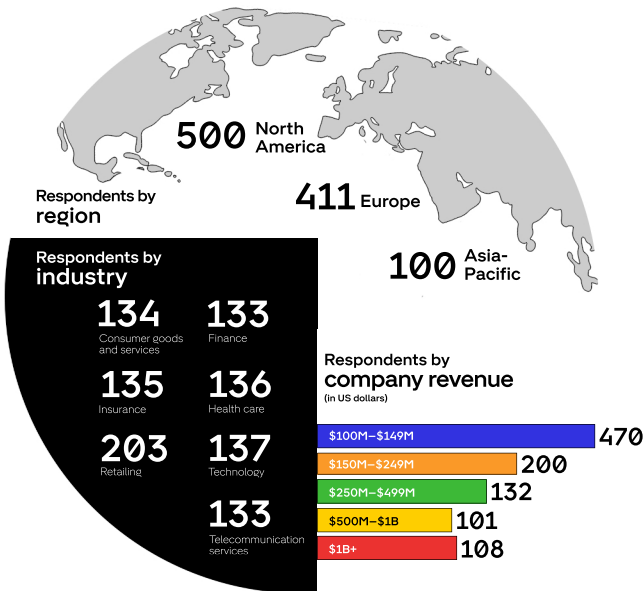
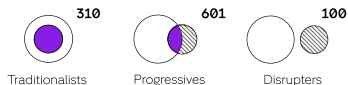
meth·od·ol·o·gy
NOUN

We conducted a mixed-methods research study with marketing and CX executives globally to delve into their pandemic responses and future visions, validate opportunities to improve customer and employee experiences, understand their desire for purpose-driven marketing, and capitalize on the importance of the future of data and technology in marketing.

Using a narrative model, we interviewed 22 executives in December 2020 and January 2021 to capture their sentiments. Interviewees represented the chemicals, consumer goods and services, energy, media and entertainment, finance, health care, retailing, and technology industries across North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific.

We surveyed 1,011 executives in January and February 2021. Respondents spanned industries including consumer goods and services, finance, health care, insurance, retail, technology, and telecommunication services in North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific.

Respondents by persona



About

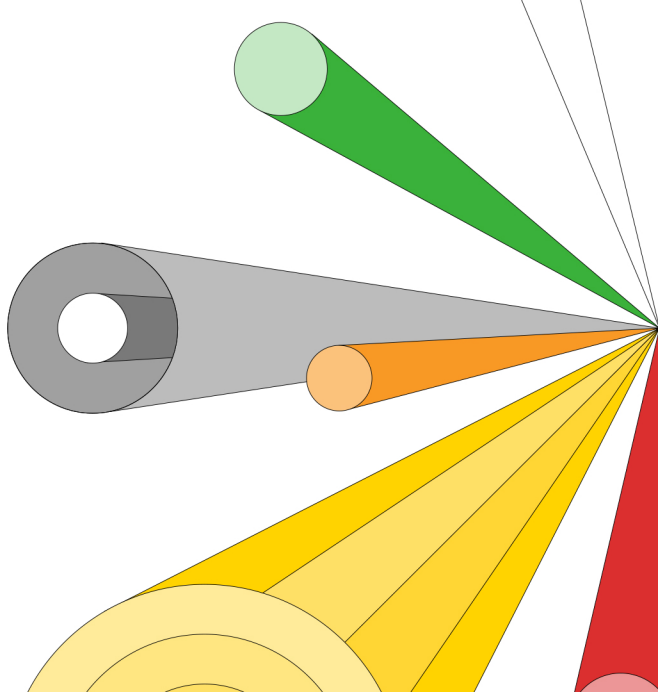
Designit

a wipro company

Designit is a Wipro company that works at the intersection of strategy, technology, marketing, and design.

We ignite progress for brands to drive progress for all.

Designit is an experience innovation firm. We help brands progress by designing new futures, bringing those innovations to market, and connecting them to people around the world.





Kathleen Ulrich

Global Head, Corporate Marketing
and Communications
kathleen.ulrich@designit.com