

## Digital Marketing (MKT) and Microenterprises (SMEs). Main challenges in Ecuador

Marcelo Javier Mancheno – Saá<sup>1</sup>, Jenny Margoth Gamboa – Salinas<sup>2\*</sup>, Jacqueline del Pilar Hurtado – Yugcha<sup>3</sup>, Alicia Giovanna Ortiz - Morales<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

*Digital Marketing is a resource that has currently become more relevant for companies and businesses; it can become an important tool to increase the competitiveness and profitable durability of SMEs. The research presented is part of a series of studies related to the digitization of businesses, for which the authors have proposed as a general objective: Analyze the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) of the Ambato canton in Ecuador. Its approach was the qualitative paradigm, which allowed carrying out a documentary investigation based on a content review, which allowed obtaining important contributions regarding the statistics and records of SMEs' situation in the province and the canton. It was obtained as a result that the situation of small companies is more advanced in terms of their digital incorporation, in many cases forced by the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, there is still a path of practices and use of resources such as digital marketing for its complete, efficient management in these terms.*

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, SMEs, Digital Transition.

### Introduction

The era of knowledge has allowed the creation and diversification of new media with the presence of information technology, where the different areas of personal, social, work, and economic life have transformed, incorporating adaptations to new circumstances. Marketing management is no exception; on the contrary, it has an important function: It has gone from being a sales tool that many companies did not apply because they considered it complicated and expensive to a two-way, innovative, leading, and massive management process (Heredia et al., 2022), which allows unlimited, non-spatial access and global interaction for large and small businesses.

This has promoted an important change in the world of marketing (Da Silva & Núñez, 2021), where the disruptive emergence of microelectronics through the internet, computers, and robots has reached a level of consensus called – Digital Economy – including big data (Big data), digital platforms, algorithms, technology companies, virtual payment methods, and electronic commerce. Advertising management no longer efficiently obeys media that were previously massive; currently, the competition is more voracious in a field where technology allows the immediacy of information and a diverse range of local, national, and international options, that is to say Globally, it becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Technical University of Ambato, mj.mancheno@uta.edu.ec, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8381-0791>

<sup>2</sup> Technical University of Ambato, jennymgamboa@uta.edu.ec, <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9507-6144>

<sup>3</sup> Technical University of Ambato, jacquelinehurtado@uta.edu.ec, <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9367-3367>

<sup>4</sup> Technical University of Ambato, aliciaortiz@uta.edu.ec, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9576-3008>

relevant to focus on the client, to know their preferences, tastes and uses mechanisms that allow loyalty (Castaño & Jurado, 2016).

A forceful alternative can be digital marketing when talking about the use of media and technological tools, networks, and the Internet to carry out the process of marketing a product or service. Among the advantages of this type of marketing, widely used today, are measurement, personalization, brand visibility, customer acquisition and loyalty, progressive increase in sales, the creation of communities, channels with global reach, experimentation, and low cost (Mejía, 2023).

Marketing has usually been understood as a tool or another function within the business of companies, but it is really a management trend that deals with or focuses on the client (consumer and potential consumer), rightly Kotler & Armstrong (2012) define it as “managing profitable customer relationships. The double goal of marketing is to attract new customers by promising them superior value, keep and grow current customers by satisfying their needs” (p. 04).

These characteristics allow the base of current markets to use technological resources linked to marketing, which not only informs the consumer but also establishes an interaction. Competitiveness has become an important part of niches or clusters, where transitory competitive advantages come to mark barriers over time to achieve temporary loyalty (Martínez, 2019). The props treated in digital marketing are born from the user experience, which has conditioned companies so much, that they modify and make the processes effective, the latter enhanced with technology (Daud et al., 2022).

#### Importance of the problem

Today, the digital economy market is considered a more expansive space where supply and demand curves interact, regulate, and innovate (Jones, Motta, & Alderete, 2016). The expansion of product lines is becoming common, so diversification and expansion are beginning to be seen in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), having a consumer who is more easily motivated by the use of technology and through marketing (Castaño & Jury, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic presented such extreme conditions that it encouraged a commercial and economic movement based on technological irruption, which substantially increased the channels to reach a greater number of consumers and markets, even higher than traditional commercial standards.

In this sense, the (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022) confirmed that due to the mobility restrictions caused by the effects of the pandemic, companies managed to remain active and increase their presence virtually, providing services and offering products online, which became an essential resource to mitigate the effects of the crisis. However, Latin America presents a delay in its preparation level for electronic commerce in comparison with other regions of the world, particularly in postal reliability and banking.

To foster this trust, institutional values are crucial; reference is made to the regulatory frameworks to carry out this activity, where online consumer protection and personal data are guaranteed (ECLAC, 2019). Digital marketing management for micro-entrepreneurs can be an opportunity to increase sales and position themselves, considering the relevance that SMEs have for the global, regional, and national economy.

One of the mechanisms that make it possible for SMEs to incorporate these innovations is the digital transition, which currently has only occurred empirically and is motivated by a global emergency but should be conceived as part of the organizational planning process. It is necessary to understand that the evolution of the Internet has caused a change in consumer behavior, giving way to the automation of commerce (Chiliquingo, Gamboa, & Mancheno, 2021). The development of Web 2.0 and management in social networks has created such a rich dynamic that it allows one to be precise when establishing the profile or map of consumer behavior (Maqueira & Bruque, 2012).

This assessment is based on the fact that electronic media have had a disruptive boom that can allow Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to position themselves commercially in the market; however, their course and evolution have not been natural but rather it has been forced by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is presumed that the maturity of these markets will undergo a significant decline when the extraordinary factors related to the pandemic are controlled (Bala & Verma, 2018).

Particularly in Ecuador, according to figures from the (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses [INEC], 2019) when referring to the population, consumer behaviors inclined towards web purchases can be seen. Of the total Ecuadorian population, 36% use the Internet to obtain information, and 28% use it as a means of communication; this denotes that at least 54% of the population interacts through the networks. This implies that more than 50% of the Ecuadorian population has access to information that can be found virtually, where SMEs can make use of digital marketing skills to reach a greater number of users (Striedinger, 2018).

However, entrepreneurs know the importance of social networks, but many SMEs are currently not in the digital ecosystem, which implies an unfavorable effect on their sales and productivity. The use of virtual platforms and resources is constantly increasing, supported by digital marketing, which gives greater importance to the presence of companies and businesses in the digital world. The research presented is justified by the relevance of digital marketing to improve the situation of companies, so it is proposed as a general objective: Analyze the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) of the Ambato canton in Ecuador.

In Ecuador, in recent years, an increase in investment in technology can be observed for the concept of equipment of physical devices, software, and computer applications of 66.7% of companies. Distributed in the manufacturing sector at 24.6%, trade at 23.9%, services at 17.3%, and mining at 0.9% (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses [INEC], 2015). Even though there is evidence of an effort to incorporate the largest number of SMEs in digital marketing, there are still challenges to face.

## **Materials and methods**

Analyzing the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Ambato canton in Ecuador is a research with a qualitative approach, where it was necessary to review documents or other studies that preceded it, as well as statistics and records of the progress of SMEs in Ecuador and the canton.

Among the methods used, the analytical–synthetic one was required, where it was necessary to break down the ideas into their parts and then interpret the content, synthesizing the main ideas. Likewise, the inductive – deductive method allowed incorporating an analysis from the particular to the general and vice versa, reaching particular conclusions that transferred common characteristics to a whole.

The group studied consisted of previously published scientific documents, the authors' studies, and the INEC, ECLAC, and BanEcuador records. Documentary research techniques were used, both for recording and deep interpretation of the contents.

The processing and presentation of the information was carried out with the support of Microsoft Word 2019, EdrawMax 2017, and Microsoft Excel 2019, which allowed both the handling of the collected information and its presentation in graphs, tables, diagrams, and figures for better visualization of the information speech.

## Results and discussion

Analyzing the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Ambato canton in Ecuador has involved reviewing information on these companies' status in the country, particularly in the Ambato canton. Table 1 shows the SMEs' classification, according to the regulations implemented by the Andean Community in its Resolution 1260 and the current internal legislation, which was accepted by the Superintendence of Companies, Securities and Insurance of Ecuador (SuperCías).

Table 1 SME Classification

Variables	Micro Business	Small Company	Medium Company	Big Companies
Employed Staff	from 1 - 9	from 10 - 49	from 50 - 199	≥ 200
Gross Annual Sales Value	≤ 100,000	100,001 - 1,000,000	1,000,001 - 5,000,000	> 5,000,000
Asset Amount	Up to US\$100,000	From US\$100,001 to US\$750,000	From US\$750,001 to US\$3,999,999	≥ 4,000,000

Note: Classification accepted by the SuperCías

In this context, SMEs in Ecuador are concentrated on goods and services production, being a very important base for the country's economic and social development, producing, demanding, and buying products (Carranco, 2018). They provide employment, guarantee sustained demand, promote healthy progress, and reactivate and energize the economy; 92% of them are made up of micro, small, and medium-sized companies (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses [INEC], 2016). Among the basic global characteristics of SMEs in Ecuador can be seen in Figure 1.

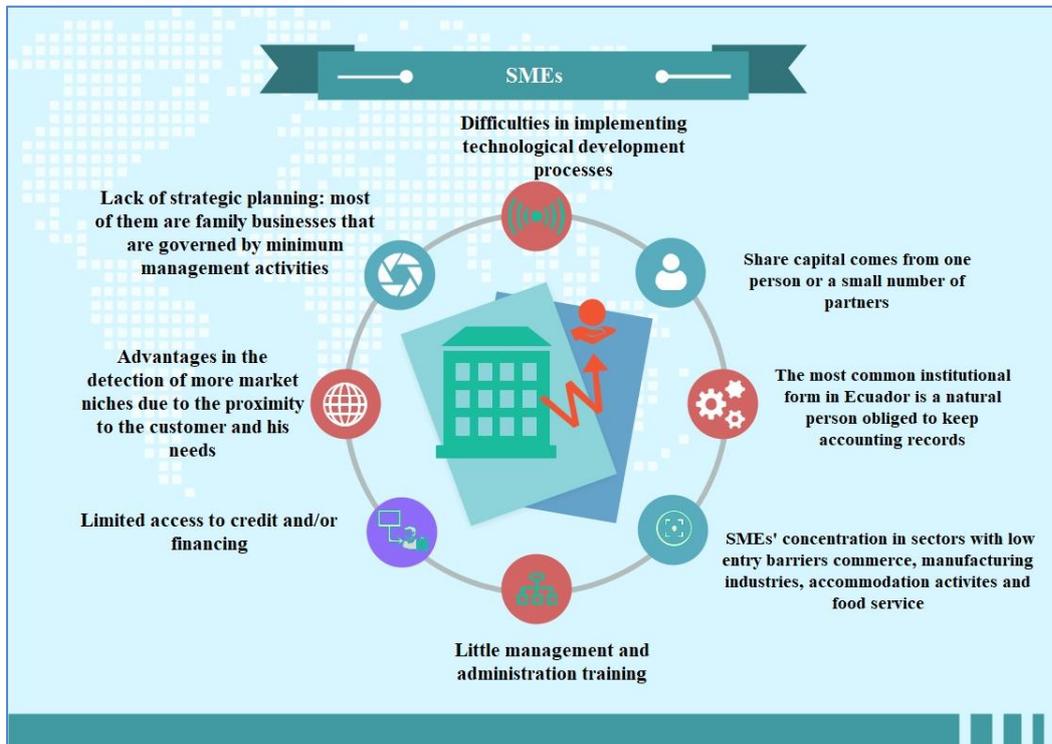


Figure 1. SMEs' Characteristics in Ecuador

Source: Simón Bolívar Andean University of Ecuador SMEs' Observatory, and Carranco (2018)

Although SMEs are distributed in five important sectors: trade, agriculture and livestock, transportation and storage, manufacturing, lodging, and meals, they are mainly supported by the trade and service sectors. However, these companies have problems that put them at a disadvantage in their durability and competitiveness; most of them have been created by ideas of entrepreneurship, need, and family businesses. Most of them go extinct before they are ten years old; an example of this stands out in the Ambato canton in a study of the competitiveness of SMEs carried out by Mantilla et al. (2015), which can be seen in Figure 2.

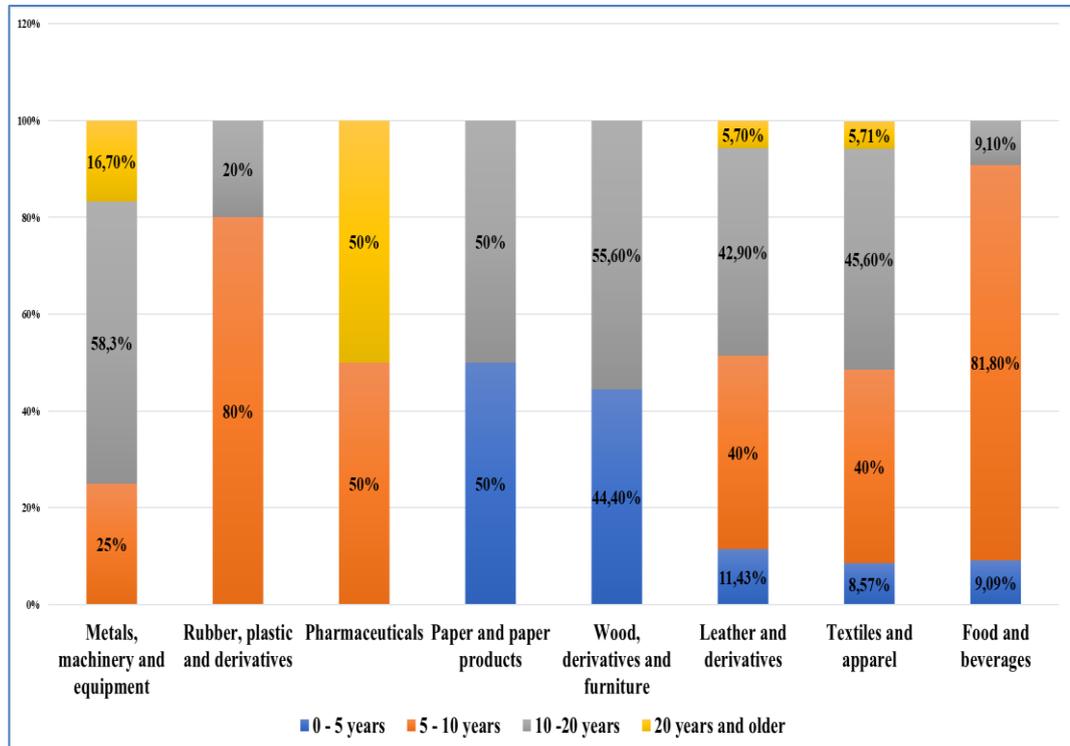


Figure 2. SMEs' Durability in the Ambato canton in prominent sectors

Source: Adapted from (Mantilla et al., 2015)

The Ambato canton, belonging to the Tungurahua province, is one of the most important cities, as it is its administrative capital and the largest and most populated city. In Figure 2, it can be seen that the SMEs located in the aforementioned canton are mostly within the line of 5 – 10 years of durability, with the exception of companies that produce paper and its derivatives, as well as wood and its derivatives that oscillate between 0 – 5 years and 10 – 20 years.

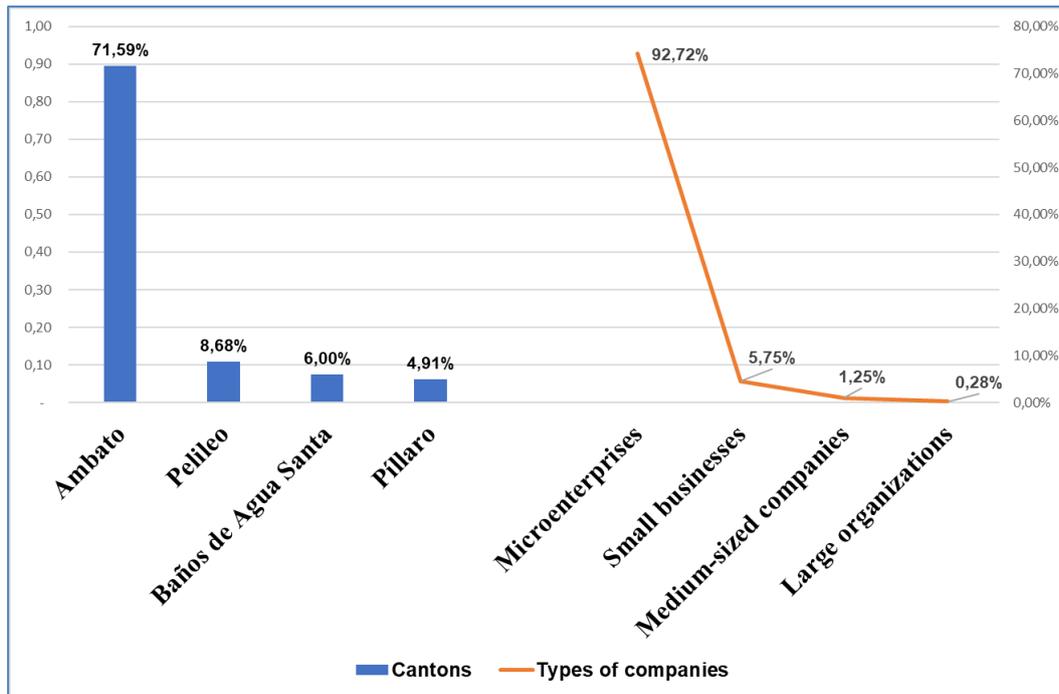


Figure 3. Distribution of companies in Tungurahua and types of businesses according to their size.

Source: Adapted from (National Institute of Statistics and Census [INEC], 2020)

In Figure 3, it can be seen that in the province of Tungurahua, there are a total of 42,677 companies, where 71.59% (30,553) of them are located in the Ambato canton, and 99.72% belong to the sector of SMEs (INEC, 2019). The canton’s main economic activity, according to the Central Bank of Ecuador, is manufacturing, followed by commerce, transportation, information and communications, professional activities, and real estate. According to the Microenterprise Regime Cadastre, there are more than one million SMEs constituted nationwide, which until May 2021 in the province of Tungurahua generated \$101,410 thousand in tax collection, of which 86.8% were concentrated in the Ambato canton (Valley et al., 2021).

However, the impact that the use of networks and technology has brought in critical times such as the pandemic is indisputable; many companies doubled their sales, postulating their products through communication platforms on the web, says the News Center Microsoft Latin America (2022), that SMEs reached a 27.7% increase in participation in sales from the web in times of pandemic, based on data provided by the Simón Bolívar Andean University of Ecuador SMEs' Observatory.

In this context, it was thought appropriate to analyze the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Ambato canton in Ecuador, with the intention that it can be extended to the reality of micro-enterprises in the country. Taking into account that social networks have echoed in global culture and different segments have begun to adhere to technologies and the digital economy, making different segments adopt platforms such as Facebook through the Marketplace, among others, that can provide faster interaction and response.

Digital tools focus on new content development; it is paramount to understand that perception is graphic, and the more technical and studied it is, the more opportunity it has to reach the client. Distinctive brand signs at the digital level have gained space at the top of mind, making their presence on networks and web pages generate expectation and perception to encourage consumption or digital positioning, taking into account the four

dimensions of digital marketing: diffusion, attraction, relationship, and conversion (See Figure 4).

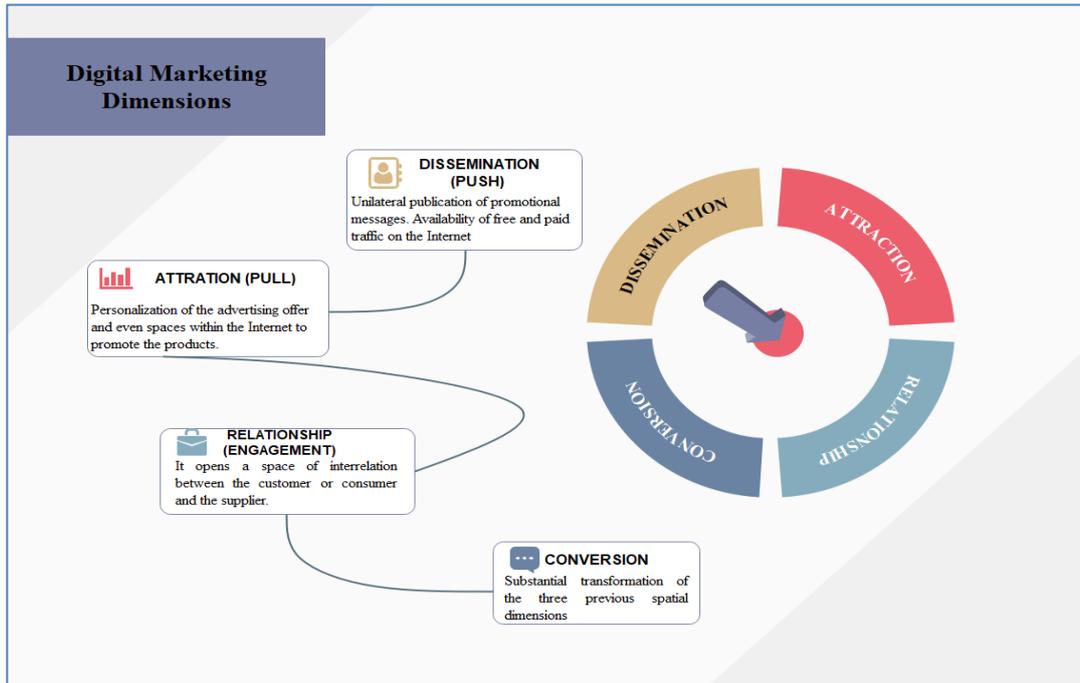


Figure 4. Dimensions of digital marketing

Source: Adapted from(Beetle, 2022)

In this order of ideas, digital marketing or electronic commerce has been seen as an alternative to increase and maintain SMEs, responsible for helping these companies increase sales in the aforementioned year. At this point, a phase of strengthening digital marketing for SMEs is proposed (See Table 2).

Table 2. Proposal to strengthen digital marketing in the Ambato canton's SMEs

Goals	Strategies	Tactics
Position the brand's digital image through a web page	Develop brand differentiation and development actions at a digital level	Structure a web page through Prestashop
		Propose a brand awareness campaign through social media interaction - Buffer
Promote new visits with related links on the web	Structure a set of actions that allows attracting a higher level of audience	Carry out a digital marketing campaign on YouTube Adwords
		Promote a recognition campaign on Facebook
		Generate an email campaign to increase the audience - Mailrelay
		Structure a Blended marketing strategy through the creation of QR codes in strategic sites.
		Perform SEM positioning through Google Adwords.
		Optimize relationship links through Ahrefs

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Develop a participatory community in social media around the brand image	a Strengthen relational strategies that capture the customer's attention	Implement a set of attractive graphics based on Branding through Big Stock  Redirect the YouTube campaign so that it can link or Redirect to the web page
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Manage conversion through each defined social media	Develop actions that allow the constant interaction of the target audience	Determine the creation of a blog in Blogger
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SMEs with low or no positioning in the web world have a great option when establishing it, for which a landing page or a web page is suggested to position the brand. When looking for brand positioning, it is best to look for specialized software such as buffers and platforms that specialize in the practice of user-customer interaction, for which the study suggests Prestashop.

In the report of the Tungurahua Economic and Social Observatory carried out by Valle et al. (2021), carried out by a survey applied to 209 enterprises in the Ambato canton, the advantages and disadvantages of electronic commerce are highlighted from the perspective of the SMEs studied in the canton, where entrepreneurs affirm that one of the advantages is the savings in costs for rent payments, basic services, as well as the increase in their clients, their sales by an average of 28.23%, and free advertising.

They express that there are also challenges or difficulties, such as a lack of trust in buyers, including security, failed sales, scams, home delivery that increases product costs, investment in mobility, packaging and packaging costs, unfair competition, and in some cases, it is necessary to expand the advertising market that has a varied cost depending on the days required (Valley et al., 2021).

The digital brand positioning must be reinforced by digital enhancers such as YouTube Adwords; generally, apart from the distinctive signs, the graphic part must be managed. Relationship marketing has been framed in a good way at a digital level, for which links and relationships must be managed with specific tools such as Ahrefs; at this point, a recognition campaign on FB and mailing through Mailrelay is suggested to have a controlled process at the time of this viral campaign.

Blended marketing, a fusion between physical and digital marketing, is an outstanding tool when attacking specific market segments, for which it is suggested that QR codes be used with a link to specific information about the product or service. SEO and SEM positioning give great results when combined, the latter meaning non-organic search engine positioning; it is recommended to be managed through the Google Adwords tool.

In digital marketing, it is essential to generate feedback, for which a participatory community must be developed that works in a specific way and captures the customer's attention; everything related to perception must be managed through graphics linked to Branding for which there are tools like Big Stock, relating it to YouTube so that Branding becomes more dynamic. The company must consider the sales funnel that results in their conversion; however, this also refers to Feedback, so the use of platforms with similarities to Blogger is suggested.

## Conclusions

One of the characteristics of SMEs within the country is precisely the difficulty they have in incorporating or implementing technological development processes; however, within

their strengths, they have the facility of very direct contact with the client, which allows them to build loyalty and get to know different market niches. It can be inferred that this advantage can be enhanced with the proper use of incorporating management resources such as digital marketing.

Analyzing the strengthening of digital marketing management to overcome the main challenges of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Ambato canton in Ecuador was an investigation that allowed us to verify that small companies require tools and resources that allow them to stay and be competitive in the market. However, there must be constant and disciplined planning based on resources such as digital marketing to have alternatives and a competitive advantage today.

Contributions such as this study is one of the proposals that have been made, adapted to the reality, culture and values of different SMEs in the country, province and canton. It is an initiative that can be explored by different small companies, from different niches, and to the extent that the tactics of each objective are applied, the results can be measured, as well as adapt any other necessary tactics, no further investment of money is required in a principle, but if determination, discipline and perseverance to achieve it.

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