MARKETING SIMPLY IN AN ERA OF COMPLEX PRODUCTS

By Rod Griffith

Marketing was easy when innovation was dramatic.

Technology marketers in the 1980s had it easy. I can say this with confidence because I was there, in the thick of it.

The advancements offered by new products made users more productive and customers happier.

For the thousands of us marketers in the computer industry then, every new product release marked a huge leap in technological advancement. It wasn't unusual for your newly launched minicomputer (think of it as one of today's servers, back when the word referred only to restaurant wait staff) to perform twice as fast as your competitors' products at a 20% lower price.

Such performance leaps made a difference. A mechanical engineer could render a 3D solid model design in just two hours instead of a full day. Booting a computer took only four minutes when it used to take 10. At a time when bringing up an app in a new window could take two minutes, cutting that wait to 30 seconds felt almost miraculous. The advancements offered by new products made users more productive and customers happier.

With each new product release, you had perhaps a six-month window during which your product was vastly superior to your competitors'. In those months, you could overtake your competitors and become the market leader—only to be dethroned again when their latest release was vastly superior to yours.

This leapfrogging in technology made it an interesting time to be a tech marketer. Leading technology companies were in a tight race, and the lead position was changing frequently, with each new innovation.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, however, things changed. Technology innovations became less dramatic. There were occasional breakthroughs (e.g., Wi-Fi, smartphones, Bluetooth), but such advancements were no longer monthly events. Technology just gradually became smaller, smarter, more integrated, more adaptive—and more complex.

Complex technology brought complex messaging.

As new innovations began to layer upon one another to create more and more complex solutions, understanding and communicating the competitive advantage of one solution over another became more difficult. Gone were the days when the clear competitive advantage could be explained as succinctly as "twice the performance at half the price."

When you're trying to make your product appear different from the rest, using the same tech speak doesn't help your cause.

To differentiate a B2B technology solution today, marketers and salespeople must take the customer through a complex educational process. It often requires a lot of time to explain the unique technical advantages of today's complex solutions. The result is complex sales messaging supported by complex sales playbooks designed to guide the customer through a long journey of information gathering and investigation, education, comparison and analysis, and ultimately, a decision.

Fueling this growth in messaging complexity is the pride technology companies take in their innovative products (and deservedly so). They want customers to know how amazing their innovations are, and so they tend to let their technology experts drive their messaging. In this attempt to explain their technology advancements, they load their messaging with technical features and complex technology discussions.

Many tech marketers add further complexity to messaging by adding tech-marketing speak to the mix. They use terms like "leading edge," "fully integrated," "end-to-end," "highly scalable," "best in class," "solution stack," "future proof," "flexible architecture," "cutting edge, "versatile," "enterprise-wide," and so on. This generally doesn't help to differentiate a product. When you're trying to make your product appear different from the rest, using the same tech speak doesn't help your cause.

Here's the main challenge with creating complex messaging: for a customer to sift through and absorb all this technical detail, they must be willing to commit a lot of time and energy. These days, that's definitely not a given.



Customers are looking for effectiveness, simplicity, and ease of use.

A move from feature-focus to experience-focus

Today, the effective B2B marketing of technology solutions requires a move from feature-focused messages to experience-focused messages.

In this stressful, fast-moving world, customers are looking for effectiveness, simplicity, and ease of use. Communicating what matters most to customers is less about the technology and innovations you've deployed and more about what those innovations will mean to their experience. How will their business and their lives improve with the use of your solution?

Tech marketing now calls for simpler, more effective messages about how tech solutions can deliver improved customer experiences. And shorter messages are better—more likely to be read, understood, and remembered. So B2B marketers must find ways to use simpler messages made of fewer words to differentiate the improved experiences their solutions deliver.

As a B2B technology marketer, you essentially face the challenge of presenting new solutions to customers in a simple, palatable way that allows them to understand your solution's business and personal value. While still important, tech features are rarely the primary focus of effective marketing today—unless, of course, your new product offers twice the performance at half the cost.

Start with a simple value proposition.

The first step is to take the customer view and articulate your solution's net effect for the customer. Clearly define:

- Who you are
- What you do
- For whom you do it

These three key elements are the core of your value proposition, and you must quickly and clearly communicate them to your prospects. If this seems too obvious, give your website the eight-second test.

Go to your website and ask yourself if a new visitor would be able to grasp these three elements with an eight-second glance at your home page. Eight seconds, you see, is about how long a visitor will spend before deciding whether to stay on your site or leave. You may be surprised how many websites don't pass the eight-second test.

"What you do" should focus on the value you bring to your customers—not simply the product or service you provide. Say what you do by describing how your solution helps customers overcome challenges or reach important goals. If your "what you do" section doesn't explain one or both of these benefits, it's likely missing the mark.

Products or services that do not solve problems or achieve goals are most likely luxury items—something that's nice to have, but not necessary. You want to provide "gotta-have" solutions, not "nice-to-have" luxuries. And your value proposition should reflect that by focusing on the values that matter to customers.

Simplify your sales messaging.

Distill your messaging to the highest level of what your solution does for the customer:

- How will the customer's life change for the better by using your product?
- How will the customer's business change for the better?
- What are the personal and business values of using your product?

Today's decision makers want solutions that offer more than just business value. They are more likely to buy products that show personal value, too. Studies show decision makers are even willing to pay more for the products they perceive as providing personal value, not just business value.

For example, a business value of a product might be that it increases worker productivity by reducing task redundancy. The personal value of that same product might include the opportunity to be seen as an effective innovator in your company, which can boost your corporate visibility and lead to promotion.

Another personal value of a product might be that it helps you spend less time working late at night, enabling you to spend more time with your family. These personal values matter to decision makers, and they are shown to have a far greater impact on sales decisions than many B2B marketers realize.

Avoid tech speak.



Don't overuse tech speak.

In your customer-facing copy, minimize your use of tech speak and industry jargon. This goal becomes even more important as a growing number of technology decision makers have no technology background. These individuals need help understanding the complete value of your solution—both business and personal.

In years past, a CTO and staff would make most technology buying decisions. Today, however, companies recognize that this departmentalization of buying decisions leads to information silos. They realize that data must be shared across the organization and IT must provide a seamless infrastructure for managing all data.

As such, technology decisions are made at a strategic level with business lines from across the company participating. To communicate effectively with this diverse target audience and successfully differentiate your solution, don't overuse tech speak.

Simplify your brand identity.

Complex offerings do not necessarily require a complex brand identity. Steve Jobs and Apple taught the industry a much-needed lesson in simplified branding with their brilliantly effective, yet very simple, brand identity. But long before their stark, elegant brand look, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak recognized the value of simplicity with the naming of their company.

Steve Jobs liked apples (who doesn't?) and thought the name was "fun, spirited, and not intimidating." At a time when computer manufacturers had boring names like Control Data, Data General, Digital Equipment Corporation, and Wang Laboratories, Apple Computer was a breath of fresh air.

Visual brand elements matter, too. Are your fonts too complex? Are there too many of them? Does your brand color palette have too many colors? Once again, Apple taught us the value of a simplified brand identity by rarely using any colors except white and black.

Simplicity can go a long way in helping a brand stand out in the crowd.

Is your brand photography too complex or detailed? In a time when people are constantly bombarded with text, colors, and images, simplicity can go a long way in helping a brand stand out in the crowd.

Highly related to brand simplicity is the need for brand consistency. It's very tempting to want to regularly alter or tweak your brand identity to keep it modern and fresh. Certainly, designers enjoy the opportunity to put their personal touch on the company's look. But with few exceptions, this should be resisted.

If you're tweaking your brand identity every few years, you may be damaging your long-term brand effectiveness. There's a reason the most successful brands in the world—including Amazon, Apple, Coca Cola, Federal Express, GE, Google, Nike, Pepsi, and UPS—often go many years if not decades without changing the look of their brand.

Talk to customers about their actual experience with your brand. Find out how they perceive your business. Let your customers lead you toward the core of your brand essence. Find out which components of your brand identity resonate with them; focus on those elements and remove the elements that don't resonate.

Simplify your sales tools.

Many sales tools fail to consider the customer experience. To be effective, you must know which stage of the customer journey each sales tool impacts most.



Apply the eight-second test to all your sales tools.

Apply the eight-second test to all your sales tools. Do they each communicate your value—who, what, for whom—in eight seconds or less? Customers must be able to immediately discern how your solution will help them overcome obstacles or reach goals. If they can't find that info in eight seconds, they're likely to stop reading.

If a customer disqualifies themself because your solution does not meet their needs, no harm done. But if your sales tools mislead the customer into thinking your solution won't help them meet their challenges or reach goals, you've missed a sales opportunity. Misleading, foggy, or complex messaging can lead a customer to an incorrect conclusion about your offering. And once a customer declares your solution a no-go, that opportunity is gone for good.

The challenge for B2B marketers is to communicate top-level messages and keep it simple.

- Use carefully crafted taglines to clearly describe your offerings.
- Present top-level information in an executive summary on page one of informational documents so customers can find what they need quickly.
- Use design and layout to present your value at a glance.

In addition to adhering to the eight-second rule, remember to focus on the customer experience, rather than focusing on you, your business, or your solution.

- In all copy, use less "us" and "we" and more "you" and "your."
- Focus on the customer benefits, not your solution's features and functions.
- Tell a story that makes the reader a hero. Help the customer understand how they can become the hero of their business or marketplace. Make the customer the central character of every piece.

Capture mindshare, and keep it.

You can't control when a customer will recognize that they need your solution. Nor can you control when a customer will recognize that the challenge they face is a high enough priority to warrant immediate focus. If you can show that your solution is best qualified to help them overcome challenges and achieve goals, you'll gain their mindshare.

Remember: mindshare is awareness that lasts over time. Good marketing should generate not just initial short-term awareness, but also long-term mindshare. So when a customer reaches the aha moment of, "Cripes! I need to fix this!" your solution will be top of mind.

Simplified B2B marketing is simply more effective.

Follow these basic guidelines to build more simplified B2B marketing that's more effective. With a stronger, more simplified brand identity and messaging communicated through more simplified sales tools, you'll likely see a range of benefits.

More customers will quickly understand the business and personal value of your offerings and what makes your solution different. And you'll reduce the risk of customers misinterpreting what you're about or drawing inaccurate conclusions.

marketreach

Copyright © 2021 MarketReach, Inc.
MarketReach® is a registered trademark of MarketReach, Inc. All rights reserved.