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C OVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global crisis. Over 200 countries / territories across the globe have been affected. India too has been impacted and economic fallout during the national lockdown has been severe. India's private consumption that accounts for 60 percent of domestic demand has witnessed severe disruption. The nationwide lockdown combined with economic uncertainty has brought discretionary spends down. As consumers try to maintain social distancing, categories like travel, entertainment and dining might remain impacted for longer term. However, recent relaxations introduced by the government should help bring overall consumer spending close to normal gradually, led mainly by contactless transactions and eCommerce segment. We remain optimistic of the future.

GP: How has the pandemic affected the Credit Card business?

HP: After the initial dip, we are expecting the market to pick up gradually. We are already back to 60% of pre-lockdown levels in terms of card spends. We are seeing categories such as groceries, online education, online health consultation and utility bill payments emerge as key spend categories for our customers. Our large and active customer base has ensured continuous generation of business for us, as our customers continue to use their cards both online as well as at Point of Sale (POS) to buy services and products. With easing of

the lockdown, our new accounts sourcing is picking up as well. All our sourcing channels are now active. Online channels including YONO (digital platform of State Bank of India) are enabling card applications and contributing to new customers acquisition as well. Overall, we are seeing a move towards cashless and digital payments, which is safer as it requires minimum physical contact. As social distancing becomes the norm, we expect digital payments to grow further. We expect customers to prefer contactless payment for safety reasons. Almost our entire portfolio is equipped with contactless functionality. Our e-card on android mobile phones through our SBI Card Pay via which customers can make contactless payments at Near Field Communication (NFC) enabled point of sale terminals with just one tap on their mobiles, without using the physical credit card has gained acceptance and we see customers using it now India's demographics along with the ecommerce boom and low rates of penetration of credit cards continue to favour the credit card business and we see significant potential for future growth.

GP: In spite of the difficult times how did SBI Card efficiently manage to service the huge customer base?

HP: Excellence in customer service is a key pillar on which our business is built and thrives. Our motto is to 'Make Life Simple' for our customers and we strived to stay true to this even in the most challenging times. Our agility and ability to evolve and shape

business strategies in line with the changing environment enabled us to service our customer base. For instance, our proactive investment in building state-of-the-art technology infrastructure, ensured business continuity and customer support even during the lockdown. During lockdown period, our business continuity plan was implemented, and we were able to resume our operations by enabling majority of the workforce to work from home. All critical business processes were supported remotely from home. Our technological capabilities, built over the last few years, enabled complete transformation of all customer facing touchpoints and ensured that our core services and operations continued with minimal customer impact while safeguarding our employees, data, systems and assets. We also enabled access of SBI Card Private Cloud based dialer, allowing agents to work remotely from their home to support the Customer Services and Collections functions. With limited staff strength to man the service helplines, some difficulty for customers may have occurred. To enable continued and smooth servicing of queries, we encouraged customers to use our 24x7 digital self-serve channels (website, mobile app, chatbot) and our customers were able to meet their servicing requirements digitally. For instance, today our chatbot AskILA not only answers customer queries but supports all transactions required by our customers. Dedicated AskILA campaigns were rolled out via emails, SMS,

and social media leading to 3X usage of AskILA during the lockdown period.

GP: SBI Card created one of the best 'Work from Home' environment in spite of a short lead time – your insight?

HP: Our investment in technology, which we have calibrated over past few years, enabled smooth transition to a remote work environment. We could quickly resume business operations with majority of workforce working from home. We have provided laptops and remote login to approximately 2400 of our Employees (our total employee strength is 4000). We have built a VPN Infrastructure setup for over 5000 users, and we can easily accommodate further expansion for the long term if required. Furthermore, various virtual collaboration platforms are provided to employees (Office365, Skype, Teams etc.) to ensure that they can work smoothly. All critical business processes were remotely supported during lockdown and we were able to continue servicing our customers with minimal disruptions.

GP: How long do you foresee the impact of the pandemic would last?

HP: COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global crisis with unprecedented impact on human lives and economic activity. Its economic impact has been deep. However, the lockdown is getting eased out in a phased manner across various parts of the country. Economic activities too are gradually getting restored. According to RBI, we can expect things to revive slowly in the second half of this financial year. (source) During the initial days of lockdown, card spends were severely impacted with discretionary spends coming to a halt. However, online spends showed an upward trend soon after lockdown was implemented and our overall spend has since returned to 60 percent of pre-lockdown levels. With ecommerce and other activities also opening up, we expect online spends to grow further. Current trends indicate that categories such as grocery, utility, online health consultation, online education would continue to drive spends for us. With prevalence of Covid-19 there is also move towards cashless and digital payments, which is safer as it requires minimum physical contact. We expect digital payments to grow further given social distancing will be a norm in future. This bodes well for us and we believe credit card transactions will gain traction. We are seeing rising interest in credit cards as a payment mode, as indicated by the online applications we have received, even during lockdown. We are also increasingly leveraging sourcing through digital platforms. All our sourcing channels are now active, and we are seeing new customer acquisition pick up gradually.

GP: What would be your wish list for a revival?

HP: It is important that everyone comes together and work towards reviving the economy. The government has already taken several corrective measures like fiscal stimulus and support for financial institutions, and hopefully more would come our way, if necessary.

GP: What would be the biggest challenge once the Pandemic blows over?


HP: We will enter a new normal with practices like social distancing being the norm. Businesses need to be agile and adapt to the evolving circumstances, in order to stay relevant. Individuals need to focus on developing new skill sets which would be required in the new normal. However, given the fiscal and other measures that the government has been introducing and as consumer demands pick up, we are optimistic of the future.

GP: While the commercial world is opening up, what would be the major changes in the way we conduct business in the Post Covid Era?

HP: Social distancing is here to stay. Business will have to adapt to this new normal. People and businesses alike would look forward to adopting measures that promote social distancing and minimal contact.

In the payments and credit card industry we see increased movement towards cashless and digital payments, as they are safer and require minimum physical contact. Further, innovations and technology would continue to drive acceptance of credit cards among users. We have already equipped almost our entire portfolio with contactless functionality. We also recently launched an e-card on android mobile phones through our SBI Card Pay via which customers can make contactless payments at Near Field Communication (NFC) enabled point of sale terminals with just one tap on their mobiles, without using the physical credit card.

GP: Being a proponent of all-round wellness, how would you relate it to the pandemic?

HP: We have always believed in looking for opportunities in challenges. COVID-19 pandemic is one extraordinary crisis that led people to rethink, refocus, reengineer and rejuvenate. This time of confinement has, for many, been an opportunity to invest in building new skills and to focus on health. The lockdown also afforded an opportunity for people to engage in long forgotten hobbies and to create cherished memories with family. To encourage people to stay positive and infuse fresh hope during this extended lockdown, we ran a brand campaign, "Ghar mein Khushiyaan" The brand film inspired everyone to use this time to fulfil wishes which remained incomplete, to learn, to share and to celebrate togetherness with their loved ones. 



GP: What has been your routine during this period?

HP: My routine primarily remained the same – except for the fact that all my meetings moved to the virtual space and I saved on the commute time. I utilized these saved hours to read more and spend more time with my family. There are also various new hobbies that I have taken up and am planning to keep up.

GP: What were some of the books you read & shows you watched?

HP: I have been reading *The Attacker's Advantage: Turning Uncertainty Into Breakthrough Opportunities* by Ram Charan, a book which I find very relevant in current times. My work needs me to stay attuned to the economic and business news, so, you will usually see me surfing through different news channels.

