

Adapting Digital Marketing for B2B How WOM Can Generate a Meaningful Buzz

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Challenge:

Do new digital marketing initiatives like word-of-mouth marketing make much sense for B2B situations, and if so, how could companies effectively apply this? The internet has traumatized traditional marketing and is causing every manager in B2C, as well as B2B industries, to re-evaluate his/her marketing options. Harnessing the true power such internet based techniques has been a challenge for all marketers. We know its potential, but how can we ensure that a positive message is actually accepted and spread exponentially to enough target customers to make even challenging methodologies like WOM effort worthwhile? Can B2B marketers learn from B2C success stories? What are the differences and implications for B2B?

Essential Principles for B2B Marketing Success

One should first recognize the pivotal differences between most B2B and B2C marketing endeavors – typically involving type of product, nature of purchase decision-making, pricing sensitivity, target customer mindset and needs, etc. On the other hand, there are some prerequisites for success that each approach has in common, but are even more critical for B2B marketing programs:

- **Focus** – all smart marketers should identify and concentrate first on their highest potential target audience (i.e. usually heavy users), although the complexity of most B2B decisions warrants a greater understanding of this target customer's needs as a first step for any marketing program
- **Relationship Building** – a brand is all about creating an impression or perception that will be interpreted as a promise of value. Assuming the product will deliver and meet these expectations, cultivating a relationship with the customer is essential to enhance brand loyalty and equity over time. The standards for initial acceptance, trust or an adequate “comfort zone” for trying a company or product brand are even more rigid for B2B, however, making it more important for businesses to demonstrate their competence and clearly communicate the benefit/promises for their product or service.
- **Personalized Marketing** - In many cases, the stakes are higher for a B2B decision and the customer demands more than just a product description and price sheet; they want more service, personal sincerity, follow-up and a customized rationale behind the sale. Fortunately the interactive advantages

of the internet enable B2B marketers to reach out and serve customers in a more personalized way today.

- **Credibility** – more than anything else, the low credibility of traditional advertising (76% of consumers don't believe companies tell the truth in advertising – source: MOMMA) has made an interactive medium like internet-driven WOM more popular and in demand. For B2B situations, however, the message must be compelling, relevant, newsworthy and distinctive to excite target customers who are very demanding, and to encourage them to spread new ideas to their peers.

Today one cannot ignore all the articles about businesses adapting new digital marketing approaches, although achieving a genuine, relevant buzz that reinforces the positives about your brand or company is usually easier said than done. There are several options, all different – e.g. social networking sites like FaceBook, Twitter, and YouTube, plus a litany of other methodologies, from blogging to banner advertising. Almost all are designed to ultimately drive traffic to a website. This article will focus on one buzz marketing approach, word-of-mouth, that is particularly relevant for B2B clients due mainly to its critical value of added credibility.

Is WOM Relevant and Worthwhile for B2B?

If properly researched, conceived and developed, the underlying conditions above for success should make a WOM proposition even more powerful for almost any B2B situation. Let's apply the basic "5 T's of WOM Marketing" for potential B2B programs, outlined by Andy Sernovitz, the author of the pioneering book on WOM and President of WOMMA, for possible B2B best practices in a WOM context:

1. **Talkers** – the brand influencers or people who will be most prone to talk about your product (usually volunteers, loyal customers, bloggers, et. al.). Often called "conversation catalysts", they represent 15% of the population who talk about 149 brands on average each week (source: WOMMA). The typical profile of these brand evangelists is more likely to fit the targeted "talkers" in B2B situations: 37% are baby boomers, rely heavily on online resources for information, and so probably would be more enthusiastic for a useful idea. Their willingness to tell their peers can easily become contagious once they have been "won over".
2. **Topics** – this is the reason to talk, where the message must always be somehow special, trusted, simple and buzzworthy. For B2C situations, the content tends to be more "silly", "cool", incentive-driven and even gimmicky. Some of these characteristics may be meaningful for B2B campaigns, but the challenge is to be more practical and service minded,

while still being “catchy” and unique enough to encourage spreading the word around. Fortunately, the relative maturity and opportunistic nature of most business managers or prospective “talkers” should make them appreciate more the potential utility of a better “mousetrap” idea, and hence a good reason to tell friends.

3. Tools – helping the message spread faster and farther, via simply talking to friends, viral email, message boards, online communities, etc. Usually managers within a particular industry are more “bonded” by shared challenges, trade associations, trade journals, etc. so they have an inherent and mutual interest in common topics. In short, there are built-in mechanisms that should facilitate the WOM communications within these industries.
4. Taking Part – or joining the conversation. This is the real opportunity for companies which can initiate successful WOM programs. Most customers in B2B situations want more from a purchase; they want extra service as the added value. The internet provides a new opportunity for smart B2B marketers to more personally engage their customers, strengthen their relationship, and hence create and sustain a competitive edge. This will involve staffing and training their people to follow up and carefully answer all queries from such a WOM campaign. In particular, the natural desire for respondents to interact over the internet will be ideal for creating new lead generation opportunities for most businesses
5. Tracking – measuring what people are saying. Most businesses today have ample resources and better equipment to monitor the results and importantly expand their data base of prospective customers. It is always difficult to quantify the results of traditional marketing programs, but the measurement tools provided by the internet will enable management to develop a metric analysis to better justify continuing with WOM programs in the future.

What Should B2B Managers Consider for a New WOM Campaign?

For most B2B marketers, there is no question about the potential of a solid WOM campaign. The trick will be to find the appropriate resources or experts who can first understand these special nuances for the B2B target customer, and then develop an innovative, smart WOM program that will really excite them. More than anything else, it will require an open mind, creative brainstorming and some testing to develop the kind of message or content that will really give B2B brand evangelists that momentous “aha” or “wow” reaction.

WOM is already the biggest influence on consumers for larger, more complex purchase decisions – e.g. 42.6% for electronic products versus 34.1% for second place, reading an article, and 30.4% for buying a car versus 24.1% from TV broadcast. Using WOM on a B2B level in such industries makes sense, since this type of credible referral system is already well established.

It is important to keep in mind that an effective WOM campaign should be integrated with other marketing or communication programs. In addition to traditional advertising and public relations, these other internet related initiatives might include:

- Special web sites – all online efforts should direct customers to the company web site for immediate action and/or lead generation;
- Company blogs;
- Youtube video postings
- Cause marketing;
- Viral email campaigns;
- Online forums (e.g. Google groups);
- Podcasts and webinars;
- Banner advertising;
- Product seeding

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