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9 B2B Marketing Trends to Watch in 2016

A look at what's in store
in the coming year

Issue 5 03.14.16

The biggest mistake that B2B ecommerce marketers and managers make is forgetting that B2B purchases are driven by need not desire.

The Death of "Digital Marketing"

On the surface, this trend might sound preposterous; but this is less about the practices of digital marketing and more about the treatment and the term. The truth is, digital has become so mainstream and central to marketing, it no longer requires niche treatment.

While we're already seeing the breaking down of digital versus non-digital silos, in 2016 the integration of the two will accelerate. B2B firms, like their B2C counterparts, have begun to realize that they have only one overarching strategy and one budget but now have a myriad of tools, tactics and channels in order to reach and engage their target audience. The digital transformation that's underway will continue to push firms to focus more on the overall strategy, brand messaging, customer experience and other marketing elements regardless of channel.

Customer Experience

Customer experience (or CX as it's commonly referred to), has been receiving a lot of attention over the last few years, primarily among B2C companies and retailers. It involves the combination of people, process and technology to understand, anticipate and consistently deliver exceptional personalized experiences across all touch points.

As today's B2B buyers are increasingly influenced by their consumer experiences and have begun to demand similar experiences in their professional lives, firms are recognizing how customer experience can be a driver of both business differentiation and profitability. For marketers this will mean a much more systematic and intentional focus on the entire experience for a customer, delivering a seamless and consistent experience, regardless of channel or device and in a way that is consistent with your brand promise.

Advocate Marketing

B2B marketers tend to focus a lot of time and effort on the pre-purchase end of the customer journey. But increasingly, firms are realizing success by also concentrating their efforts on providing value beyond the sale, with the aim of turning a client into a promoter — an advocate who is willing to refer people to and provide references for

your business. Referrals have long been considered one of the most valuable forms of marketing, delivering qualified leads that tend to become clients and remain loyal over a long period of time. While loyalty programs have been a staple in the retail world for quite some time, we're starting to see B2B firms leverage their own version.

Advocate marketing software platforms such as Influitive and CustomerAdvocacy help marketers build advocate relationships with clients at scale by increasing social media engagement, generating more reviews and capturing referrals. These platforms use customized portals where firms invite their best customers to participate in challenges and provide feedback to earn rewards for things like badges, special event invitations, gift cards and award ceremonies at conferences. Docu-Sign has used Influitive's platform to grow over 1,000 advocates and influence over $3 million in their sales pipeline.

Sales Enablement

Oracle Marketing Cloud describes sales enablement as "Providing sales with insights into buyer motivations, behavior, and activity to help boost their results." For many B2B firms, especially those that are services-oriented, marketing is a support role for business development and sales activities. Ultimately, the goal of sales enablement is to ensure that every seller (or business developer depending upon your industry vernacular) has the required knowledge, insights, content and processes to optimize every interaction with prospects and clients.

Today's complex buyer's journey and the evolving role of the sales function demands that marketing does more than simply help their firms generate new leads. They also need to be focused on helping to convert those leads into opportunities and opportunities into revenue. Sales enablement includes demand generation, lead nurturing and related activities, but it primarily focuses on leveraging technology (such as marketing automation) to provide better buyer insights, predictive analytics and proactive content support. Sales enablement forces marketing to get into the minds of sales people and think about their sales process and approach, in addition to the decision process of the buyer.

Marketing Apps

Whether mobile apps or on-site web apps, in 2016 more B2B firms will find ways to incorporate apps as part of their marketing strategy. Web apps are applications built into a website, as opposed to something you have to download and install on your computer or mobile phone. They can turn a static web page into something more functional and interactive that better engages users and can help to convert users into leads. Apps may include calculators, assessments, estimate builders, interactive white papers or some other utility that turns content into something users will interact with because it's helpful and interesting.

In addition to web apps, mobile apps are also going to pick up steam in B2B marketing as well. If your firm invests heavily in content marketing, produces content frequently, and has a loyal audience, a mobile app can be a great way to deliver content into the hands of your audience. Other B2B firms are creating apps for tradeshows, events and networking. For more product-oriented B2B firms, apps can be used for sales as well. Atlas Copco Construction is an example of a B2B firm that uses a mobile app to showcase their products and services and make it easy for customers to request quotes, access contact information or find the nearest location.

Podcasting, Live Streaming and Video Shows

Podcasting has been steadily growing in popularity over the last several years, with Edison Research finding that 33% of Americans have listened to at least one podcast this year. Relatively easy and cost-effective to produce, podcasting involves the recording of a series of episodes provided to users in the form of an audio MP3 that can be downloaded from your website or syndicated through a service like iTunes. Much like audio books and talk radio, some people prefer to consume content via audio as opposed to the written word. And for users on-the-go, podcasts offer a convenient experience that can both educate and entertain them, while helping to establish authority and thought leadership for your brand.

We've seen video blogging become more prominent in the B2B space, but now with tools such as Twitter-owned Periscope or Meerkat, among others, marketers have the ability to easily produce live streaming video as well. Both of these apps use Twitter to

notify and link users to the live streams as well as manage the comments and chats within the streams. Live streaming can be used for events, giving demonstrations, Q&A sessions, "behind the scenes" videos and other things that might be interesting to your audience.

Similar to podcasting, video shows create an ongoing series of episodes with a set topic or focus, as opposed to a more one-off approach. Video shows can be used to create a series of how-tos, tutorials and other educational themes. Intel has chosen to take more of a storytelling approach by showcasing the stories of some of their customers through their "Expert Mode" and "Meet the Makers" series. With video shows, brands need to think about video more like a TV network, rather than a movie studio.

Email Marketing Resurgence

Many have long predicted the death of email marketing, but the data shows quite the contrary. According to Gigaom Research, marketers consistently rank email as the single most effective tactic for awareness, acquisition, conversion and retention. But while many B2B firms (e.g. technology, services, products, etc.) already depend on email marketing as a primary communications channel, others have not leveraged email marketing to its potential. In 2016 we're going to see a trend towards a more effective use of email marketing from B2B companies.

Why? While there are many reasons (such as ROI, effectiveness and measurability), one stands above them all—mobile. As B2B marketers have been struggling to figure out how best to capitalize on mobile, the answer perhaps has been right under their noses all along. A study from Moveable Ink found that in the first quarter of 2015, 67% of all U.S. email opens occurred on a mobile device — and 75% of those were smartphones. While the data varies from study to study, the growth in mobile opens is staggering and the shift is undeniable. Which is why many are calling mobile the "new inbox" because it's an inbox that's always on.

But while the convenience of mobile means audiences are more captive than ever before, the window of opportunity is much narrower. Meaning this resurgence is not

The drive is on among B2B companies to raise their game in terms of web presence and digital marketing.

just about more B2B firms using email marketing, it's also about how they use it. Focusing on improving the mobile experience will include being "mobile friendly" from a technical standpoint but also means thinking about content and email design from a mobile first perspective as well. And, whether desktop or mobile, this resurgence will also see more firms move away from the "batch and blast" approach of yesteryear and take a much more targeted and personalized approach.

Search Budgets Shift to Content

A new report released by PulsePoint and Digiday found that by 2017, content marketing budgets are projected to grow 59 percent, far outpacing search and social budgets. Search algorithms are rewarding producers of high-quality and relevant content much more so than companies that have merely invested in technical SEO.

Today, getting ranked is much less a technical exercise (although there are best practices and technical considerations), and more about creating content that people are searching for in order to earn rankings. And it's also much less about focusing on singular keywords and the masses, but rather being the best answer for long-tail searches that now contribute to 70% of search traffic. So while SEO and SEM will still have a role in a B2B marketer's budget, the trend is certainly moving toward firms creating custom content that speaks to the needs and interests of a target audience.

Online Advertising Disruption

Google's testing of a new platform for displaying video ads in search engine results pages shows that online advertising isn't going away anytime soon. However the year ahead should make for some major disruption to say the least. A recent report from Pagefair and Adobe found that ad blocking in the U.S. grew by 48% in the past year and there are now 198 million active ad block users around the world. And we're likely to see that number continue to increase in 2016 as well. Dr. Johnny Ryan, PageFair's head of ecosystem, remarked to Business Insider "ad blocking is a viral phenomenon that will continue."

Doubleclick's interactive Display Benchmarking tool found the click through-rate across all ad formats and placements is only 0.06%. So the rise in ad blocking software usage

only reinforces what those reading the analytical tea leaves have known for quite some time: users are annoyed with content that isn't relevant to the content they're trying to consume.

Bot-fraud is also causing pretty substantial issues for advertisers who are projected to lose $6.3 billion globally to bots in 2015. Bot-fraud detection company White Ops and the Association of National Advertisers recently analyzed over 3 million websites and found that bot visitors were rampant across the websites of major publishers and brands, inflating the monetized audiences of those sites by 5 to 50 percent. The research also found that bots accounted for 23 percent of all video impressions observed, 11 percent of all display impressions, and 19 percent of all retargeted ads.

Online advertising isn't going to disappear, but the rise of ad blocking software usage, bot-fraud and historically low click through-rates will likely cause B2B marketers to take a hard look at their use of online advertising in 2016.