

## Using social media in business-to-business marketing

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If business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing is the waves and the froth on the surface, business-to-business (B2B) is the ocean underneath. Considerably larger, substantially hidden, rather mysterious, containing poorly understood but powerful currents, and with un-plumbed depths. While B2C marketers, perhaps obsessed with the excitement and glamour of big budget TV advertising campaigns, came rather late to the realisation that customer retention and relationship building were the key to generating shareholder value through marketing, B2B marketers have always known that customer relationships matter. Of course, it is the waves and the froth that people mainly see, and so most people think of marketing as consumer marketing. In particular, when it comes to the application of information technology to marketing, it is consumer-related activities that come to mind—such as websites for heavily branded consumer products, online retail, and consumer-focused social media campaigns (great social media campaigns have recently come from the likes of Nike, Cadbury and Heinz<sup>i</sup>). However, B2B marketers have always known that relationships with customers are their most valuable asset, so it is hardly surprising that they have striven to recruit information technology to the cause of identifying, developing, maintaining, managing and enhancing profitable customer relationships. The latest tool, or rather, set of tools to be recruited, is social media.

The emergence of information technology has revolutionised many aspects of marketing. Web 2.0 and social media applications are only the most recent in a series of IT developments that have enhanced marketing in a number of ways<sup>ii</sup>. Most obviously, businesses have a wide range of new communications channels to use to communicate with customers, prospective customers, and the market-place at large. Data-mining and customer relationship management (CRM) systems enable firms to identify the requirements of individual customers, predict their behaviour, and devise individualised marketing strategies containing messages and offerings tailored to the ‘market segment of one’. Arguably most important, certainly from the point of view of finance professionals, IT-based marketing lends itself readily to a ‘marketing metrics’ approach. In principle, it is possible to calculate the ROI for every dollar of marketing spend, to identify precisely those marketing strategies that generate enhanced shareholder value and those that do not. Just possibly, Lord Leverhulme’s lament, “half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, and the trouble is I don’t know which half”, may no longer apply in the world of digital marketing. The use of social media in marketing increases the ability of businesses to measure the ways in which marketing activities affect financial performance.

Figure 1 illustrates the issues in social media marketing that B2B marketing professionals consider to be important. The word cloud in Figure 1 was created by analysing articles (‘white papers’) written by B2B social media marketing specialists, sourced from websites that aim to act as digital marketing knowledge hubs for marketing practitioners (examples of such websites are [www.b2bmarketing.net](http://www.b2bmarketing.net), [www.baseone.co.uk](http://www.baseone.co.uk), and [www.mycustomer.com](http://www.mycustomer.com)). The authors of works such as these almost all work in digital media agencies, and the articles clearly serve the purpose of promoting the author and the company as well as conveying useful information. Nevertheless, these are substantial pieces of work (usually more than 1,500 words long), written by the people who are pioneering the field of social media marketing, and often demonstrate both considerable reflection and the use of results

from market research reports. When analysed in the aggregate they provide an interesting perspective on what matters to B2B social media specialists.

**Figure 1: Key Concepts in B2B Social Media Marketing**



Source: Original, created by the authors using [www.worditout.com](http://www.worditout.com)

From Figure 1 it is easy to see that both general-purpose social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the specialist B2B social medium LinkedIn are important to B2B marketers. On the other hand, although Google does appear within the word cloud, it is not prominent, since Google has yet to establish itself firmly as a popular social media brand. While no specific blogging platform (such as WordPress, Blogger or Tumblr) appears in Figure 1, *blog* does, and is considered particularly important in B2B marketing. Closely related to *blog* are the terms *content marketing*, *expertise*, *community* and *audience*. In contrast to consumer markets, where fashion can be the essence of the product or service (the latest dress, the latest computer game, the latest phone), in B2B marketing there is considerably more emphasis on substance. This analysis is augmented by the use of a text mining approach, which is summarised in Table 1.

The analysis for Table 1 uses the same document set as Figure 1, but rather than the content analysis approach employed to produce a word cloud, a more sophisticated text mining tool has been used to extract terms from the text data. Rather than simply counting word frequency, text mining approaches use more complex algorithms to extract likely technical terms from a body of text. Consequently, Table 1 contains automatically generated two and three word phrases rather than single words. In addition, this technique allocates a relative importance to the extracted terms (column 3: technically known as the C-value of the term).

**Table 1: Key Terms in B2B Social Media Marketing**

Rank	Term	Relative importance score
1	Social media	61.7
2	Content marketing	48.7
3	Social network	37.8
4	Fan page	18.0
5	LinkedIn group	17.0
6	Email marketing	16.8
7	Target audience	14.0
8	Facebook page	11.0
9	Brand awareness	9.0
10	Decision maker	8.5
11	B2B buyer	8.0
12=	Blog post	6.0
12=	Online video	6.0
12=	Social web	6.0
15=	LinkedIn poll	5.0
15=	Twitter account	5.0
17	LinkedIn company pages	4.75
18=	Twitter follower	4.0
18=	Landing page	4.0
18=	Prospective customer	4.0

Source: Original, created by the authors using the TerMine service at [www.nactem.ac.uk](http://www.nactem.ac.uk)

The evidence in Table 1 confirms that LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are key tools for B2B social media marketers. Conventional (Web 1.0) digital marketing techniques—*email marketing* and the *web landing page*—also make an appearance in Table 1, emphasising that social media are characteristically used as part of an integrated digital marketing strategy employing multiple channels of communication. However, Table 1 clearly reinforces the message of Figure 1 that delivering useful content to the target audience is crucial to B2B social media success; specifically, *content marketing* often using *blog posts* and *online video* is directed towards key audiences such as the *B2B buyer*, the *decision maker* and the *prospective customer*. This is the essence of, and the challenge presented by Web 2.0 B2B marketing: it goes well beyond the boundaries of a narrowly conceived sales message, requires the involvement of those people (often from outside the sales/marketing function) who can generate content that is genuinely interesting to business customers, seeks to engage customers in a dialogue, and aspires to the achievement of ‘thought leadership’. There is considerable scope for self-delusion at various places in this process. It is a delusion to think that social media are just another vehicle through which to push the company’s wares; the sales/marketing team are probably deluded if they imagine that they can generate user-relevant content on their own; it is a delusion to imagine that customers have some intrinsic interest in you or your business (you have to tell them how they can improve *their* business), and probably the greatest delusion of them all is to imagine that thought leadership is easily achievable.

High-technology firms such as Oracle, Intel, Cisco and SAP are, unsurprisingly, leaders in the use of social media for B2B marketing. They use the best-known social media platforms extensively and successfully, for example; Oracle Social (“the online community for Oracle’s Social Relationship Management Platform”) has over a million Facebook ‘likes’ and over 30,000 Twitter followers;

Cisco's main Facebook page has over 400,000 'likes'; the official Twitter feed of SAP has over 70,000 followers, while that of Intel has over 1.4 million followers, presumably reflecting interest from consumers as well as from business users (Intel is that unusual animal, a largely B2B company with a high consumer brand profile). All of these firms, of course, are heavily represented at LinkedIn (Oracle's over 650,000 LinkedIn followers and nearly 120,000 employees on LinkedIn illustrate this). However, it is in the quality and quantity of their content marketing that these leading-edge B2B social media users are out of the ordinary. Oracle seems particularly heavily committed to this medium<sup>iii</sup>, with a high-volume of technically-orientated, up-to-date blogs that clearly serve multiple purposes, including product and customer support, customer service and staff recruitment as well as marketing. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to identify where the marketing is going on, since the emphasis seems to be so much on the technology, the customers, and the product. Certainly, the content is being generated by technical staff, not by sales or marketing staff. While the Oracle blog site has a generally technical feel to it, at the Cisco blog site<sup>iv</sup> it is quick and easy to find interesting content about industry-specific applications. Moving quickly to the financial services section of the blog site one finds articles dealing (for example) with the technology supporting ATMs, the future of digital payment systems, and methods of improving customer retention in financial services. Compared to Oracle the material seems a little more polished, and perhaps a little more sales-orientated. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that these blogs contain a lot of information of interest to finance professionals, and are certainly not just a hard sell.

Of course, these are very large firms in the high-technology sector. It would be surprising if they were not exemplars in the use of social media for B2B marketing. Naturally, small and medium-sized B2B firms make rather less use of social media. A study<sup>v</sup> found that only 27% of such firms used social media for marketing, primarily for four reasons: to attract new customers; to cultivate relationships; to increase awareness; and, to communicate the brand online. While it is to be expected that the use of social media marketing by small and medium-sized B2B firms will grow rapidly, the evidence is that smaller B2B companies are lagging a long way behind the leaders and are yet to be convinced of the merits of this approach. Although the direct financial costs of implementing a social media marketing strategy are modest, major concerns for the smaller firm are the time involved in managing a social media presence, lack of familiarity with social media, and doubts that a social media presence would contribute to their business objectives. So, while the evidence from the large IT firms is that social media are established as a key marketing tool, the evidence from smaller firms is that there remains a degree of scepticism.

B2B social media leaders not only provide large quantities of interesting and relevant information for customers, prospective customers and the industry community at large, they also judiciously tag these offerings and cross-reference them on social media platforms so that they receive the maximum visibility on search engines, so achieving maximum effect across the range of social media. Social media exemplars have built substantial virtual communities within which it makes sense to talk about engagement in conversations and the development of relationships with customers and other netizens. Employees of these companies seem to enter into these conversations without undue corporate interference or control, and the absence of a controlling corporate presence no doubt contributes to the feeling of genuine community. Successful B2B social media looks like the natural process of voluntary information sharing and discussion characteristic of shared interest sites on the Web (for example, cycling or photography enthusiasts). Of course, this is easier to achieve where those involved actually do share a genuine enthusiasm—for example, where the parties

involved are all computer 'geeks'. It is understandable that smaller B2B firms have made less use of social media and remain a little suspicious of this approach to marketing. Not only is the time involved in maintaining a serious social media presence more burdensome for a small firm, but the consequences of poorly controlled communication could be more serious. Global corporations may have PR departments to put right mis-communications (whether intentional or unintentional) from employees; small firms generally do not. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that social media will become an increasingly important component of B2B marketing. Technological solutions will be found to make social media more accessible to smaller firms. More and more people will use social media in their homes and in their work-places. Before long, social media will become a standard feature of the B2B marketing landscape.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://econsultancy.com/uk/blog/11244-10-of-the-best-social-media-campaigns-from-2012>

<sup>ii</sup> Efthymios Constantinides and Stefan J. Fountain (2008), "Web 2.0: Conceptual foundations and marketing issues", *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 9, no. 3, pp. 231-244.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://blogs.oracle.com/>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://blogs.cisco.com/>

<sup>v</sup> Nina Michaelidou, Nikoletta Theofania Siamagka and George Christodoulides (2011), "Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands", *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40, pp. 1153-1159.