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B2B PR | MARKETING | DIGITAL

How to connect with customers

Two-thirds of B2B deals are lost before a formal RFP process even begins

(Ref: McKinsey)

It won't come as any great surprise that the business world we inhabit is changing; or that the rate of change is becoming ever faster.

Gordon Moore, one of the founders of Intel, predicted in 1965 that the power of computer devices would double every two years, while falling in cost. In many respects, what subsequently became known as Moore's Law created the foundation for our modern world, with almost every aspect of our lives being revolutionised by ever cheaper and more powerful computing.

Gordon Moore (left)

The impact has been profound and is reflected in almost everything we think, say and do – in our behaviours, our messaging and our methods of communication.

This is as true in the Business to Business (B2B) world as it is in the consumer segment.

Thanks to technology, B2B customers now have access to increasing volumes of data and use more channels than ever before to inform and guide buying decisions. This is changing buying patterns and the way in which companies find potential partners or business solutions.

In recent surveys, management consultants CEB found that, '57% of the purchase decision is completed online before a customer even calls a supplier', while Forrester reports, '74% of business buyers conduct more than half of their research online before making an offline purchase'.

These figures highlight what I'm sure you already know: that the online or digital experience is crucial in winning and retaining new business for your company.

A B2B customer will regularly use six different interaction channels throughout the decision journey, and 65% will come away from it frustrated by inconsistent experiences

(Ref: McKinsey)

There’s a catch!

What you may not have considered is how the explosion in online content is adversely affecting your customers’ approach to the buying process.

In particular, as the volume of digital noise grows so it becomes increasingly difficult for your customers to identify the best solutions and partners – to make an informed choice before they call your sales team.

In many respects, the ease with which customers can carry out research online has made this problem worse. A recent survey from McKinsey, for example, found that, ‘each B2B customer regularly uses six different interaction channels throughout the decision journey’, while similar research from Forrester refers to no less than seven different channels.

This in itself creates potential problems, as it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain consistent messaging across all channels. Indeed, the McKinsey survey highlighted this as a contributory factor to suppliers being excluded from the buying process before a formal RFP was issued.

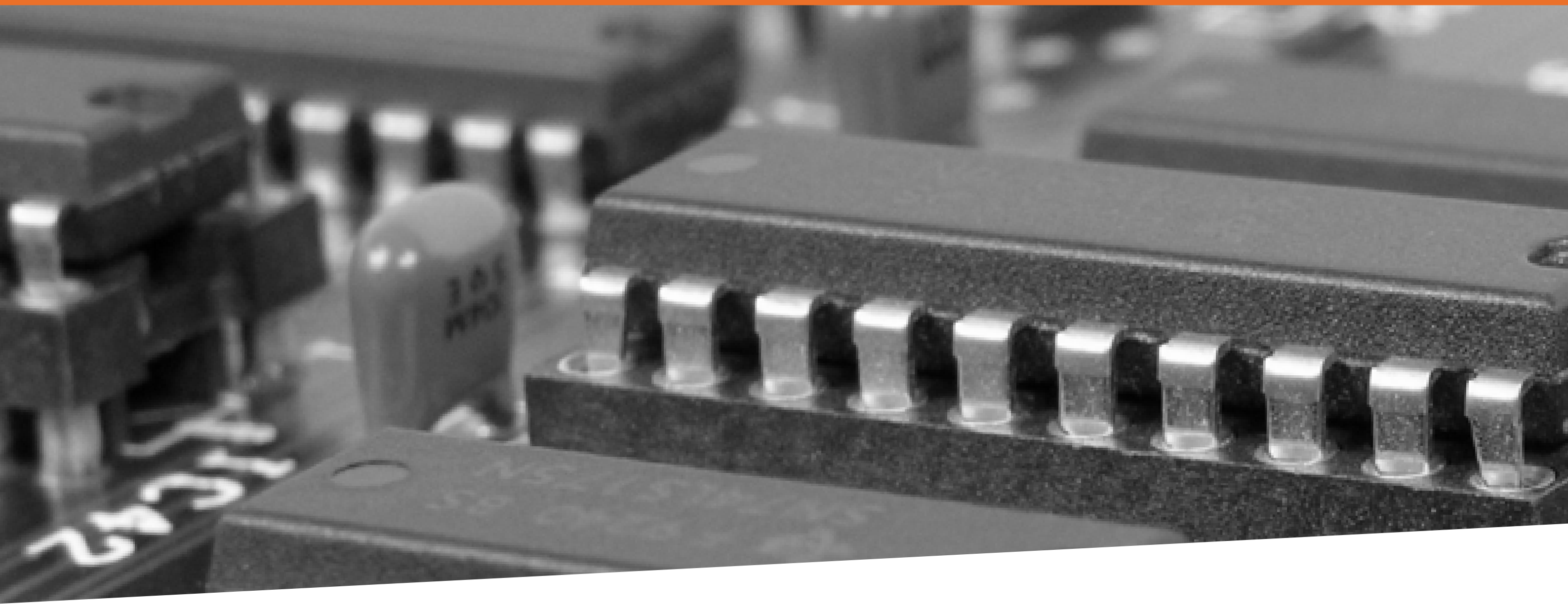
The buying process is also changing in other ways. CEB works with many of the world’s major companies and has carried out extensive surveys on buying patterns. Their findings show that on average there are 5.4 people involved in every buying decision.

This is especially true for major purchases, where multiple departments will expect to input into the process; some of these will be influencers, some specifiers and some the ultimate decision makers.

This means that, more than ever before, sales messages and materials have to be structured to appeal to a diverse audience, each of whom has different interests and decision making criteria.

CEB’s argument is that the increasingly diverse nature of each target audience, plus the ease with which research can be done online, makes it essential for sales teams to adopt a consultative approach, based on strong customer insight.

This same philosophy also has to be applied to marketing messages and the materials and communication channels used to build market awareness and then to draw each customer along the journey from interest, research and evaluation, to contact, comparison and final decision.



The power of PESO

Developing a marketing plan that cuts through the growing noise in the marketplace depends on a clearly defined strategy, detailed knowledge of customer challenges and the experience to define and exploit the most appropriate routes to market.

In turn, developing the multiple channels available to your business requires a consistent, proactive and creative approach, underpinned by a proven business model. In short, it requires the power of PESO!

PESO stands for:

Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned.

It is a simple but extremely effective framework around which communications strategies and tactics can be easily adapted to meet the changing needs of the sales and marketing function, determined by the objective – for example, brand building, customer nurturing or lead generation.

The four components are defined as follows:

Paid: any paid for media - AdWords, e-shots, sponsored social media posts, trade media advertising, sales promotions and exhibitions

Earned: independent media coverage - news and PR in trade, technical and business media, third party blogs and independent web mentions

Shared: interaction with social media channels - likes, shares, retweets, comments and reposting of your online assets – white papers, video, blogs and social media posts – online forum discussions

Owned: all channels that you own - web and online channels, newsletters, customer and distributor events.

In essence, PESO is a simple model that incorporates all methods of marketing communication – both traditional and new world – and allows them to be structured in a way that addresses the behaviour of modern B2B customers.

PESO in practice

Let's take a simple example, to show how the PESO model can be easily applied to manage the marketing process to produce optimum results.

Typically, this will involve the creation of a high value content asset, such as a white paper – similar to this document. This is not a sales document; it's intended to provide insight, knowledge, ideas and information to help readers gain a better understanding of the subject and, by association, to position the publisher as an authority on their subject.

Clearly, with a high value marketing asset, there are many other opportunities both to promote it in its own right, and to dissect the content for use as stand-alone items.

Paid:

- The white paper can be promoted using Pay Per Click (PPC) adverts, targeted to reach the correct audience using techniques such as retargeting, geo-targeting or individual IP targeting
- Paid can also include banner adverts on independent news portals or e-shots managed by the trade and technical media

Earned:

- The news releases should be distributed to all relevant trade, technical or business media; including independent bloggers
- The content of the paper can be converted to technical or feature articles, or thought leadership comment pieces, and placed in key publications

Shared:

- The posts on social media channels can be shared, liked or reposted by followers

Owned:

- News releases or blog posts on your web site which can be shared across social media channels
- Highlighted content from the white paper can be used as further blog and social media posts
- The white paper can also be converted, in whole or in part, to short video clips; simple animated sections or face-to-camera interviews; each promoted via social media or other owned channels.

Additionally, the core information should be adapted to create related content for each discipline within the target audience. Take CEB's 5.4 people involved in each buying decision for example, a white paper that was initially written for an engineering audience, with a focus on technical arguments, could be modified for a commercial audience by changing the emphasis to the financial aspects of the chosen subject.

Test and measure

Fundamental to most modern marketing techniques is the ability to easily test, adjust and measure activities.

This is especially true for a content-driven approach to PESO, where many of the activities exist in the digital space.

Measurement can, and should, take many forms, to ensure that you have solid data on which to base subsequent decisions. Data capture and analysis tools range from relatively simple web site traffic analytics, IP tracking, social media engagement, media coverage and e-mail statistics to sophisticated real-time in-page PDF analysis and document adaption on the fly.

The choice of tools will be determined by your needs and resources. The important point is that data on the take-up and use of each item of content, through each of the PESO channels, must be gathered, analysed and acted on.

It's also important to recognise that this is a process of continuous learning, and that some activities may fail at the first attempt. This is not unusual. However, if steps are taken to understand why things went wrong, to test and experiment with different approaches, then over time it becomes possible to develop a methodology that delivers surprisingly successful results.

Be prepared

For most businesses, the traditional salesforce-driven method of approaching customers – of cold calling, sending out product literature or even knocking on doors (yes, it still happens!) – is becoming less and less successful.

Customers are less inclined to meet sales reps until they are ready to talk price. By then, they've done most of their research and, potentially, made an initial choice of supplier. This situation is likely to become worse in the not too distant future with the impending EU General Data Protection Regulation. Regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, this regulation will be coming into force in the UK and will effectively limit many of the opportunities for direct and unsolicited sales approaches.

Until this takes effect, however, it's worth being aware that there is a risk that inbound marketing techniques such as those described in this document can create an unrealistic expectation among sales teams.

Recent reports indicate that there is a growing belief that inbound marketing alone can drive traffic, interest and enquiries. This may be having a detrimental effect on the behaviour of sales teams, dissuading them from traditional methods of cold calling as they wait for inbound techniques to draw in prospects. In reality, of course, sales and marketing teams must be aligned, working together to develop customer relationships from the earliest possible stage – ideally before the customer is even aware that they have a need.

This has to be coordinated across all channels; success does, however, depend on the sales team adopting a consultative approach, adding value to the conversation from the outset by adopting some of the best practices normally associated with the generation of high value content and marketing assets.

It's a noisy place

One of the biggest challenges for B2B marketers is that buying cycles are often lengthy and complex, with multiple touch-points and processes that involve disparate groups of influencers, specifiers and decision-makers.

This complexity makes it difficult to develop effective messaging and manage consistent communication across diverse channels in a digital environment that is becoming ever noisier and more crowded. The result is that it is becoming ever harder to connect with customers at an early stage in the buying cycle.

It's not, however, all bad news. Companies that have a clearly defined marketing communications strategy, based on a solid understanding of the challenges faced by customers, and delivered via a carefully planned and integrated communications plan, are in an excellent position to deliver high levels of sales growth.

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We work across the B2B sector, specialising in the engineering, industrial, scientific, logistics, built environment, and packaging segments.

For advice, insight and a results driven approach to your marketing communications please get in touch.

Milton Keynes Challenge House Sherwood Drive Bletchley Milton Keynes MK3 6DP
T +44 (0)1908 533253

Manchester Emerson Business Centre Regent House Heaton Lane Stockport Cheshire SK4 1BS
T +44 (0)161 4011880

E info@4cm.co.uk | **W** 4cm.co.uk