TRENDS IN THE B2B MARKETING STACK

Business-to-business (B2B) marketing is a unique sort of beast. It differs from business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing with its own complexities, roadblocks and hurdles. To combat these inherent challenges, today’s B2B marketer must leverage advances in digital technology to create custom solutions based on unique data that are specific to their target audience.

THE B2B SECTOR:: THEN & NOW

In the recent past, the B2B sector obtained leads primarily through a heavy sales focus and outbound efforts. This dependence on sales teams put marketing on the back burner.

With sales having developed to over $550 billion of the U.S. economy, the B2B sector is growing faster than ever and today we see a trend toward a marketing-based approach. Now that marketing efforts aim to attract inbound leads, deliberate timing is even more important.

The path B2B businesses take to reach distributors and their end customer is long and winding. This means they have to market themselves in order to really stand out.

In order to obtain new distributors and channel partners, lead generation is still key. This cannot be done without an actionable and loyal commitment to these essential partners. User-friendly marketing materials, qualified end user leads and consistent touch points make a strong value proposition for those customers to buy into your brand.

When your brand is standing side-by-side with the competition, it’s critical to have that upper hand in the relationship and transferred product knowledge.

That relationship has typically been nurtured through face-to-face interactions over time through sales staff. These days, the rate at which new distributors and channel partners are sprouting and expanding their offerings to stay competitive is increasing. This means marketers have an even more pressing need to onboard and educate their partners and clients more in depth and with more urgency.

“90% of B2B companies believe marketing should contribute more to their enterprise.”

DID YOU KNOW?

“A December 2013 survey of U.S. CEOs conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) found that the largest percentage of those surveyed, 86%, believed that technological advances would have the greatest transformative effect on their businesses.”

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1 Key Trends in B2B eCommerce for 2013, Forrester, 2013
2 B2B Companies Believe Marketing Should Contribute More to their Enterprise, Econsultancy, 2014
3 CEOs Foresee Changes Resulting from Technology, eMarketer, 2014
OBSTACLES FACING B2B MARKETERS

B2B marketers face many obstacles while also trying to maintain visibility and control of the brand.

When we distribute content through email newsletters, the web or via webinars, the challenge is knowing exactly how the message will resonate with the end user. The best way to accomplish this in today’s digital world is through monitoring click-throughs, opens, visitor tracking, surveying and other analytics.

It’s nearly impossible to pick up on the thoughts, feelings and interests of potential customers if you cannot manage and organize their profiles and data. This is typically implemented through a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. The typical road to implementing CRM is paved with documentation, professional instruction and case studies, but it continues to be the day-to-day functionality that will determine whether or not any CRM will be that catalyst to amazing results.

Once the CRM is established, this centralized system of both end-user and channel-partner records will help avoid channel conflict. If you’re in the B2B game today and you go through channels of distributors to reach your end users, you’ve probably struggled to determine when to take the lead. Providing your channel partners with deceptive pricing and contradictory details of products and services can quickly lead to trouble. Agile data systems, platforms and flexible infrastructures can allow marketers to try new strategies with lower cost over time. It is much easier to evaluate custom pricing matrices and special offers when you use Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) or CRM systems to flag opportunities and maintain them.

How can marketing make strides in the post-purchase experience?

In reality, commitment to providing the end user with value, no matter where they fall in terms of product purchase, adoption or familiarity is essential to wooing them and eventually winning them as loyal brand evangelists.

It is the dream of every marketer to turn end users into loyal brand evangelists.

Many B2B marketers are busy enhancing or streamlining the product and warranty registration process to kick off that post-purchase experience. This becomes apparent in most customer service interactions where the more information we have on an end user, the quicker we can leverage this data to provide them with a tailored and effective experience.
HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN:: B2B MARKETING TACTICS

As we take into account the challenges that B2B marketers face, solutions begin to take shape. There are numerous, innovative ways to dodge these obstacles in your marketing approaches, ultimately providing a competitive advantage in today’s marketing world. Here we’ll outline which tactics we see trending so that you can discover what could work best for you.

Content

When determining where to distribute resources and invest in planning and production, content should be a high priority. Today, the brands that see the best results are those that can tell their stories effectively and consistently while tailoring their content to a specific channel. To achieve this, a clear understanding of the workflow and tools needed is crucial.

Content management begins with understanding your audience, your channels and how to make your content resonate effectively at the most opportune times. The importance of content management has risen so much as of late that emerging platforms aim to help with these tasks.

There are a number of third-party products that hit on the five principles of content marketing (plan, produce, publish, promote and prove).  

From our experience, we can confidently say that one of the most critical deliverables in marketing projects today is content. The success, failure and any delays in projects often directly relate to the generation of content.

Additional tactics will not have a clearly defined level of success if the importance of content workflow is left out. If your content falls flat in messaging, education and sales, your efforts will respond accordingly. Product videos, educational resources, newsletters and even social media posts should always be completed with a very deliberate hand in the associated content.

Video

Gone are the days when a simple, bulleted list of technical specs, paragraphs of content and product graphics would undoubtedly sell your product. Today, in order to truly influence end users to buy, you must establish the context of the product or service and the value it provides for them. Trends show that video is the tool you need to effectively prove this value.

Online video now reaches a whopping 86% of the total U.S. Internet population.

“74% of B2B marketers include content marketing in their go-to-market strategy.”

6 2014 Marketing Outlook, B2B Magazine
7 Oracle Buys Compendium, Oracle, 2013
8 PLAY 2014 Opening Keynote, Brightcove, 2014
From product demonstrations to promotional spots, video can quickly and effectively provide the end user with the story behind the product or service, creating a longer-lasting resonation than a list of technical specs. The advancement of mobile devices and the technology behind browser and video player functionalities have opened the door for increasingly reliable and widely accessible video distribution, guaranteeing that the end user has a positive experience while viewing your content.

Automation and Lead Generation Platforms

As a tool that streamlines sales and marketing efforts by implementing technology into otherwise high-touch and complex systems, marketing automation must be married to the often-overlooked content strategy in order to be effective. There are many options to consider when jumping into the marketing automation and lead-generation game. The top players, Hubspot, Pardot, Act-On, Eloqua and Marketo, all provide tools that send highly targeted messages and capture advanced analytics. The data gathered from these analytics can then be used to further tailor messages and ultimately form a strategy behind future actions.

The best-performing examples of marketing automation and lead generation use these platforms as supplemental utilities to strengthen the CRM platform. With these tools, B2B companies can more deliberately calendar out their activities and gain insight into potential partners and other players (end users, competitors, etc.) by segmenting data by audience.

To automate messaging correctly and to make an impact in increasing sales funnel activity, marketing teams will need to plot use cases, create conversion logic and desired customer experiences. For example, a B2B marketer could require a potential lead to download a specific white paper, visit a certain service or product page or fill out a contact form before following up with that lead with a drip email campaign.

To really make an impact, B2B marketers should always make a point to include IT teams in their plans in order to integrate the web, email and other offline marketing activities driven by enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, such as purchase history. By combining data records, marketers will be able to develop a more complete profile to be used to not only market better, but to provide a more tailored and attractive customer experience.

Distributor Portals

Online web applications or websites for distributors and channel partners are taking center stage more frequently. Within the secure management and access of these portals lies custom material and utilities all geared toward enhancing the relationship and strengthening the partners. Of course, the information that these portals capture for the B2B marketer is invaluable as well.
These online portals need to support efforts to maintain and strengthen brand control, as well as increase channel opportunities and activities.

Some common features within these portals:

- **Lead Registration**
  - For some specific channels and products, leads are registered by the partner to basically lock in their pursuit.
  - Some B2B companies have provided logic and rules around this. For example: any lead not contacted or assigned an activity after 30 days is then open to the rest of the channel participants.
  - In many respects, we feel the incentive to register leads needs to be more than just a “do it or lose it” approach.

- **Custom Pricing and Incentive Transparency**
  - What better way to show you care about your partners than by offering strategic pricing based on levels of success?

- **Material Library and Resources**
  - On-demand products and materials need to be easily accessible by partners on a moment’s notice these days.
  - The more successful libraries will allow searching and downloading of white papers, case studies, logos and files in a user-friendly manner.
  - Consider sorting materials based on popularity as well.

- **Online Ordering**
  - Enables partners to streamline the process of inputting product and service orders and gives them payment options on those orders.

- **Learning Management**
  - In an effort to more effectively manage how they are represented by dealers, distributors, affiliates and partners, B2B companies are turning toward a more deliberate and quantitative approach to communicate their brand and value propositions.
  - Learning Management Systems (LMS) are popping up regularly and provide a vehicle that highlights the best and brightest evangelists passing the appropriate exams, but also gives insight into which partners need the most help or assistance.

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**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY**

“For B2B marketers, any marketing activity or resources put into growing or enabling deeper and mutually effective relationships with partners, retailers and end users will reap rewards. In today’s real-time economy that sometimes includes unpredictable buying cycles, more B2B companies are offering the tools, content and interactions digitally that support and, in some cases, replace traditional offline touch points.”

Bruce Williams
Development Department Director
thunder::tech
TAKEAWAYS

B2B marketers must continue to drive innovation, not only through messaging and brand voice, but also through the technical systems they use to organize important data. It’s true; marketing will solicit more IT budget than the traditional IT teams, but with good reason. If we eliminate the resources for carefully planned information logistics, integrations and workflow, then we undercut a marketer’s ability to show any verifiable return on their efforts.

Now more than ever, it is essential that not just B2B marketers, but also their partners and vendors, have an understanding of available technical services and platforms. This is critical because of the need to know the correct way to pull data from activities in order to provide fair measurements on efforts and use these measurements to pivot on future campaigns and actions.

Sales teams do not want to call upon unqualified leads and marketers don’t want to spend money on sending emails to dead ends.

The true successes in B2B marketing all have an underlined characteristic. They all have taken great care in setting up a digital marketing stack that operates in the background and is used as the basic foundation for expansion and creation and configuration of rules.

This essentially sets up the rules of engagement for any customer coming in at any point of the funnel and what the actions surrounding that contact should be.

This marketing stack is typically a set of technical platforms encompassing CRM, automation and lead scoring. With the proper effort and planning, multiple campaigns and automations all happen in tandem and at staggered volume and cadence.

And while a technical prowess certainly is beneficial and oftentimes required, the human element cannot be ignored. Even with small marketing teams, the understanding of workflow, lead scoring and tailoring of specific marketing platforms to company purpose is required to achieve any sustainable success.

B2B marketers need to champion the innovation in customer experience and realize that while the traditional sales and marketing activities may have worked to this point, the success stories of the future will not be rewrites of yesterday.