

Why B2B brands need to embrace social media

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Date : January 17, 2016



Social Media Works for B2B Sales, Too

The chief **marketing** officer at a major technology provider recently voiced concerns that I've heard from several other **CMOs**: "Our customers have gotten way ahead of our sales efforts. Too often, we're not even getting invited to the dance." This tech company's website, like many others, overflows with information about product features but offers few perspectives about how the products truly solve customers' problems.

It's a common issue in B2B markets. The wealth of information available online for prospective customers has effectively uncoupled buying cycles from selling cycles. This is a terrifying development for B2B firms, and especially for their sales and **marketing** teams. Bain & Company recently surveyed 370 sales and **marketing** executives of large technology or industrial companies. Of this group, half acknowledged that **digital marketing** and sales channels are significantly changing customer behaviors, yet only 12% feel well prepared for the **digital** disruption.

One effective way to make a strong impression with buyers early in their search is to develop authentic, insightful content and syndicate it through relevant channels where buyers can easily consume it. Content that speaks to customers' pressing needs — such as speed to market, cost reduction, reliability, and reputation building — proves more influential than traditional advertising or a sales brochure that outlines features and functions. When a utility company publishes a point of view on the implications of deregulation for business customers, or a software firm writes about how the evolution of the cloud will affect health care delivery, they stake out a position as a thoughtful, empathetic supplier.

Adobe Systems, for example, was widely known as a desktop publishing company when it acquired Omniture, a **marketing** analytics company with different buyers and a different sales process. It's no easy task to shift a buyer's perception of your **brand** and to reach all potential buyers — and **digital marketing** needs to be as effective as face-to-face **marketing**. **Adobe** came up with a solution by using Omniture's website **CMO.com** to help reposition its **brand** as a precursor to generating demand. It gradually turned **CMO.com** into a [powerhouse of original and curated content](#) that's highly relevant to heads of **marketing**.

Even for large companies in complex B2B markets, **social** media offers useful platforms for distributing these new types of content to keep customers engaged with their activities. **IBM's** security business, for instance, has roughly [23,000 followers on LinkedIn](#), where it raises awareness and gets useful feedback through the volume of “likes” and comments. The [IBM Security Access Manager/Tivoli Access Manager](#) group currently has 825 separate conversations among its 2,231 members about issues relevant to people involved in security product development and security management.

Maersk Line, the world's largest container shipping company, started experimenting with **social** media several years ago and now has 1.1 million followers on **Facebook** and large audiences on other channels including **Twitter** and **Pinterest**. **Maersk** has learned to publish captains' blogs and stories about people, environmental issues, and other topics at a fraction of the cost of advertising.

Maersk took this novel publishing approach after the Baltic Sea froze over, making it difficult for ships to arrive on time in the port of St. Petersburg. A campaign called [#wintermaersk](#) showed how the company navigated icy waters to keep the cargo flowing and included dramatic photos that captivated **social** media users. Although **Maersk** uses **social** media primarily for **marketing** and improving customer perceptions of the firm, this campaign also resulted in 150 unique sales leads, which is quite a large number in the shipping industry.

The experiences of **Adobe**, **IBM**, **Maersk**, and other **marketing** leaders shows that useful content distributed through **digital** channels can be as effective in provoking a dialogue as face-to-face selling. The quality of the content is key to sparking that dialogue. These companies also have embraced **social** media **marketing** and experimentation, even in industries not usually considered cool or **social**.

Does your **marketing** strategy allow you to influence potential buyers who have a penchant for learning? Are your sales teams aligned with investments in content creation and delivery? Companies that expand the depth and breadth of their **digital** footprint to make strong first impressions will be able to capitalize on the opportunities inherent in customers' new **digital** behavior. Those that wait won't recognize which opportunities they have missed.

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