

---

## Essentials of business-to-business marketing

---

### Introduction

If your organisation sells its products and services to other organisations, rather than to consumers, then you probably struggle, as we do, to find the relevance in most marketing text books, of marketing to your own business. You may have tried any number of recommended techniques, only to abandon them as you fail to see results in terms of increased sales. You may also have wondered how you can possibly afford to do any marketing at all, given the sheer size of investment it seems you are required to make. Finally, with so many marketing methods and techniques available, you are probably confused as to exactly which one will bring results to your business. If you are nodding at any of these points, then this "Essentials of business-to-business marketing" is for you.

### First thing's first - Marketing is not a luxury item

With many organisations, particularly those that sell "big ticket" products or services directly to other organisations, the sales cycle is a long one. It can take many months, and even years, to convert a cold call into a firm order. With long sales cycles such as this, it is vital that your sales team has a pipeline brimming with leads. If this pipeline is not full, and sufficient to ensure enough firm orders to reach your sales objectives, then because of the length of your sales cycle it might be months before you realise anything is wrong.

Marketing used cleverly, can secure you a string of sales leads for months to come, stuffing the sales pipeline with opportunities to keep your business thriving when times get tough.

The benefits of putting marketing at the heart of your business are many. By doing so, you build a marketing-led organisation, which means you are putting the customer at the heart of your business. Yes, marketers are in effect the voice of the customer - trained to understand and be responsive to their needs. If you don't have a marketer at the heart of your business, neither do you have your customer at the heart of your business. It's as simple as that. And that's quite a frightening thought.

Any company focused on bottom line results, as all of us are, needs to have one foot in the present and one foot in the future. Whilst sales, and more importantly, sales results, keep you firmly in the present, it is marketing, and strategic marketing planning, which will keep you in the future.

## **Key business-to-business issues**

Companies that sell products to other organisations, rather than consumers, have an extremely different, and often complex, marketing environment, and it is for this reason, therefore, that a different approach is required. Often products and services sold to other organisations are complex, and of much higher value. The latter, combined with a slower purchasing cycle within organisations, mean that business-to-business suppliers have a much longer sales cycle, lasting 6-12 months on average.

Often these organisations also have a relatively small number of known customers, with a complex Decision Making Unit within each customer. It is easy to see, then, why such organisations inevitably become sales led, relying on direct, personal relationships to build the business. In some cases, the marketing environment is further complicated by the existence of more than one organisational customer group i.e. a distributor or manufacturer and an end user.

Ok so your marketing budget may not be massive, and demonstrating Return On Investment is a given, but what activity should you spend your money on?

## **The best business-to-business marketing techniques**

Marketing needn't cost you a fortune. What is important is to look carefully at the type of products and customers you have, and find the activities and strategies that are most likely to yield results. Many companies have small marketing budgets, and as such, a large helping of "lateral" thinking is required. Clever PR, for example, is not expensive, providing the right environment for your people to close sales, and direct marketing via the Internet can really bring in the business.

And when you are planning your marketing spend – think long-term. Many marketing techniques, particularly when it comes to selling a product people have never seen before, or don't even know they need, take time to make an impact. It is important to recognise this fact, so that you don't pull the plug on a marketing campaign just as it is about to yield results. Equally, it is not uncommon for marketing activities to run sporadically and ad hoc, in an effort to save money, but this may often mean that any cumulative impact is lost.

## **Top tips for successful business-to-business marketing**

### ***1. Establish/position yourself as an expert in your field***

Positioning yourself as an expert in your market place, particularly if you sell complex products and services to other organisations, will build credentials for your organisation which may make the difference, at a sales meeting, between getting the deal and not getting it. One of the ways in which you can do this is by talking about topical issues in the press that your customers read. Not only will you be talking intelligently about your customers' issues in a highly credible way (editorial is seen as the second most credible information source behind analysts' reports – Edelman Trust Barometer 2006), you can also go on to use reprints of these articles as sales collateral which can make or break deals, or as content for direct marketing activity.

### ***2. Leverage your best customers***

If you have some great success stories concerning problems that your product or service has solved for existing customers, then make sure you shout about them! Case studies again make great sales collateral, and when written in the voice of the customer make a strong connection with prospects. They are also accepted by many of the trade press when written in a journalistic style. Once more case studies which appear in the press are seen as much more credible than advertising, cost considerably less to generate, and will pay dividends when you want to win new business and enter new markets.

### ***3. Put yourself in your customers' shoes***

When producing any kind of marketing collateral which attempts to sell your product or service, remember that your customer is only thinking one thing - What's In It For Me? Don't give them products, give them solutions to problems.

### ***4. Remember that having the best product is not enough***

Never believe that having the best product is enough. To lead the market you need two things - the best product, AND the best marketing.

## **Getting return on your business-to-business marketing investment**

So how do we know when and how our Marketing is making an impact? Well the answer is that you don't – unless you measure it. Measurable marketing techniques are not rocket science; they simply require you to allow time and budget for measurement, and to think through some relevant measures of success, for example for your PR activity you might measure the quantity and quality of press cuttings. For direct marketing activity you might look at the number of leads generated. Alternatively you might run a before and after survey, for example to measure a change in brand awareness. Importantly frequent and consistent measurement enables you to adjust strategies before too much money is spent on the wrong thing. So it's important to measure results as often as possible, because every day that you don't, you could be wasting money on the wrong thing. Take heart though, if you're using Web Marketing techniques, because these can be measured almost in real time, allowing you to react quickly.

## **Skills required for marketing business-to-business**

Business-to-business marketing requires a different range of skills to consumer marketing. First and foremost, your marketer needs a depth of business experience, and to be used to working in a business-to-business environment. Your marketer will be a good all-rounder, with strong copywriting skills and a good grasp of business issues - essential for all the marketing collateral they will need to produce. This person will also be creative and resilient, with strong organisational and project management skills.

## **Where to find business-to-business marketing skills**

Unfortunately, such business-to-business marketing skills are not easy to find. Many companies have in-house marketing managers, but turn to outside agencies for specialist advice e.g. copywriting, PR, Search Engine Optimisation etc. If you choose an external marketing agency to assist with any area of your marketing activity, make sure that they are:

- a) A business-to-business marketing specialist
- b) Well versed in the business issues of your industry sector(s)

One point to remember, in employing external agencies, is that you will only get work back as good as the brief you give them. And to give a good marketing brief, you need marketing expertise, which is why more and more organisations are discovering that outsourcing their entire marketing function, or employing a one-stop shop type marketing organisation, can pay dividends. Not only is the quality of the marketing produced much higher, but it will also save you hours of time liaising with external agencies and checking and reworking what they produce, or wondering why the work submitted never came up to expectations.

### **A final thought**

Marketing builds many things in a business, not just sales leads and customer empathy, although both these elements are vital. Marketing builds your company brand, until suddenly it becomes so strong that sales leads come to you, without you having to chase them. The reputation and image of your company, as created and communicated by the marketing team, will be uniquely powerful in attracting all types of stakeholders to beat a path to your door. And you don't just want to be attractive to your customers, do you? Wouldn't it be great to have the best employees, the best partners and the most high profile media queuing up to talk to you?

Finally, marketing builds customer loyalty and relationships, which will also ensure long-term sales through repeat business, word-of-mouth referrals, and unique cross-selling opportunities. Some companies have customers who are so loyal that they become unpaid members of their sales team!

One day, you might want to sell your company on, and if you've worked hard at your marketing, not only will you have a healthy profit and loss account, but also a healthy balance sheet. Brand reputation and customer loyalty are both classed as "goodwill", and given a value on your balance sheet, and many buyers will be more than happy to pay a premium for such valuable and intangible assets. Do you still say marketing is a luxury item?

1800 words  
//ends

This article was written by Karen Hewitt of Ogam Insight Ltd., a rapidly growing strategic marketing research, insight, analysis and planning consultancy serving the needs of the UK Technology sector. For more information go to [www.ogaminsight.com](http://www.ogaminsight.com).