Integrating the Digital World with Therapeutic Services

by Lydia Poon

Image Credit | Victoria Heath

*How can traditionally face-to-face therapeutic services adapt to the digital world?*

✅ **INSIGHT** | **NOTE**   26 Sep 2021

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, more of us are working remotely, staying indoors, and turning more digital. According to Statista, there has been a 34% increase in the number of U.S employees working from home for 5 or more days per week, a 34% increase in smartphone usage, and an 18% increase in overall monthly in-home data usage[1]. Surveys from the CDC have also shown that these dramatic changes prompted a spike in mental health issues, including increases in anxiety, depression, trauma and suicidation[2]. Clearly, these desperate times demand a need for mental health services. How can therapeutic services that rely on face-to-face interactions work and adapt to the digital world?

Many industries outside of health have already made the move to online services, such as switching from physical stores to online retail. In fact, Walmart's e-commerce sales from their online stores grew 97% when the pandemic was at its peak[3]. Now, companies are utilizing and integrating both physical and digital spaces for a personalized customer experience, also known as omnichanneling. H&M was one of the first companies to uphold this omnichannel method with one of their biggest innovations was utilizing in-store technology to create a better customer experience. They used radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to map out the layout of merchandise, locate where products are, stock information, and determine what to put on display. They also implemented use of handheld devices for customers to help them locate the desired product within a store, order products to be delivered in store or at home, and make payments if the customer is in a changing room[4]. These digital applications to a physical space enhanced customer experience, creating a boost in sales and customer loyalty (CITE).

Mental health services could learn a few pointers from how companies like H&M shifted to omnichanneling. Just as physical stores began using handheld devices, therapeutic practices could utilize technology devices for therapy sessions such as through phone or video calls. In fact, research has found that online therapy is just as effective as face to face therapy; though the physical component is absent, internet-based interventions for depression and anxiety are found to be beneficial and just as effective as face-to-face treatments[5]. One study even tested a form of online art therapy through WhatsApp, a popular SMS network, which proved to show beneficial results for adults with learning disabilities[6]. In addition, online therapy may be cheaper and more accessible than going in-person, providing more support for the underserved. Noticing the success of online therapeutic practices along with the spike in digital usage, many mental health services have integrated forms of online therapy into their businesses. Such services include Betterhelp, an online therapy platform that pairs you with a licensed therapist based on your preference, including form of communication via messaging, video call, or phone. Other services such as Woebot even integrated the use of machine learning to create chatbots that can lead cognitive behavioral therapy sessions with their users.

The success of online services may also be attributed to the distinct set of skills needed to maintain online businesses than physical ones. To successfully market their brand, companies must "select social media platforms in which they want to engage, understand users before establishing their own presence, and give reason for users to engage with them"[7]. Understanding the market, Betterhelp, Bloom, Cerebral, and many other online therapy services were able to successfully market themselves depending on the platform used. Collaborating with Facebook, YouTubers, and Instagram, they appeal to a wider audience and personalize their ads based on their targeted demographics. For example, Betterhelp partnered with famous YouTubers such as Phillip DeFranco or Elle Mills, who both have millions of subscribers, to market their service. On Instagram, Betterhelp and many other online therapy services would follow popular formats that many Instagram posts follow such as memes, graphics, or small infographics to catch users' attention. Looking at the different formats taken into account in advertising, it is clear that marketing online is not as easy as posting the same ad across multiple platforms - we must appeal to the audience involved.
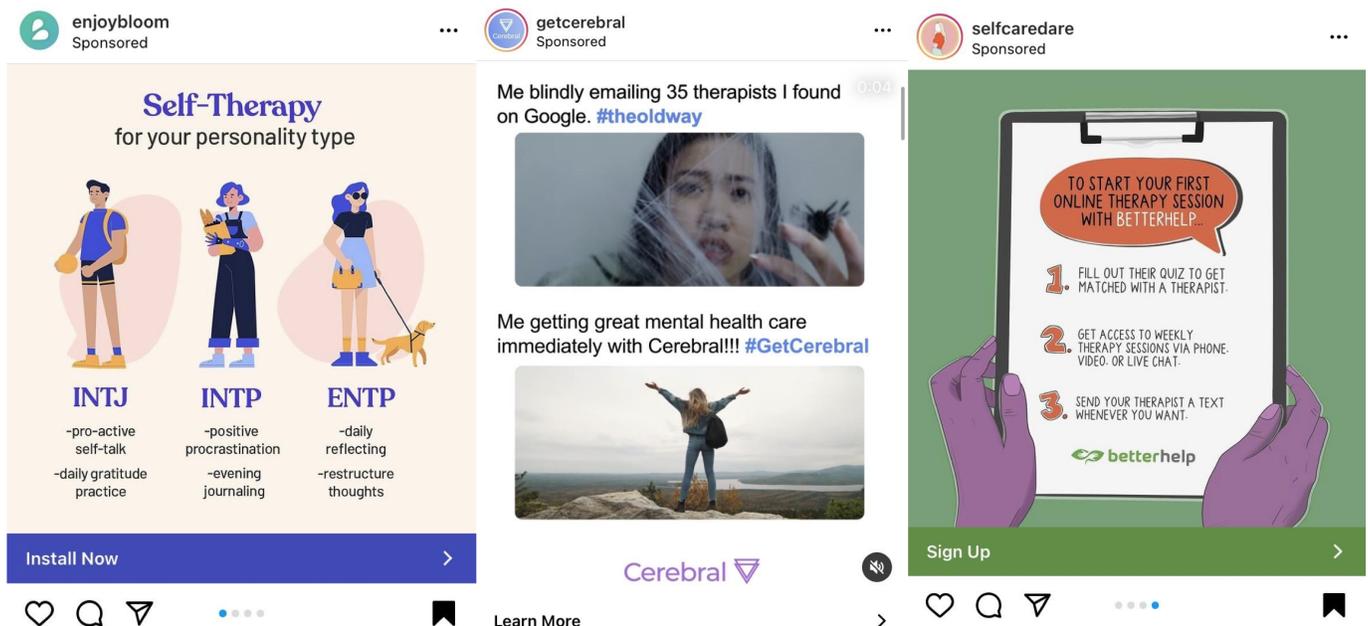
In addition to marketing, maintaining a solid online reputation is just as valuable when it comes to managing online businesses. Reputation for mental health services especially rely on the validity of their services. In online reputation management (ORM), organizations focus on online reviews, online presence, social media, and surveying[8]. Some ORM practices include citing sources and clinical studies that test the efficacy of their platform may add to the credibility of a company's service. Online therapy services including Talkspace and Woebot have done just that, citing successful clinical studies from Columbia University and Stanford University. Amwell, another online therapy service, even includes a hotline that users can call to speak to a doctor about symptoms or conditions. Through working with an ORM consultant, healthcare providers could increase their rating by 1.4 stars[8].

Transitioning to the digital world is a huge feat. As businesses transition to digital platforms and digital means, managers should look at different methods to integrate digital technology into their practice. The success of these services involve maintaining a good online reputation and utilizing social media/influencer marketing to gain traction. Doing so will cater more effectively towards customers' needs and will attract more customers to their user base.

References

[1] Johnson, Joseph. "Topic: Coronavirus: Impact on Online Usage in the U.S." *Statista*, 29 Apr. 2021, www.statista.com/topics/6241/coronavirus-impact-on-online-usage-in-the-us/.

[2] Czeisler, Mark E., et al. "Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation during the Covid-19 Pandemic - United STATES, JUNE 24–30, 2020." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 13 Aug. 2020, www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm.

[3] "Walmart's Ecommerce Sales Globally by Division 2021." *Statista*, Walmart, 11 May 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/1109330/walmart-ecommerce-sales-by-division-worldwide/.

[4] Jocevski, Milan. "Blurring the Lines between Physical and Digital Spaces: Business Model Innovation in Retailing." *California Management Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2020, pp. 99–117., doi:10.1177/0008125620953639.

[5] Andrews, G., et al. "Computer Therapy for the Anxiety and Depression Disorders Is Effective, Acceptable and Practical Health Care: An Updated Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, vol. 55, 2018, pp. 70–78., doi:10.1016/j.janxdis.2018.01.001.

[6] Datlen, Gillian W., and Chiara Pandolfi. "Developing an Online Art Therapy Group for Learning Disabled Young Adults Using WhatsApp." *International Journal of Art Therapy*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2020, pp. 192–201., doi:10.1080/17454832.2020.1845758.

[7] Haenlein, Michael, et al. "Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing: How to Be Successful on Instagram, TIKTOK, & Co." *California Management Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2020, pp. 5–25., doi:10.1177/0008125620958166.

[8] Vartiak, Lukas. "Benefits of Online Reputation Management for Organizations Operating in Various Industries." 2015. *Researchgate*, www.researchgate.net/publication/283267754_Benefits_of_online_reputation_management_for_organizations_operating_in_various_industri

Lydia Poon (Follow)

Lydia Poon is an Editorial Assistant at California Management Review. She is a third-year undergraduate student undergoing a BA Psychology degree from University of California-Berkeley. She currently volunteers as a research assistant for the Berkeley Psychophysiology Lab and is aspiring for a career in mental health services.