

CSPs' digital channels have become more important than ever

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Communications service providers (CSPs) found that their investments in their online channels were a lot more important than they had expected following the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting shutdown of physical stores. This comment provides some insight into how the pandemic changed CSPs' handling of their online channels, and is predominantly based on a recent webinar chaired by Analysys Mason with participants from three CSPs and one vendor (all identified in the final paragraph).

The online channel became a key tool for CSPs during the initial COVID-19 outbreak

The online channel suddenly became the only channel that customers could use to do business with CSPs during the COVID-19-enforced lockdown. This forced CSPs to put specific attention on making sure that their online channel fully represented their business. No one anticipated this situation and so no one was ready to make the online channel provide this much support. However, all the participants in this webinar scrambled to use and improve what they already had in place.

The online channel also became the way in which people could find out what to expect from their CSP. How a particular CSP was operating (for example, the availability of call centres, the handling of new orders, how technicians would respond and when shops would be open) changed daily, or even hourly, and forced constant online page updates. Customers had a lot more questions, and these could only be handled online.

Customers' priorities changed following the outbreak of COVID-19. Online channels had to fully support maintenance problems in addition to the more-traditional issues such as bill payment. CSPs made many tactical decisions to add support and features based on needs that did not previously exist, such as online training to improve elderly customers' use of smartphones.

The COVID-19 shutdown amplified the need for e-commerce. Customers that wanted new services, a change to their service or to buy a new phone had no other channel options. CSPs put a greater emphasis on answering questions because customers made decisions that they might otherwise have made with in-store support in a retail shop. One way in which CSPs worked to overcome the limitations of e-commerce was to use technology to visualise phones in 3D (provided by [Binkies 3D](#), the webinar sponsor). The CSPs participating in this webinar were fully prepared to take orders and provide customers with services and devices via their online channels, which put them in very good stead. Not all CSPs were that well-prepared.

CSPs will accelerate their investment in digital channels

CSPs' retail shops started to reopen recently. Some customers have reverted to gathering information online, but making final purchase decisions in-store. However, many customers have become more used to using online channels for everything, making it the 'new normal'. New customers that signed up for services fully through an

online channel are now comfortable in doing so, even if they were not before. Indeed, it is likely that online channels will remain important for the foreseeable future, given continued concerns about outside contacts and the limitations of reopening shops.

Some industries exist in an online-only world. However, CSPs in developed markets expect to continue to support a range of channels in order to engage with customers in the mode in which they are most comfortable. Both the retail shop and the call centre have a key role to play. The online channel is important for customers that are well-conditioned to the online world and can help CSPs to lower operating costs. As has been demonstrated, it is also an essential resource in a pandemic.

CSPs continue to give their online channels more attention, even though the initial crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed. Many are even accelerating their previous plans and are continually testing new features with customers to ensure that they will really make a difference. The COVID-19 crisis has made CSPs aware of their short-comings and the need to ensure that they understand how customers will use their online channels.

The following people participated in the webinar.

- Rovin Vazirna: business product manager for online commerce at T-Mobile USA (and at Sprint prior to the acquisition by T-Mobile).
- Leonie Tichelaar: product owner of e-commerce for Vodafone Ziggo in the Netherlands.
- Colin Li: product owner of go-to-market e-commerce at TELUS Digital in Canada.
- Gabriele Romagnoli: international business development manager at Binkies 3D, who provides interactive 3D models of mobile devices for digital commerce platforms.
- Larry Goldman: head of software and networks research at Analysys Mason.

The video replay of the webinar can be found [here](#).