The New Rules of the Game

beanstalk

Modern B2b Buyers, How to Reach Them and Win Sales



Contents

A New Way to Buy	**4**
Sales Resistant Buyers	5
Buyer Research and Self-Education	6
Organisational Factors	8
Supplier evaluation	10
How can Businesses adapt?	14
Focusing on the Buyer	15
Aligning Sales and Marketing	**20**
Changing the Sales Approach	23
Build an Effective Database	24
Conclusions	25



The New Rules of the Game

Selling to businesses is tough. And getting tougher. The business to business landscape has changed dramatically in recent years and meeting sales targets is getting more difficult for those businesses that have not adapted. This e-book explores how modern buyers have changed, the implications and the strategies needed when trying to engage with them and to win lucrative new contracts.

An understanding of the motivation and behaviour of modern buyers is needed to be able to achieve sustainable sales success. Sales and Marketing need to adapt and work together to maximise opportunities. The modern marketer needs a new approach to identify and reach buyers, while sales professionals need to adjust how they approach their prospects and try to close deals.



A New Way to Buy

B2b buyers are now less influenced by traditional sales and marketing activity. In a highly competitive environment they are more sceptical of sales and marketing approaches and whether new suppliers or products can deliver real value.



Sales Resistant Buyers

> "Almost 60% of the buying process is completed prior to a b2b buyer wanting to meet or engage directly with a potential supplier. In some sectors this can be even higher"

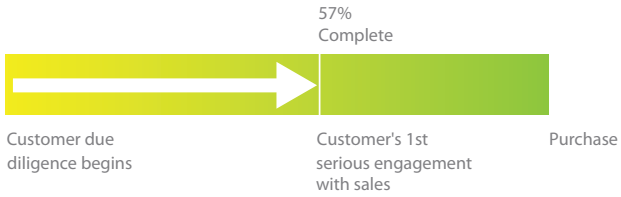
Buyers Delay Meeting Salespeople

One clear illustration of the transition in b2b buyer behaviour is that they move much further through the purchase process before engaging in a sales conversation with suppliers. Research conducted by the Marketing Research Council and published in the Harvard Business Review suggests that on average almost 60% of the buying process is completed prior to a b2b buyer wanting to meet or engage directly with a potential supplier. In some sectors this can be even higher.

This has happened because buyers can now easily and immediately access comprehensive information on the products and services that might meet their requirements. They conduct their own detailed research and analysis, educating themselves as to what is available in the market, options, and budget implications.

This change presents a significant challenge to the traditional approach of Sales and Marketing departments. In the traditional model Marketing would identify a lead which Sales would engage at an early stage of the evaluation; helping to educate and shape the solution that would resolve the needs or problems that have been identified. This traditional approach has not only become ineffective but can also be an irritation to buyers that are in the process of establishing their own requirements and supplier shortlists. The traditional salesperson, even when they have engaged with a buyer at an early stage, becomes less able to influence the buying process as it develops.

Fig 1: Customers are choosing to delay a commercial conversation with suppliers



Source: CEB MLC Customer Purchase Research Survey

Buyers Seek Out Information

The research makes clear that modern buyers are using a wide range of mostly digital information to help them assess their internal issues, and then to identify and evaluate the options available to them.

Typically where a business is still using traditional b2b sales and marketing methods:

- In the best case scenario the seller is selected as a capable vendor and will receive a detailed and well specified request for proposal with limited scope to add value or propose new solutions. The key evaluation made by the buyer is low pricing against a tight specification.
- In the worst case scenario the organisation is deselected early in the evaluation phase because the buyer was unable to find relevant information quickly and easily. This is despite the seller actually having capability to meet the buyer's requirements fully.

Where it is easy for them to educate themselves about the seller and the solutions available buyers are likely to interact more, and to retain awareness of a particular supplier for longer.

Buyer Research and Self-Education

> "96% of visitors to a b2b supplier website are not ready to buy"

There is a wealth of information available to buyers. In many cases the abundance of information and the clamour and noise from suppliers can be overwhelming. Buyers have had to become adept at ignoring what they don't want to hear; undertaking their own independent analysis and research to refine their needs and to identify who will be able to meet these.

Simple sales messages no longer generate engagement. Buyers are more self-reliant and sophisticated, aware that if they have a need, there is a wealth of information available at the point that they want to engage with it.

The Zero Moment of Truth

Google has identified the "Zero Moment of Truth" as the first time that a buyer considers a purchase. Often before anything else (even discussing with colleagues) a buyer will undertake an internet search. This search is so easy it can occur almost instantaneously with the thought process that triggers it. The search provides immediate and relatively objective information on what is available.

The early stage research by buyers is confirmed by Marketo. They established that approximately 96% of visitors to a b2b supplier website were not ready to buy. These website visits are however valuable interactions and should not be ignored by the modern marketer. The same research identified that 70% of those visitors will go on to buy from that organisation or a competitor.

Detailed Buyer Evaluation

When embarking upon their evaluation, buyers can spend a lot of time researching available solutions, scoping out their own requirements and comparing numerous suppliers against multiple criteria. Only then will they make the decision to engage, and often with only some of the suppliers initially considered.

The resources buyers need to educate themselves are easily found through search engines, social media, forums and other online channels. Websites and documents produced and distributed by supplier organisations enable the buyer to learn a great deal about specific product or service offerings before speaking with potential suppliers directly. Specifications can be studied in detail and, where necessary, additional research undertaken to ensure sufficient technical knowledge is in place to make objective comparisons.

The Buyersphere 2015 report indicates that b2b marketers should react with caution to the clamour for investment in social media. Only 4% of buyers actively searched social media channels as an information source, and only 50% of buyers used them at all in the buying process. Where they were using social media, buyers mostly chose industry specific forums. LinkedIn and Google+ were also used, Twitter was used the least.

Social media may be currently of relatively limited importance, however this situation should be monitored closely by marketers. Social media channels are likely to spread further into commercial life and demographic factors may impact on increased uptake; younger buyers are far more likely to use these information sources.

> "Technical specifications, external reports and expert interviews are more influential than pricing information for b2b buyers."

Educated Buyers

Forrester research concludes that the average buyer seeks out three items of information for every one that is sent by marketing or sales departments. Buyers come to the table highly educated.

Information Sources

Buyers use a number of different ways to find information (on average 2.4 alternative types of information source) and the most frequently used are supplier websites and search engines according to the 2015 Buyersphere report.

The source used has an impact on how much influence that information has. Company specific information sources such as the supplier website are not seen as objective and have less influence, although they are highly utilised. Recommendations from colleagues or industry specific intermediaries are the most influential information sources.

Information Types

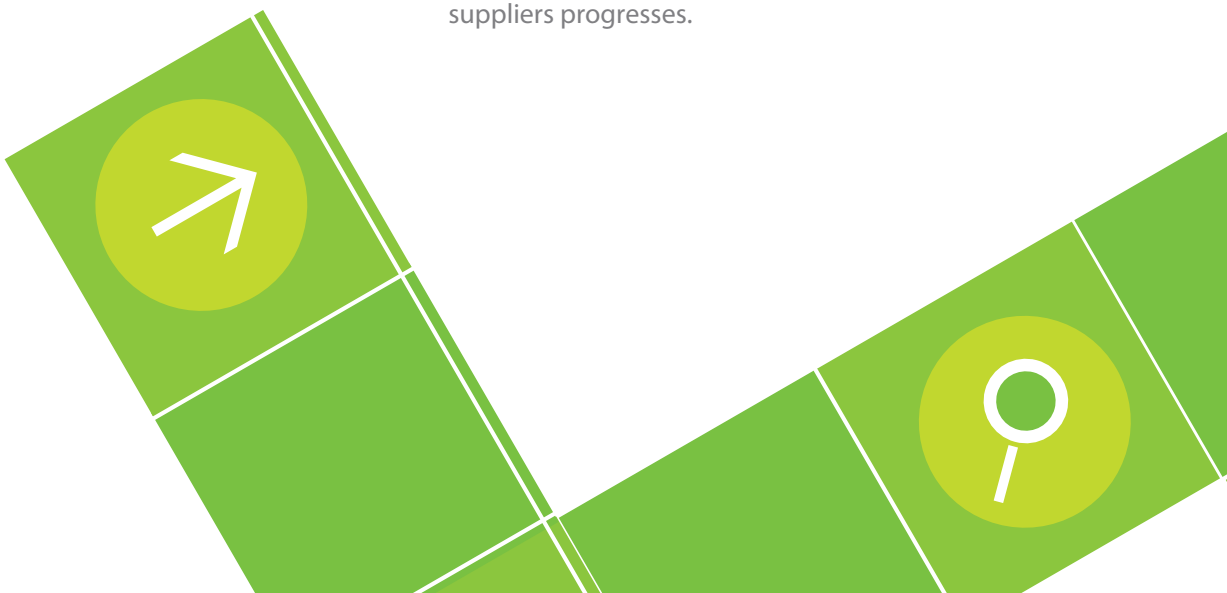
Types of information mostly commonly sought are:

- Pricing information (67%)
- Technical specifications (58%)

It was found that fewer buyers were looking for How To Guides (only 12%).

In comparing the information types that most influence buyers, technical specifications, external reports and expert interviews rank the highest. Although powerful, external reports were relatively infrequently accessed and this may be because they are more difficult for buyers to locate than other materials. Interestingly all three types were more influential than pricing information.

Different information is sought at different stages of the buying process as the level of knowledge that buyers have increases and as their evaluation of suppliers progresses.



Organisational Factors

> "The average number of individuals involved in b2b buying decisions is 2.5"

Decision Making Unit

In consumer markets the Decision Making Unit is straightforward. It is usually one individual, sometimes two for larger purchases, but rarely more. The Decision Making Unit is much more complex in b2b organisations where it may consist of a number of stakeholders. Each stakeholder has a different level of power and influence and will exercise these at different stages of the process. They often have different organisational and personal needs and priorities.

For significant purchases the average number of buyers involved in a buying decision is 2.5, but this varies with the size and criticality of the purchase (2015 b2b Buyersphere).

The difference between business and consumer buying is most striking where strategic importance of a purchase decision is high and the spend is high. In these circumstances multiple high level decision makers with specialist expertise are involved. Low importance and low value purchases are most similar to consumer purchases. They are often undertaken by one junior person, as there is limited risk associated with a poor decision.

Fig 2: Understanding the Decision Making Unit

	Low Strategic Importance	High Strategic Importance
High Spend	Typical example: Utilities	Typical example: Plant Equipment
	May be seen as an expensive necessity	May be seen as a critical asset
	Approx 3 Decision Makers	Usually more than 4 Decision Makers
	Mainly mid-level Decision Makers with some C suite involvement	C suite Decision Maker with mid-level assistance
	Specialist and non-specialist involved	Many specialists involved
	Clients typically buy on service	Clients typically buy on customisation
	Typical example: Stationery	Typical example: Safety Certification
	May be seen as an easily replaceable commodity	May be seen as something that must not go wrong
Low Spend	Usually a single Decision Maker	Approx 3 Decision Makers
	Junior Level Decision Maker	Mainly mid-level Decision Makers with some C suite involvement
	Non specialists involved	Specialists and non specialists involved
	Clients typically buy on channel	Clients typically buy on consistency and brand

Your Offer

Source: B2B International

Procurement Involvement

A natural assumption is that in larger organisations the procurement function is key to the purchase decision. Research indicates however that this is far from the case and procurement is only involved in 12% of significant b2b purchases (2015 b2b Buyersphere). Procurement are more involved when purchases are large but typically even then it is at a low level, especially up until the point where suppliers are being researched in detail.

> “Half of buyers encounter internal policies that discourage cultivation of long term beneficial partners”

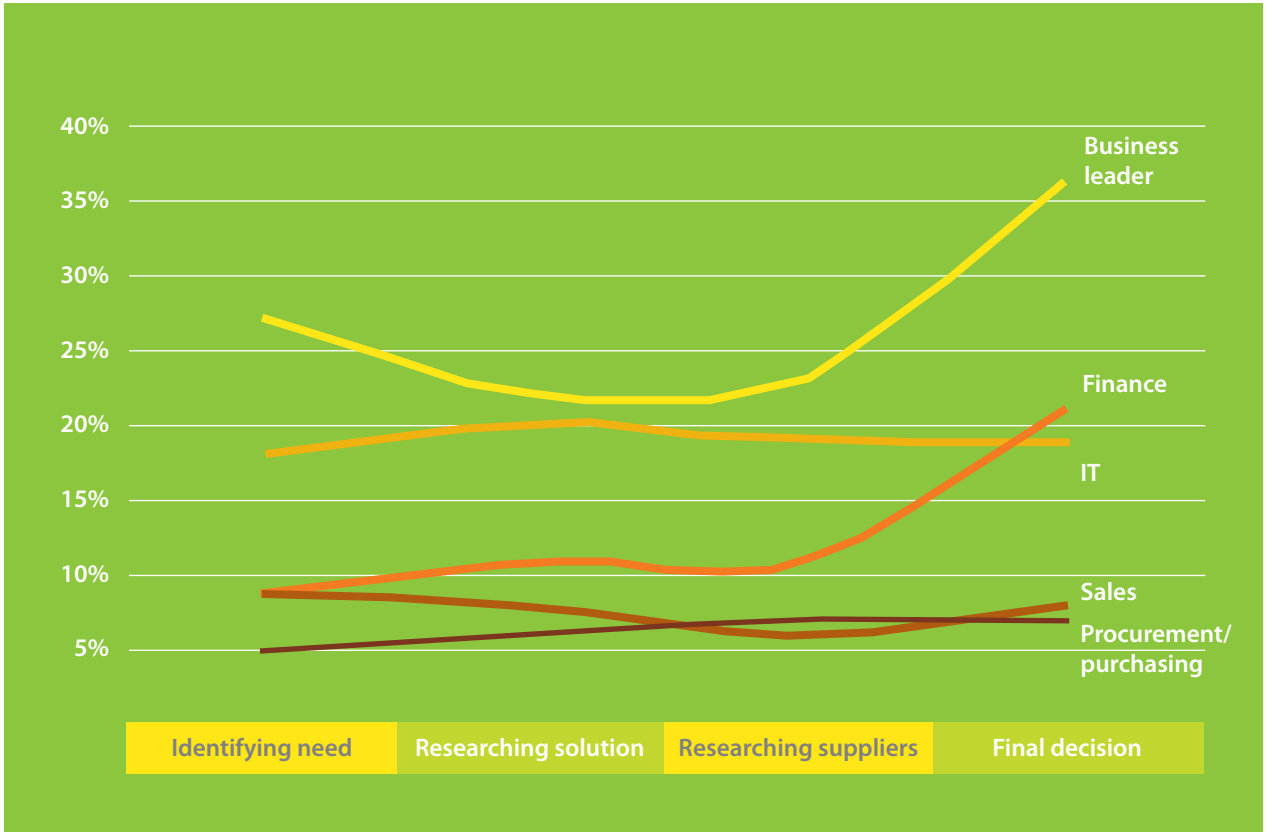
Job Roles of Decision Makers

CEOs and Directors are heavily involved in the buying process, but especially at the start and end of it. Functional roles and particularly IT are engaged in the middle of the process during detailed evaluation. Finance is most involved at the end of the process as final negotiations and approval of a preferred supplier is sought.

Internal Factors of the Decision Making Unit

Negotiating the complex Decision Making Unit poses not just a difficulty for the seller of products or services. It can cause significant frustration for those within it. Individuals keen to make changes are not just limited by budget restrictions and authorisation timescales; there are often political factors and vested interests that have to be delicately negotiated. Nearly half of respondents in a Fortune Knowledge Group survey encountered policies that discouraged them from cultivating long term partnerships with desirable partners. Those seeking to persuade others will often value information, analysis and tools that help them to illustrate a business case to others.

Fig 3: Decision maker roles at each stage of the buying process



Source: b2b Buyersphere 2015

Supplier Evaluation

> "After choosing a supplier only 52% of buyers believed they had chosen the best price"

Price isn't Everything

There appears to be a disconnect between what buyers say they want and what they actually choose. When asked to describe their ideal supplier, buyers surveyed for the 2015 Buyersphere report highlighted best price and reliability.

Fig 4: Ideal supplier attributes identified by buyers



Source: b2b Buyersphere 2015

After choosing a supplier however 77% of buyers are confident the supplier would deliver, 70% believe they have chosen suppliers with the best product, yet only 52% believed they had chosen the best price. The best price is clearly therefore not as important in the evaluation as buyers may suggest.

Suppliers Need to Communicate Well

Chosen suppliers are better communicators and this is clear in a number of areas. A number of communication factors rank higher in the study than low pricing when it came to buyers making a decision to choose a particular supplier:

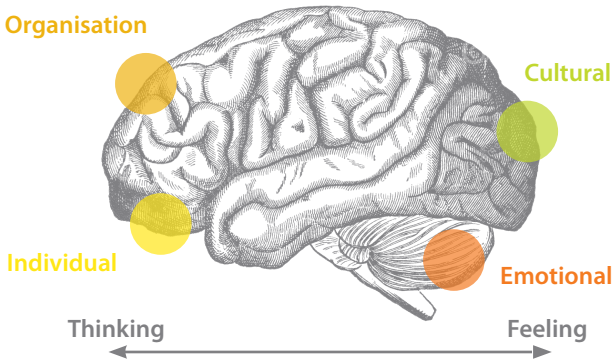
- A better understanding of a buyer's needs
- Responding more quickly with better quality of information
- Providing more frequent communication
- Using email more effectively

These suppliers build better relationships with buyers and succeed in winning their business.

Buyer Assessment Factors

When thinking about and evaluating supplier offerings, b2b Buyers weigh up a number of different influences. They have responsibilities to their organisation and towards those within it. They also have individual motivations and needs. Buyers will assess rationally the impact of a purchase decision on the organisation and on them individually, but will also be influenced by the organisational culture and by emotional factors.

Fig 5: Factors influencing supplier evaluation



Organisational Needs

The organisational needs are typically defined by buyers that have already undertaken significant research on the requirements of the organisation and how these can be met. The organisational needs are carefully and rationally evaluated against the capabilities of the supplier.

> "Individual value is twice as important to buyers as organisational value"

Particular members of the Decision Making Unit with specialist expertise will often be tasked with assessing the product or service specifications being offered against those that are required.

Meeting the specification is a threshold requirement for any supplier to be considered and typically there are several suppliers that can meet these requirements. It is other factors that cause one of them to be chosen over the others.

Individual Needs

The motivations and needs of an individual buyer are very important. They can be underestimated because they are often not clearly articulated by the buyer or easily identifiable. Individual value was found to be twice as important as the value to the organisation in a Corporate Executive Board study. This study looked at how buyers perceived a brand and whether they then went on to consider a supplier, make a purchase or pay a premium price.

The impact that a buying decision can have on an individual in their working life is considerable. Buyers are keen to realise benefits that help them in their job or make their life easier, but they are acutely aware of the risks if a purchase decision goes wrong. These personal risks extend beyond the damage to the organisation and the impact on their ability to do their job well, it can damage their credibility and status within the organisation or put their career directly in jeopardy.

The risks make b2b buyers highly cautious and risk-averse. It explains why reliability is such a key desired attribute of an ideal supplier, but also why confidence in the supplier and buying the best product overtakes all other factors when it comes to the suppliers that are actually selected.

Cultural Factors

Different organisations have different values, ways of working and beliefs which impact on the decisions and needs of those within it. Organisations will often want to deal with suppliers that have a similar ethos to them. Creative brands want to deal with other creative brands, big businesses want to deal with other big businesses.

The Fortune Knowledge Group research identifies that 65% of executives believe subjective factors (such as culture and values) increasingly make a difference when evaluating proposals. When choosing a supplier over half said that corporate culture was a top driver.

> "65% of executives think it is more difficult to base decisions on only clearly quantifiable factors such as cost."

Understanding the culture of key customer segments and demonstrating congruence with them enables relevant buyers to feel that a supplier is a good match as a future partner.

Understanding culture may require scratching under the surface of PR and press releases regarding corporate social responsibility and green policies though – these are not necessarily representative of the actual culture of those inside the organisation and how they behave!

Almost all b2b markets exhibit a customer distribution where a small number of customers dominate revenue. Often, even in the largest b2b companies, a few customers really make a difference to sales. The culture of the business cannot necessarily match those of all of its customers, however understanding and mirroring the culture of the most important customer segments could yield significant benefits.

> 62% of executives say it is often necessary to rely on gut feelings and soft factors

Emotional Factors

We sometimes forget that buyers are human beings who take their emotions to work with them and are still susceptible to emotional responses. The emotional factors are in fact often the deciding factors. As we have seen, a rational evaluation of the company needs is often a matter of suppliers "ticking the box" by demonstrating the capability to meet the required specification. Sellers are differentiated by the emotional factors.

Fortune Knowledge Group identified that 62% of executives say it is often necessary to rely on gut feelings and soft factors. 65% agree that it has become more difficult (due to the complex environment) to base decisions on only clearly quantifiable factors such as cost.

The actual impact of emotional factors are probably much higher than the survey. Many of us are unaware of or do not identify the impact of emotional factors on our decision making. Particularly where corporate culture emphasises the value of rational evaluation and the objective analysis of data there will be a strong tendency for the emotional component of a decision to go unacknowledged. Often emotional decisions will be post-rationalised to avoid cognitive dissonance (the mental stress caused by knowing information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values).

There are a range of emotions that may drive purchasing decisions including an emotional desire for social benefits (such as admiration from others or fitting in with colleagues), improved self-esteem (feelings of achievement or doing good for society or the organisation), or other factors such as excitement, happiness, or confidence.

The Particular Importance of Fear and Anxiety

The most powerful emotions likely to affect a buyer though are fear and anxiety.

The CEB study examined the emotional connections between customers and brands and found a much higher correlation of emotional connection between b2b brands compared to b2c, which many will find surprising. 70% of Cisco's b2b customers feel emotionally connected to their brand compared to only 45% of Apple's b2c customers.

This emotional connection is directly correlated to

> 48% of b2b buyers acknowledge that they had failed to speak up about a new solution that they wanted to purchase

the number of perceived personal risks that are associated with a purchase (loss of credibility, increased time or effort, the loss of their job).

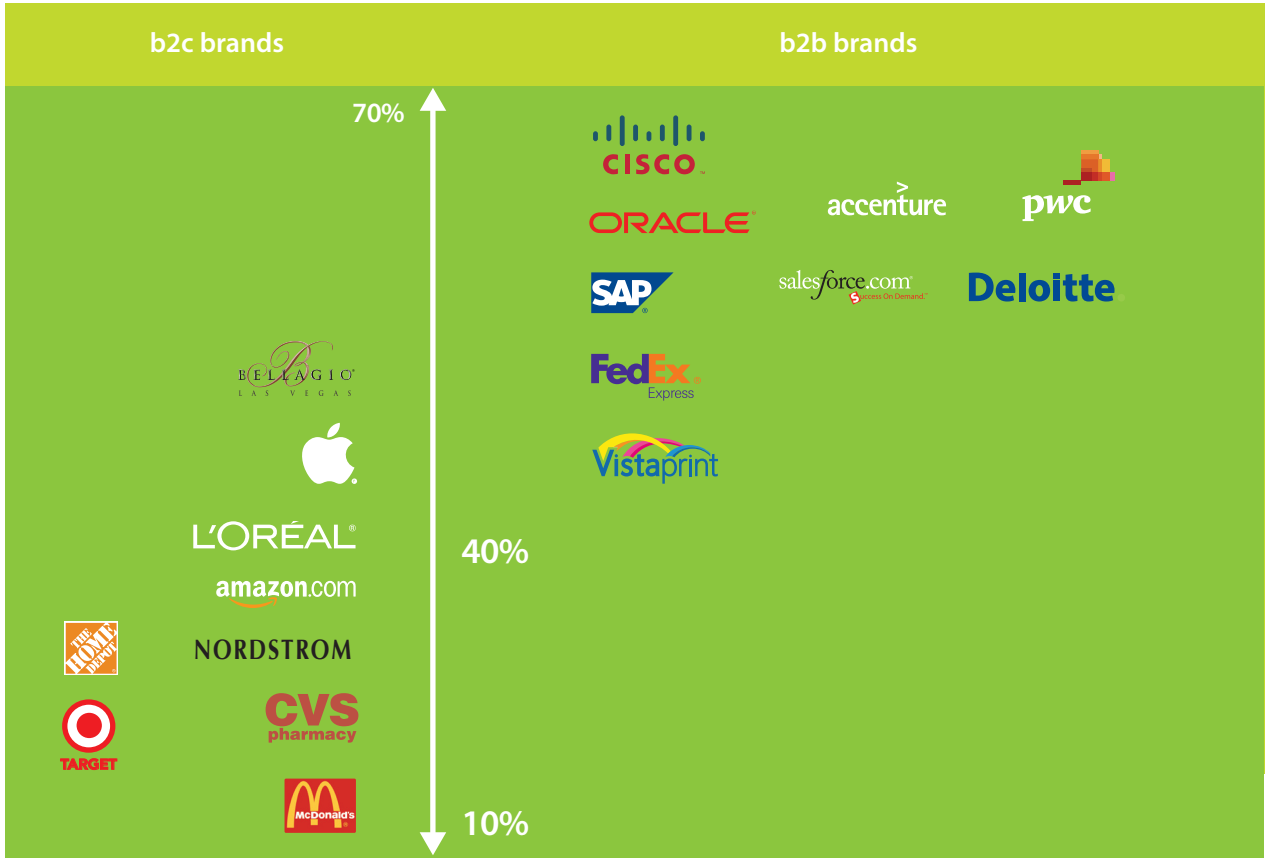
Under these circumstances it is not surprising that buyers become fearful, anxious and risk averse. Why try a new supplier if there is a possibility of looking foolish in front of your colleagues or boss, or of losing your job.

Often during the middle stages of the purchase process, excitement and enthusiasm for change wanes and anxiety manifests itself as risks and complications are identified. During these periods purchase probability reduces below 50%. CEB found that those buyers who encountered video and social media with positive emotional messaging during this period were much less prone to this "unhappy valley" of falling purchase probability. This messaging overcame some of the fear and anxiety, reassuring buyers that "it would all be alright".

The anxiety and fear caused by the risks we have identified results in many buyers failing to act, even when they recognise both organisation and individual needs.

> “Only 30% of brands selected by buyers were unknown to them at the start of the process”

Fig 6: Emotional Connection of Customers to Brands



Source: CEB/Motista Survey; CEB analysis

48% of the CEB survey of b2b buyers acknowledged that they had failed to speak up about a new solution that they wanted to purchase. The most common reason for the failure to act was the risk of losing respect and credibility, and this almost doubled as the size of the Decision Making Unit increased to four or more people. The immediate pain of change and short-term considerations such as the personal investment (time and effort) of a purchase as well as the associated risks overshadowed longer term gains.

Brand Familiarity

This fear that is experienced by buyers has other impacts too. Buyer familiarity with the brand at the start of the buying process is significantly more important than the price. Only 30% of brands successfully chosen by b2b buyers were unknown to them at the start of the process. Buyers seek reassurance and overcome their fears by going to suppliers they know and perceive to be low-risk. The Buyersphere report identified the most important feeling that buyers experienced relating to the brands that were chosen was confidence in their ability to deliver. This was followed by feeling that they were paying a reasonable price (not necessarily the lowest) that they were valued as customers, and that they had a good rapport with the salesperson.

How can Businesses Adapt?

There are significant benefits and competitive advantage to be had if your business understands and adapts to the recent changes to the b2b buying process, and the motivations and environment of the b2b Buyer. Sales and marketing strategies can reach buyers in an effective way with the relevant expertise, technology and techniques.

Your competitors will increasingly have understood (at least partially) how to do this as it becomes the new normal.



Focusing on the Buyer

Identify the Decision Maker

We have looked at the general features of buying in b2b organisations, but the detail will vary depending upon your own market, existing customers and prospects.

Understand Market Sectors

There may be some of your target market sectors where a successful sale or new business win can have a huge impact on revenue. Many businesses have a small number of customers making up a large proportion of revenues. These market sectors may however, have a small number of prospects with many competitors chasing after them and strong existing supplier partnerships. Because of these large deal sizes and their complexity (along with the high risks of changing supplier) the purchase process may also be long and drawn out.

In addition to the highest value sectors it is often sensible to balance the distribution of sales and effort to include those (that are profitable) and can provide a larger number of opportunities. These may be easier and quicker to close too, even if they are less headline-grabbing.

If there is more than one market segment then the Decision Making Unit should be understood for each, along with the stages and timescales of the buying cycle, and the culture of those organisations within it. Detailed analysis should give an understanding of who buyers are. There are typically a number of individuals involved; complexity and size of the Decision Making Unit is correlated to the strategic impact of the purchase and the level of investment required. Different stakeholders should be assessed to understand their role within the organisation, their level of power and influence and the timing of their involvement during the buying process.

Marketing programmes and approaches can be designed that will reach and influence each stakeholder role. The business leader is often very influential and involved throughout (particularly at the beginning and end of the process), finance may be involved (but often not until the end). Each stakeholder will have individual motivations and needs as well as those of the organisation.

Create Buyer Personas

Developing Buyer Personas enable your business to have a common understanding of buyers you are trying to influence and put a face to them. This can ensure a coherent approach to your communications and engagement with specific stakeholders. This should give you clarity on who the person is, what they value, and how best to speak to them.

According to Marketo research, those businesses that are most successful in adapting to the new buyer:

- Achieve 50% more sales-ready leads at 33% lower cost per lead
- Reduce the percentage of marketing-generated leads that are ignored by sales (from as high as 80% to as low as 25%)
- Raise win rates on marketing-generated leads (7% higher) and reduce “no decisions” (6% lower)
- Have more sales representatives reach their targets (9% higher)
- Have a shorter ramp up time for new sales representatives (10% decrease)

To adapt, sales and marketing functions must be closely co-ordinated, with a sophisticated lead generation and lead nurturing strategy deployed using content that provides value to the buyer.

Fig 7: Buyer persona developed for a supplier of HR software

Buyer Persona Profile Card



My name is Helen

Role, reporting and Experience
I am the Human Resources Manager reporting to the Managing Director of the business. I have a BA in HR Management, have 5 years experience in HR roles and have been in post for less than a year

Organisation Profile
The organisation is a privately owned Facilities Management and Cleaning business. It was started 20 years ago by the current owner and employs 200 staff. The Company has many part-time operators working remotely on client sites with a high turnover of staff.

Organisational Needs
- There is a need for systems and controls to ensure that all legal obligations are met
- Errors in wage calculations need to be reduced or even eliminated
- Improvements are needed to reduce errors in tracking holiday and working hours
- There is a need to improve staff retention to reduce recruitment and training costs

Organisational Culture
- The organisation is heavily influenced by the MD of the business. He is sceptical of the benefits of investing in new technology and views HR legislation as "red tape" and damaging to business.
- The business is cautious and risk averse although the MD is prepared to cautiously invest in areas where he can see a financial return
- The organisation is not showy and operates from a small out of town industrial unit

Individual Needs
- Tools and systems to enable me to deliver a compliant HR function
- Systems that enable me to effectively manage HR tasks, such as annual leave requests, time sheets and staff scheduling
- Access to information about up to date employment law and legislation

Emotional Factors
- I find it difficult to convince the MD that spending funds on training, development and improved systems will bring benefits
- When I do implement projects I am worried about the consequences of them going wrong
- I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the problems caused by salary errors, and feel upset for the staff affected

Power and Influence
- The MD is aware of the challenges but I am the one who has responsibility for this area and am required to put forward my recommendations.
- I will have an influence on the decision; however the final decision will be made by the MD

Preferred Information Types
- Recognised industry expert guides and articles
- HR law and legislation updates

Preferred Information Sources
- Websites - Industry associations & suppliers
- Blogs and newsletters via email
- Webinars and events

A Buyer Persona will typically include demographic information (such as experience, background and education), job role and seniority, the problems that they have that you can help them resolve, their goals and values, and their common objections. Understanding the preferred information sources, types of information that will be relevant for them and emotional factors that will impact their decisions will also be of benefit. You can use this knowledge of what is likely to be of importance in the buyer's decision making process to provide the relevant information that will help them and demonstrate your expertise.

Buyer Personas can be produced to a high level of detail over time however even basic personas provide structure to the communication and content strategy.

Develop Online Presence

Your website is a key resource for prospective customers at all stages of the buying process. If you are able to attract the buyer to you close to the "Zero Moment of Truth" then it will stand you in good stead, since brand awareness at the start of the process is so closely linked to success.

Your website will be used to assess the capability of your business, evaluate the culture, and as an information resource during the buyer's self–education.

> "70% of b2b marketers are producing more content than in previous years"

Optimising the user experience and navigation to guide buyers to the right information quickly and easily so that they access what they need not only gets the relevant message across more effectively but will also keep them engaged with your materials longer. In the Digital Age attention spans are short and if a visitor to your website cannot find the information they need they will quickly move on.

Content has become vital to supporting meaningful engagements with your target audiences across all channels. It can be created in a huge range of formats:

- **email**
- **blog posts**
- **articles**
- **eBooks**
- **whitepapers**
- **videos**
- **webinars**
- **FAQs**

Different forms of content may be appropriate for different audiences that you are trying to reach or their stage in the buying process. In most cases using a number of different formats helps to cover a broader section of your market, provides appeal to different personal preferences and enables an objective assessment of what is most effective.

Optimise for Search Engines

The changes to search engine algorithms over recent years have meant that it is now far more difficult to artificially manipulate search engine rankings with "black hat" SEO techniques. There is a close alignment now between the sites that are high ranking on organic results and those that provide the most relevant, comprehensive and valuable information for that search term.

Web pages need to be analysed carefully to ensure that they are optimised for indexing by the search engines. The quality of the content, the number of pages, unique imagery, rich media such as video, regular updates and links from high quality referrals (such as trade bodies) are important for you to be found through organic searches.

Develop Content Marketing

The purpose of content marketing is to provide information that will support the audience and meet their needs during their self-education and research. Firstly therefore it should be emphasised that when creating content it must be centred on the needs of your customers or prospects, giving them useful information and helping them to answer their questions. It should explore problems or concerns that they have and not be promotional or focussed on your organisation, products or services.

Content marketing has become a key component of marketing budgets, with 70% of b2b marketers producing more content in 2015 than in the previous year according to the Content Marketing Benchmark Report. In many cases however the research found that volume continues to increase, no matter how effective organisations feel they are at content marketing. The noise buyers experience from content is therefore getting louder and louder, but much of it is of poor quality.

Buyers filter out all but the most relevant and useful material. Customer-centred, relevant and educational communication will be valued by buyers and will help create or support the relationship you build with them.

Document Strategy and Measure Results

A low percentage of organisations have a documented content strategy and even fewer are able to track the Return on Investment of activity they undertake.

> "The best way to build credibility and trust is by sharing useful information"

By documenting the strategy, implementing it in a structured way and using specialist tools to track the effectiveness of particular content and distribution channels, you are able to optimise effectiveness.

A documented content strategy should define target markets and their associated Personas, the categories of content that you intend to create and the themes that are going to be of the most interest to the target audience. For each content item there should be a clear understanding of:

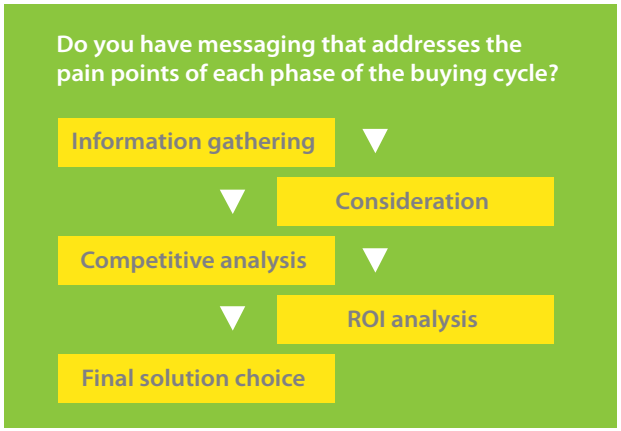
- what are you looking to achieve with it?
- how is it relevant to the audience?
- what are the measures of success?
- how can the reach be maximised?

A detailed content plan can be put in place with an associated calendar.

Create Content to Meet Specific Needs

The content strategy should mirror the information that you have identified is being sought out by buyers. By mapping the Decision Making Unit and understanding which stakeholders are engaged in the purchase process and at what stage, you can create content specific to their needs.

Fig 8: Addressing each part of the buying cycle



It is important to recognise that different information is sought at different stages of the buying process so content needs to be provided that meets these requirements as they develop.

We have seen that buyers are not seeking out corporate brochures. The most authoritative content for buyers is external industry analysis but this is rarely accessed. Sharing third party content that has referred to your organisation can be highly effective if you distribute it more widely. Technical specifications, external reports and expert interviews are the most influential types of information accessed by b2b buyers. Pricing information is sought by buyers, so providing a guide to pricing can maintain the engagement of website visitors.

Overcome the Fear and Anxiety of b2b Buyers

B2b buying is high risk so it is important to provide reassurance and address the buyer's fear if you are an untested supplier. The best way to build credibility and trust is by sharing useful information. If you can help frame the discussion and demonstrate an understanding of the commercial challenges that the audience experiences then your company will be seen as a trusted advisor and thought leader. If buyers believe that your company understands their problems and knows how to solve them, this helps reduce the feelings of fear and can make a big difference in being selected for consideration and purchase.

Create Emotional Messages

Content that is emotionally compelling is effective at all stages of the buying process. Often suppliers will provide more technical and feature-led messaging in the middle of the buying process.

> "Content that is emotionally compelling is effective at all stages of the buying process"

This period is characterised by a slump in buyer confidence as unforeseen difficulties and challenges are realised. The CEB study identified that this slump could be significantly mitigated by messaging designed to evoke a highly personal and emotional response. Emotional messaging can help to overcome inertia, reduce the length of the buying process and address the fact that buyers are reluctant to disrupt the status quo.

Emotional messages may for example emphasise to buyers the costs and pain of their current situation. It can also help them to visualise how they would feel when realising the benefits of a successful purchase.

Invest in Good Copywriting and Design

The copywriting and design elements required for content are significant subjects in their own right. Creating high overall quality of content is determined as much by the style and the support of appropriate design as it is by informative subject matter.

The copywriting and design elements can make the content much more accessible and should be appropriate for the category and theme of the piece.

Personalise Content

Personalisation of content has been shown to provide a significant uplift in successful outcomes (for example higher open and click through rates from email marketing). Sophisticated personalisation can even be deployed to provide dynamic website content – presenting tailored content that will be of the most relevance for the visitor.

Build a Consistent Brand that Highlights your Culture

All of the content that you create should be consistent and support your Brand. The interactions with your materials are cementing a perception of your organisation in the mind of the buyer. This awareness should enable you to be seen as a capable and trustworthy supplier. It will also be giving the buyer an understanding of your culture and values that they will assess when considering you as a partner.

Social Media

The research suggests that investment in the common Social Media (Twitter and Facebook) will provide limited benefit in a b2b context. Industry forums can be a trusted source of information so may prove to be a valuable route, while LinkedIn and Google+ may be worth limited investment and monitoring as their adoption becomes wider.

The distribution strategy for your content should include social media as with many modern tools it is easy to include this channel with little additional cost, and it can help to maintain brand awareness. Social media should not divert significant resources from other areas.

Aligning Sales and Marketing

We must not lose sight of the need to convert interested buyers into revenue generating new customers. The engagement that a buyer has with marketing materials and content is likely to be much deeper and broader than it would have been in the traditional model but the sales function still remains essential in achieving new business wins. When a salesperson meets the buyer, a perception of the organisation will already be in place from the touch points they have had with the branding, marketing messages, website content and design. These experiences should be consistent and then supported and enhanced by the salesperson.

Connect Sales and Marketing Departments

Integration of the sales and marketing approach is therefore fundamental to successfully converting leads. Increasingly, there is a move for organisations to target both sales and marketing functions on revenue achieved to ensure close alignment between them.

The marketing team should ensure that the sales team are kept informed when campaigns are delivered while the sales team should feedback to the marketing team with success stories, lead quality and conversion rates. The integration of customer relationship management and marketing automation tools enable visibility of end to end conversion rates for each marketing activity.

Sales and Marketing should meet regularly to share information on customer profiling, communications and conversion rates and in particular to set joint objectives. Teams should work together on defining the scoring of leads and the definition of Marketing Qualified Leads and Sales Qualified Leads.

> "The marketing experiences of the buyer should be consistent and enhanced by the sales person."

Ensure Effective Lead Transfer

Effective communication and clarity over the point at which a Marketing Qualified Lead becomes a Sales Qualified Lead ensures that leads are not wasted.

There should be a two way process so that leads that are engaged by Sales but are not yet ready can be efficiently passed back to Marketing. These leads can then be nurtured until the point that they become sales qualified.

Sales can only be generated from a lead when it is sales qualified so having a clear process that maximises the number of leads reaching this stage increases Sales and Marketing efficiency.

> 70-80% of leads rejected by Sales go on to make a purchase within 2 years

Forrester Research identified a b2b lead management gap in many traditionally structured organisations with separate marketing and sales silos.

Up to 80% of the leads generated by Marketing are ignored by sales teams. This problem is due to sales teams cherry-picking the leads they perceive to be the best quality because many of them are not yet receptive to direct sales engagement.

This is particularly wasteful because research has identified that 70-80% of the unqualified leads rejected by Sales go on to make a purchase within two years, either from that organisation or from a competitor. These recycled leads are therefore highly valuable. Effective lead nurturing can reduce the level of leads wasted to below 25%. It also ensures that if after further evaluation by Sales a lead is returned to Marketing since it is not yet sales qualified, that it will continue to be developed until ready to re-engage.

Fig 9: Traditional Separate Marketing and Sales Approach



Up to 80% of leads are wasted

Fig 10: Modern Marketing and Sales Integrated



Less than 25% of leads are wasted
Marketing only pass over Sales Qualified Leads and continue nurturing Marketing Qualified Leads. Sales are able to return leads that are not yet ready, which then continue to be nurtured.

Marketing Qualified Leads are prospects that have indicated a definite interest in your company's products or services. After further engagement or qualification these may become Sales Qualified Leads where they have reached the stage that it is appropriate for direct sales engagement.

> Effective lead nurturing can reduce the level of leads rejected to below 25%

Implement Lead Nurturing

Automated marketing systems can apply scoring of leads based on both firmographic data (sector, size, location) as well as behavioural attributes (which content has been viewed, how many times etc). This can enable the sales function to focus their efforts on those prospects that are ready for that interaction and where the expertise and skills of the salesperson are best utilised to close deals.

Research from Forrester, Gartner and DemandGen confirms that although there is a significant resource and financial investment required to deploy and implement Lead Nurturing effectively, that it does have a significant impact on outcomes.

The impact is typically:

- 50% more sales ready leads at 33% lower cost
- 10% or greater increase in revenue in 6-9 months
- 20% increase in sales opportunities versus non-nurtured leads

Lead nurturing means more than an occasional phone call or email promoting the company, products or services. Modern marketing automation software can undertake complex personalised communication providing information and educating potential customers about how they can resolve issues they face.

Email is the backbone of this communication but many solutions can post and track social media updates and interaction, website visits, and downloads. These systems capture detailed firmographic and behavioural information that can then drive fine-tuned personalisation of messaging. The scoring of leads indicates those that are proving most interested in the content or the business, and closest to the point where they may be ready to engage directly with Sales.

> Human interaction proves a vital part of the nurturing and qualification process

Ensure Human Interaction is Integrated into the Process

Human interaction (over the phone) typically proves a vital part of the lead nurturing and qualification process. The deployment of marketing automation enables communication to be focused on those leads that score highly (due to multiple interactions), or on those that undertake specific pre-determined actions (such as downloading price information).

Targeted telemarketing to these Marketing Qualified Leads results in high conversion rates to very good quality Sales Qualified Leads. Where the lead is not yet ready to become sales qualified the telemarketing call can capture important information and intelligence about that prospect that can enhance personalisation of the nurture campaign. This nurture campaign continues until a lead becomes re-qualified in the future.

Changing the Sales Approach

> "High performing sales people are able to challenge assumptions made by buyers and propose alternative solutions"

With the changes in how b2b buyers research and source new suppliers, Sales need to adapt their approach to be successful.

We have seen that the alignment with Marketing needs to be closer than ever before and sales interaction needs to be congruent with the marketing messages. There are other ways however that Sales need to change to be successful.

Keep Sales Ahead of Buyers

Buyers are far more highly educated and knowledgeable than in the past so it is essential that your sales team keeps pace with and exceeds this level of expertise to be able to engage buyers effectively. Sales also need to understand in detail the environment in which their potential customers are working, the commercial pressures and challenges they face. CEB Research that was highlighted in Harvard Business Review suggests that the highest performing b2b salespeople prioritise those opportunities that demonstrate a potential to change rather than a potential to buy. These individuals are able to challenge the assumptions that are made by buyers and propose alternative solutions.

A high level of sophistication and understanding is required to persuade buyers to rethink their requirements. This understanding must extend to the customer's commercial drivers and enable these salespeople to demonstrate how their solution could provide greater benefits than the buyer had originally anticipated or specified. Instead of matching a solution to fit with the buyer's requirements they provide insight and coach the buyer towards a solution that they had not considered. If done well, this can mean that other competitors are discounted.

Maximise Value from your Sales Team

The cost of business development professionals has escalated dramatically. It is also difficult to find those with the necessary levels of sophistication, skill and knowledge to be a high performer in the modern environment. Providing the right level of marketing support to the field sales team enables them to focus on what they (and you) want to do – close deals. By ensuring that sophisticated marketing strategies are in place, generating and nurturing leads effectively it is possible to ensure that salespeople are able to focus only on the high quality Sales Qualified Leads that they can engage productively.

By assessing their needs closely an organisation can often reduce the scale of the sales function, yet increase its effectiveness – potentially freeing up the budget necessary for investment to generate high quality content, deploy marketing automation and to ensure that leads are nurtured and reach the agreed standard to become sales qualified.

Build an Effective Database

Customer relationship management systems linked to marketing automation platforms allow you to track the detailed interactions that individuals have with your organisation and prioritise contacting leads based on their behaviour. The gain in the effectiveness of targeting and communication relies upon a dataset of known prospects being built up.

Undertake Lead Generation

Lead generation is needed to start this process and provide a validated and opted-in dataset. There are a number of ways that this can be undertaken. There are a myriad of digital advertising options available to target buyers and generate their interest in useful content. In order to download content from a landing page the buyer will typically exchange their contact information and by doing so opt-in to become part of the lead nurturing programme.

Traditional high volume email marketing can also be used (where the objective is to encourage the download of valuable content in exchange for their contact information rather than just prompting an immediate sales enquiry).

Lists can be sourced for this email activity that enables the targeting of particular vertical markets, organisation sizes, locations or job functions.

Telemarket to Build Data

Invariably the available raw data to target buyers is incomplete. It may be that specific roles are not identified, contact information (particularly individual email details) and qualifiction information is unavailable. Relatively small numbers of customers and potential customers impact the success of b2b businesses, so market intelligence about the individual buyers and the needs of each of them is very valuable.

Professional and skilled telemarketing can prove a memorable form of communication and is highly effective to develop this database. Because of the human interaction it can be used to qualify organisations requirements, identify Decision Making Unit stakeholders and elicit useful information and market intelligence.

Telemarketing using appropriate skilled staff and technology to capture information can create a database including:

- Qualified organisations that have a requirement for your products or services
- Relevant buyers in each organisation within your target market
- Full buyer contact information
- Where the organisation is in the buying process
- Existing contract situation and competitor relationships
- Current pain points

Once identified and engaged directly in a conversation these buyers can be added to the lead nurturing activity. These buyers have an understanding of your organisation's capability and have agreed to receive your marketing communications.

There is no substitute for human interaction to build this database.

This information is not available from other sources, and is valuable. Security measures and contractual protection should be in place to protect the organisation from having it copied and sold or supplied to competitors.

Conclusions

There has been a shift in the way that purchasers buy b2b products and services. B2b buyers delay talking directly to potential suppliers while they undertake their own detailed research, evaluate their needs and assess how these can be met.

B2b purchases have significant risks for the buyer and are evaluated on an organisational, individual, cultural and emotional basis. Successful sellers are not winning on the basis of offering low prices (even though buyers say this is what they want), but these sellers do convey the reliability and trustworthiness of their organisation which alleviates buyer's fear and anxiety. Much of the differentiation of successful suppliers is their ability to create emotional drivers for buyer behaviour. You should use emotional messaging throughout the buying process to remind buyers of the pain points of their current situation and how these will be alleviated by working with you.

Decision Making Units are complicated and made up of a number of individuals. They can be understood by mapping those within each target sector and creating personas that identify key stakeholders and the associated features of this audience. Members of the Decision Making Unit have different levels of influence and are involved at different times, so you should target them appropriately, for example business leaders are much more influential than procurement departments for many significant b2b purchases.

Modern marketing techniques using marketing automation and high quality content marketing can engage your buyers, demonstrate capability and create familiarity with your brand at an early stage. You should invest in these techniques and the content that adds value to the buyer. This approach is much more effective than high volume scattergun distribution of poor quality material.

Your content marketing strategy should be documented, with a structured content plan and calendar. The success of marketing activity should be closely tracked to ensure that improvements in targeting can be made as campaigns develop and the results are evaluated. Content marketing can be created in a huge variety of forms and a range of these will maintain interest and appeal to different personalities or buyers.

Relevant information for each stage of the buying process and for relevant stakeholders should be easily available to find online. The structure and navigation of your website should help buyers to find what they need easily. Social media is not widely used in the b2b purchase process so you should not invest heavily in engagement on popular platforms. Industry forums are widely respected as an information source though and LinkedIn and Google+ may provide some benefit.

Careful attention should be paid to the copywriting and design as well as to the insight that your content provides. Good copy and design makes content accessible and is part of creating a consistent brand and demonstrating your culture. Businesses will often want to buy from culturally similar businesses so you should understand the culture of key customer segments and mirror these where possible.

Brand awareness early in the buying process has a significant impact on a successful outcome for the seller. Building an effective lead nurturing programme will ensure that engagement is maintained and personalised to the buyer's needs. Tracking and monitoring buyer behaviour and interactions means that once they have reached a certain level of awareness you can engage them directly over the phone. These telemarketing engagements with buyers are highly targeted and, as there is an established interest prior to the call, will have a high conversion rate to Sales Qualified Leads. If after the telephone discussion the lead meets agreed criteria it can be passed to Sales, otherwise it can continue to be nurtured as a Marketing Qualified Lead until it does reach this stage.

Your Sales and Marketing teams need to work closely together, particularly to ensure that they have common objectives and agreed lead scoring and lead transfer mechanisms. This reduces the number of leads passed to Sales that are wasted as they are not yet ready to engage in a commercial discussion.

Sales teams should be highly knowledgeable in the commercial realities of the buyer as well as your own solutions and understand in detail how these fit together to provide the buyer with business benefit . This enables high performing salespeople to disrupt the buying process, demonstrating how their solutions can provide value that was unanticipated by the buyer.

The only way that these new sales and marketing techniques can be applied is by building an opted-in dataset of relevant prospective buyers. Lead generation will be necessary for you to build this database that can then be used for content marketing and lead nurturing activity.

Lead generation can take the form of a wide range of digital advertising and marketing. This promotes your content and increases awareness of it to target groups. The objective is for those that find the material of interest to provide their details and opt in to your marketing campaign. Prospects can also be reached directly. Particularly where the number of target organisations and potential buyers is limited (common in b2b markets) direct engagement can be highly effective.

Large organisations with sizeable marketing budgets may look to develop the skills required (include copywriting, design, telemarketing, marketing automation and social media) internally within their marketing team.

This is impractical for many mid-tier organisations however, where working with a professional outsourced partner (that builds a deep understanding of their needs and who has the expertise and team to work effectively on their behalf) is far more cost-effective and efficient.

Data can be purchased to build lists for direct engagement by email marketing, however inevitably publicly available data is incomplete. In these circumstances you should consider high quality telemarketing programmes to build the target database of individual opted-in buyers. Human Interaction is memorable to the buyer and can elicit a range of useful information enabling your database to then be used to deliver more personalised content (which is more effective). Telemarketing also provides a more complete dataset with personal contact information, qualification of needs and identification of the stage in the buying cycle.

An investment in a telephone validated database developed specifically for you creates a valuable business asset. Like any business asset it should be carefully protected. Salespeople often see the value in this type of data and may try to take it with them if they leave your business. IT security and contractual protection should be considered to minimise the risk of this data falling into the wrong hands.

To develop a powerful marketing infrastructure that is adapted to the New Rules of the Game and supports an efficient sales team requires a variety of capabilities. As well as insight into your customers and market, expertise is also needed in copywriting, design, marketing automation, database analysis, web design and development, digital marketing and telemarketing.

For large organisations with significant marketing budgets and teams it is feasible to evolve their internal capabilities to meet the needs of the new buyer and buying environment. For mid-tier or smaller organisations this is achieved most cost-effectively by working with an outsourced partner who has the expertise and team to work effectively on their behalf in some or all of these areas.

The Rules of the Game may be new, but sellers can understand and adapt to these changes. With the right resources and skills, sellers can connect with b2b buyers, add value and build partnerships. Getting this right means both sides win.

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About Beanstalk

At Beanstalk we help our customers to win new business. We are an integrated marketing agency; providing a full range of b2b telemarketing, content marketing, marketing automation, lead nurturing and lead generation services. We are a professional team of marketing, sales, design, content and digital marketing specialists.

Beanstalk can identify, engage and nurture prospective customers on your behalf; generating high quality Sales Qualified Leads and Appointments. We create and manage qualified prospect databases that are very specific to each customer's needs. These databases become critical business assets that underpin all of their marketing activity and form the basis of the future sales pipeline.

Beanstalk builds long term customer partnerships. To find out more about how we can deliver profitable sales growth for you please call us on **0845 474 2047** or visit **www.beanstalkmarketing.co.uk** for more sales and marketing insight.

