B2B RESEARCH

B2B Marketing



How good is your digital strategy?

In association with: Google

HOW GOOD IS YOUR DIGITAL STRATEGY?

B2B Marketing recently joined forces with Google to find out whether B2B companies were winning enough business online. The resultant research project revealed an industry committed to a digital future but still struggling to fully embrace all it offers.

This paper was written by Alex Aspinall, head of content at B2B Marketing. It is based on research carried out with 118 mid-to senior-level B2B marketers in August 2014.

The vast majority working in the B2B marketing world have a detailed understanding of the increasingly significant role digitisation has had on their business' fortunes over the last decade. There was an overwhelming consensus in our research regarding the importance of digital.

Of those surveyed, 80 per cent agree that a quality online presence is essential for their business to succeed. This figure rose to 87 per cent when the focus shifted to future business growth. These figures tell a pretty clear tale; business success and digital sophistication go hand-in-hand. Few would argue with this position.

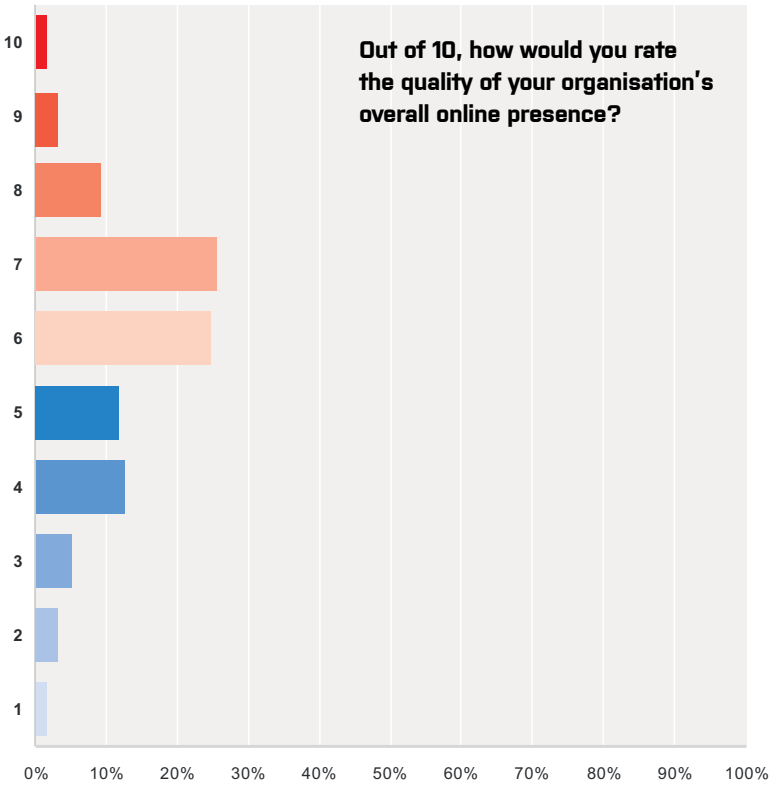
There's an awareness out there that you should have a decent website serving relevant content, that inbound marketing is the way to go, and that SEO, email and social media are all important elements of getting digital right. But that doesn't mean all B2B brands and the marketers charged with representing them are going in to battle armed with recourse to sophisticated digital strategies. Simply 'being present' is not enough. You need a plan.

Many marketers, it seems, are still operating blind. This is a cause for concern, and it's this under-preparedness for the future that this research project and the organisations behind it are aiming to tackle.

Mediocrity reigns

Our research set out to garner an understanding, initially in the most general terms, of how well B2B marketers think they are doing at present in terms of creating a digital presence for their brands. Unsurprisingly, respondents provided a very mixed set of responses.

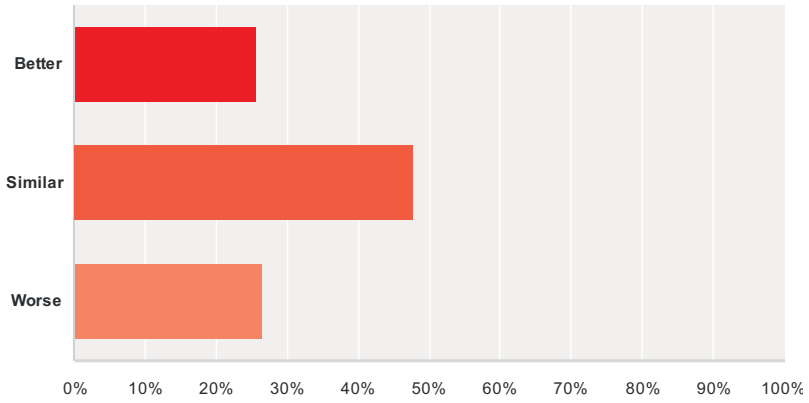
Some were very happy with how they were doing – 14 per cent gave the quality of their organisation's overall online presence eight, nine or 10 out of 10, while others were considerably more negative (10 per cent gave themselves either one, two or three out of 10). The vast majority were somewhere in between, with 51 per cent of the respondent group awarding their digital presences either six or seven out of 10, and the remaining 25 per cent selecting either four or five out of 10.



The clear message here is, barring the exceptional few with nine and 10 out of 10, there is considerable room for improvement. That should be a call to arms in itself; if your brand isn't already on its way to becoming one of the pace setters, it's possible you, your colleagues and your senior management team could change things and see real benefit. There is an opportunity to stand out from the crowd.

What is perhaps most concerning, though, is that the intensity with which people feel the need to make these changes isn't necessarily as pronounced as it could be. When asked to evaluate whether their organisation's online presence is better, similar or worse than that of their closest competitors, almost half (48 per cent) said it was of a similar standard. Only 26 per cent thought their online presence was better than their competitors'. This means almost three-quarters of B2B brands need to up their digital game, either to catch-up with, or to leverage an advantage over, their closest competitors.

How does your organisation's online presence compare to that of your closest competitors?



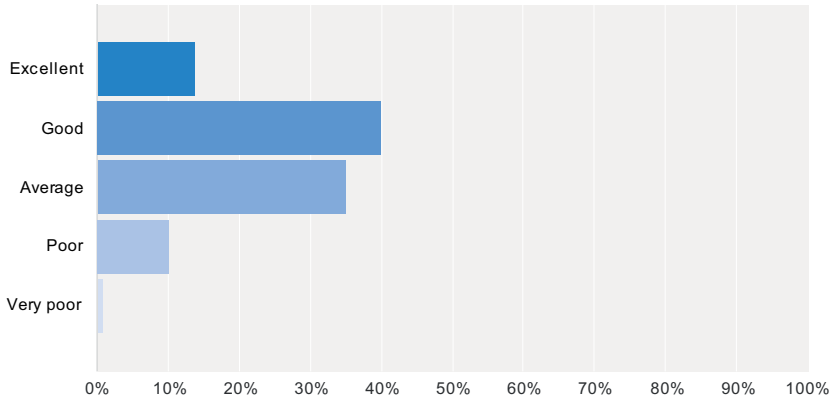
The motivations for these groups are different, but it would pay for all of them to re-invest and reassess their organisation's approach to digital marketing. The elite leading the way cannot afford to rest on their laurels, as their competitors should be looking at the examples they have set and should be hot on their heels. Those coasting, with digital presences of similar standards to their competitors, should see an opportunity to invest and stand out from the crowd, and those awarding their own efforts a one or two out of 10 – clearly – have a great deal of work to do to ensure their survival.

However, understanding the necessity, and a willingness to improve, aren't the only pre-requisites for developing better digital practices. There are so many interconnected areas making up the digital jigsaw these days that it can be confusing knowing exactly where to start. For these reasons, we sought to examine the specific areas in which B2B marketers feel they are doing well and highlight the areas with which they are most in need of assistance.

Strengths and weaknesses

There was a degree of confidence among respondents when it came to the their performance in areas such as the quality of their websites (where 54 per cent described their offerings as being either 'excellent' or 'good'), search (43 per cent), content marketing (41 per cent) and email marketing (39 per cent).

How would you rate the quality of your website?



There were more mixed responses when it came to social media – where, somewhat surprisingly, only 29 per cent described their social presence as being either 'excellent' or 'good' – and, tellingly, in digital strategy, where only 24 per cent spoke positively about their performance.

In fact, digital strategy attracted more attention at the other end of the spectrum, with 36 per cent describing their digital strategy planning as being either 'poor' or 'very poor'. Failures in this department were only eclipsed by the negative reviews people gave themselves when it came to proficiency with digital advertising techniques (where 48 per cent gave themselves either 'poor' or 'very poor'), and in mobile delivery (where the figure was a worrying 58 per cent).

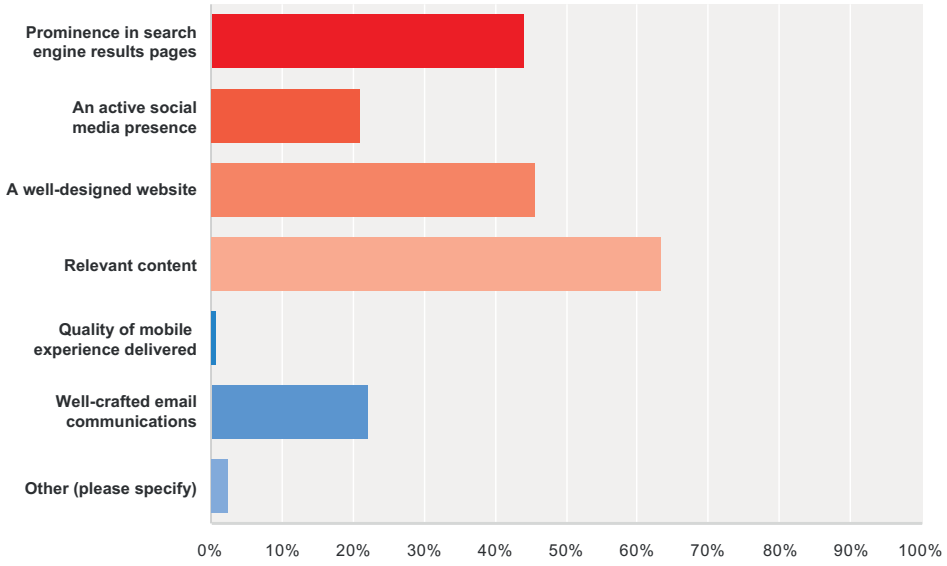
It's possible to suggest that failures in mobile and digital advertising are at least partially explainable by the fact these are two of the less well-established facets of the modern digital mix. While marketers are used to having to produce content, think about websites and send emails, most are less well-versed when it comes to satisfying the evolving demands of an audience growing increasingly picky about advertising and prospects and customers who expect to have content served as, when and where they demand. The temptation to focus on the areas in which you feel most comfortable and ignore considerations such as mobile, which is a trend that is not going away, and digital advertising (PPC and native, as well as more basic forms of display) could be incredibly detrimental.

Of course, the overriding message here is that by addressing the failings reported regarding strategic digital planning, other shortcomings should be better managed. By ensuring organisations are working with properly thought-out digital strategies, that cover areas of weakness such as digital advertising and mobile, as well as the areas where more success is already being enjoyed, is the best way for B2B organisations to start to improve their digital performance.

With this is mind; we sought to quantify how important various areas of digital marketing are perceived as being inside our respondent organisations. When asked to rate the importance of each of the areas outlined previously, the quality of an organisation's website came out on top with 43 per cent selecting it as the area perceived as being of most importance internally. An organisation's search performance (which includes both organic and paid-for search) came joint second, with digital strategy, and was selected by 17 per cent.

When we asked the respondents themselves to highlight the areas they regarded as being of most significance, similar responses were recorded, though the significance of content was amplified. Sixty-four per cent selected it as being one of the two most important areas of their digital work. This was followed by having a well designed website (46 per cent) and prominence in search engine results pages (44 per cent). That marketers flagged content, website quality and search performance as being the three most important areas of focus highlights their commitment to inbound marketing. All three are essential components of building a successful inbound strategy, and bear further examination.

Which two of the following would you regard as being the most important elements of your online presence? (select two):

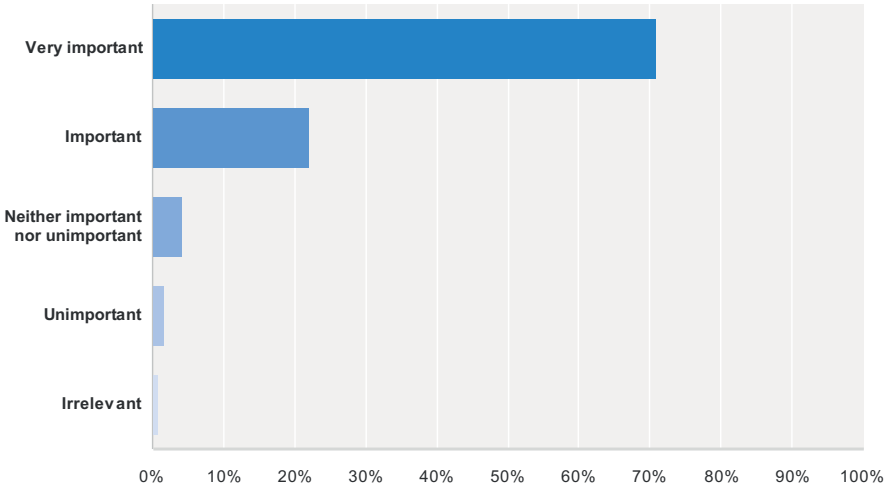


Traffic and leads

At its heart, inbound marketing is about generating relevant traffic and, as a result, workable leads. Of course this has to be facilitated by providing the people searching for your content with relevant, compelling reasons to engage, but without traffic turning into leads and – ultimately – sales, few would regard inbound marketing as being successful. For this reason, we sought to quantify just how important traffic and leads are in terms of being objectives towards which marketers are tasked with working.

Taking the growth of relevant traffic first, 46 per cent of respondents said it was very important and 43 per cent said it was important. But perhaps the most unequivocal response from the whole survey came when we asked marketers to report on how important generating new leads was for their organisation. Seventy-one per cent described it as being very important, while a further 22 per cent said it was important.

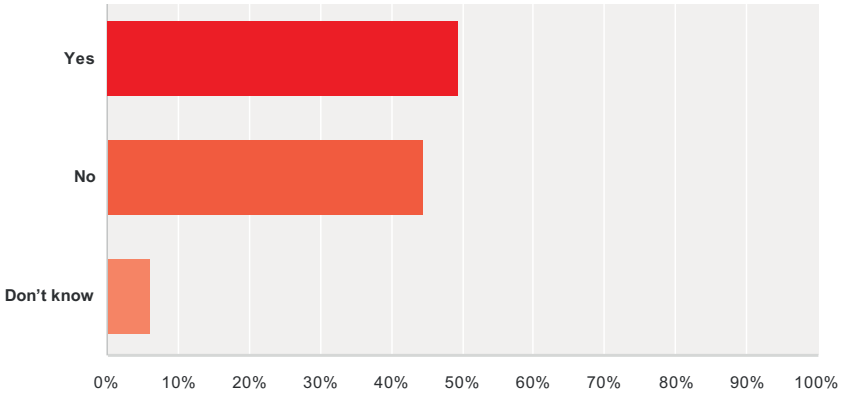
How important is generating new leads in your organisation?



Bearing in mind the level of importance attached to search performance, the stock placed in content marketing and the emphasis expressed regarding the need to drive relevant traffic and generate new leads, it would be a safe bet to imagine a majority of marketers being well on top of their organisation's SEO activities. But, rather alarmingly, this isn't necessarily the case.

Before going on to drill down into the types of traffic respondent websites were and weren't managing to attract, we asked a very simple question regarding whether respondent organisations had SEO strategies in place. According to our results only half of B2B marketers are currently working with strategic approaches to SEO. Fifty per cent did have SEO strategies in place, 44 per cent didn't and six per cent didn't know whether they did or not. Similarly, less than half (43 per cent) of respondents claimed they had a plan for strategic traffic growth.

Do you have an SEO strategy in place?

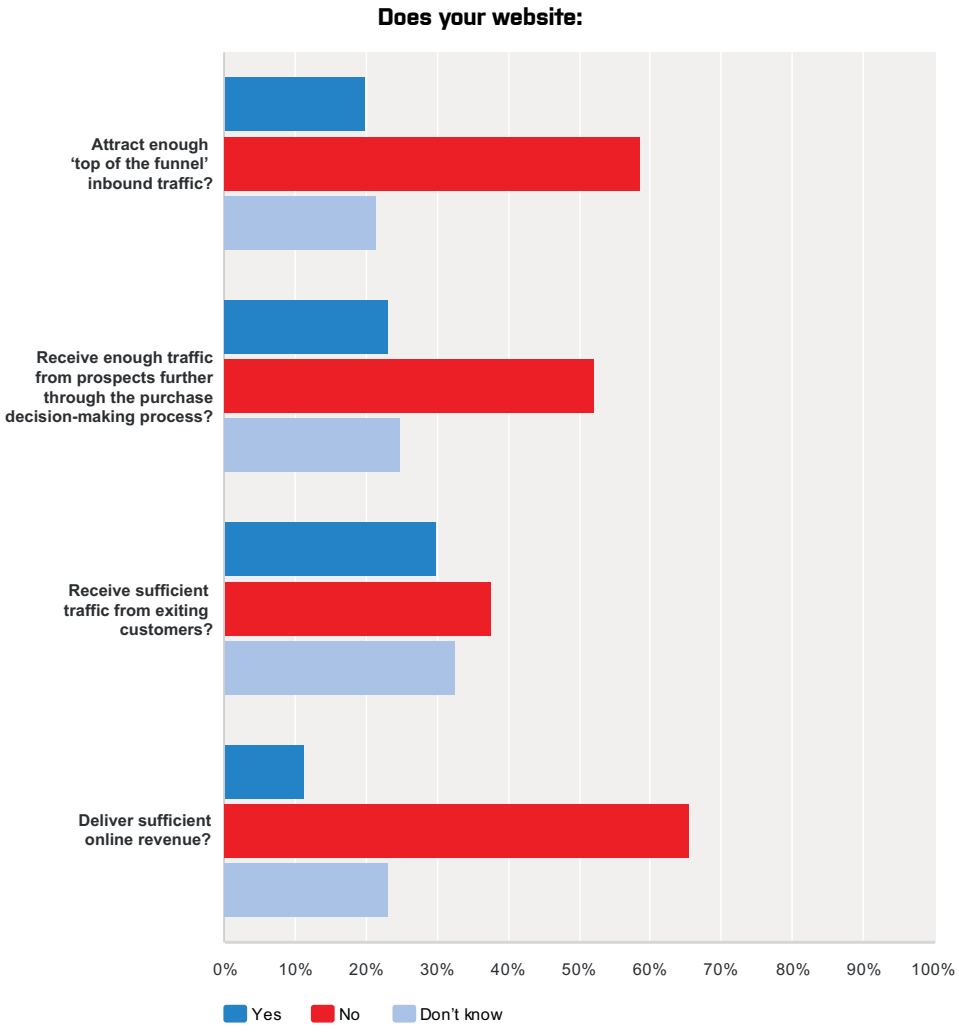


This lack of SEO and traffic growth planning comes as a surprise. The excuses offered previously regarding a lack of sophistication in mobile and digital advertising don't really apply here. B2B marketers have been dealing with SEO for many years now, and while industry developments do serve to move the goal posts every now and again, basic keyword activities and strategies should really be in place for brands looking to thrive in the current buying environment.

Marketers acknowledging the relevance of driving traffic and inbound techniques but failing to ensure SEO strategies are in place cannot expect to feel like they are on top of the traffic on their website. But at least they are happy to admit it. Less than a third (31 per cent) of marketers claimed to feel in control of the traffic flow coming to their website, 63 per cent said they didn't feel in control and the remaining six per cent weren't sure whether or not they were in control.

While accepting brands are far from being 'in control' of the selling/buying process in the digital era, it should still be possible – with recourse to effective digital strategies – to claim some level of ownership over the traffic hitting your site. For example, effective use of PPC solutions, implementing an SEO strategy and a basic understanding of the insights stored in Google Analytics should all help restore some semblance of order and predictability to the lottery that is web traffic acquisition.

And it seems such adjustments need to be made sooner rather than later. Another area many respondents agreed on was their failure to attract enough relevant traffic to their websites. We even split the traffic types up into different categories, such as 'top of the funnel traffic', 'prospect traffic' and 'existing customer traffic', to try and target specific pain points, but none of the traffic types were overly well represented.



Only 20 per cent of respondents claimed to be attracting sufficient top of the funnel traffic and 23 per cent were attracting enough prospect traffic, while a slightly more impressive 30 per cent were attracting enough attention from existing customers. The rest admitted that either they weren't managing to attract enough people to their site or they didn't know whether they were or not. Crucially, only 11 per cent of our respondents claimed their website was delivering sufficient online revenue. If there is one call to arms from this research, it is this. Websites and digital investments are not cheap. They are, however, essential costs of doing business in the 21st century. So, if you're going to have a website, you may as well focus on ensuring you're doing everything you can to see returns from it.

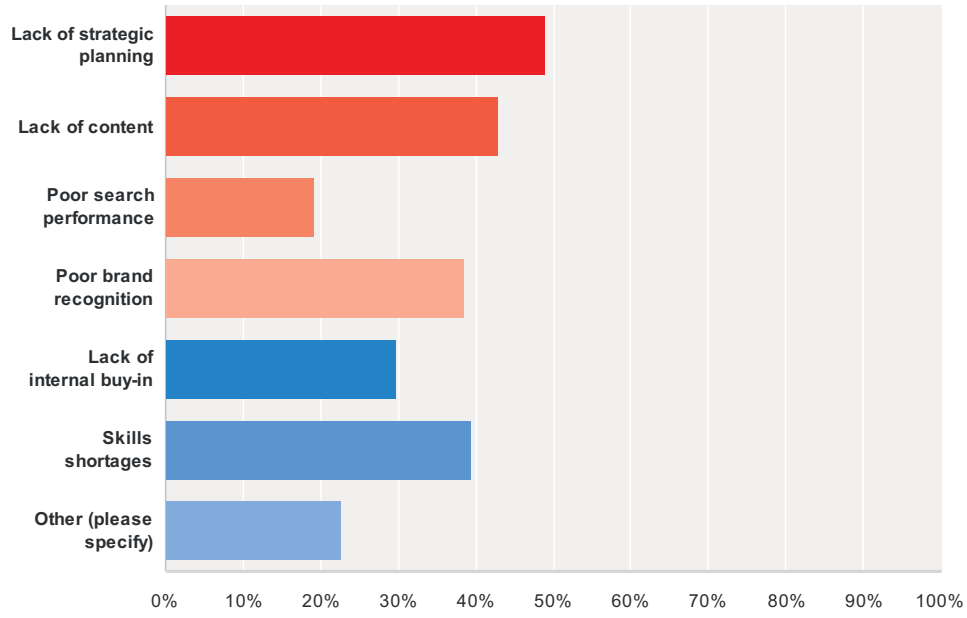
Barriers to success

In order to help the B2B brands struggling with digital it makes sense to assess how they are currently performing. But in order to affect change it's vital to address the factors behind their underperformance. Research projects such as this should provide marketers with the opportunity to stand back and assess exactly why and where things are going wrong. And, according to our research, there are a wide variety of reasons.

We asked respondents to reflect on the main challenges serving to limit their organisation's attempts to drive both online traffic and online leads. Given the two are very clearly linked it came as little surprise to see that results for the two questions closely mirrored each other. For the purposes of reporting here, we're highlighting the percentages associated with attempts to drive online leads.

The most commonly selected reason for a failure to generate enough online leads was lack of strategic planning. This option was selected by 46 per cent of respondents, and is very much in line with other conclusions highlighted earlier in this report. The second most selected issue (with 41 per cent of marketers highlighting it) was a lack of content, which is clearly going to have a detrimental effect on securing inbound leads. Additionally, skills shortages (selected by 31 per cent), poor brand recognition (29 per cent) and – unfortunately – lack of internal buy-in (28 per cent) all secured significant percentages of our respondents' frustrations. It's worth noting, also, that poor search performance was responsible for failures, according to 19 per cent of our respondents.

What challenges are currently serving to limit your organisation's attempts to drive online leads? (Tick all that apply)



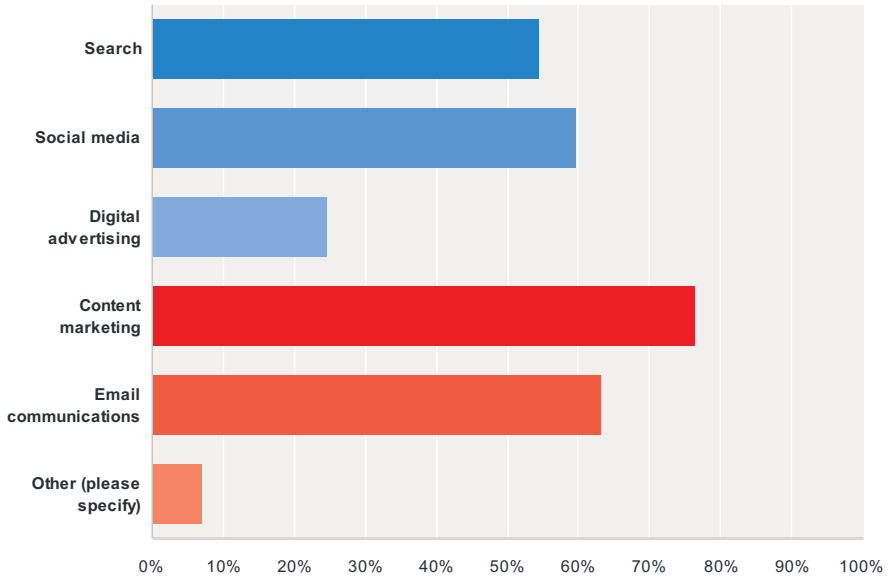
Taking each of these areas in turn, it's possible to see a lack of content, poor brand recognition and poor search performance as being the result of having poor digital planning and strategies in place. In a way, these problems are neatly grouped; address the strategy and the rest should follow. The importance of a properly structured digital strategy has been made clear several times in this report, and countless times elsewhere. It is no longer something businesses can afford to ignore.

Those marketers battling with a lack of internal buy-in, whether it's coming from above or below, have a very different battle on their hands. They are caught in a chicken and egg situation where colleagues must be shown the benefit of improving digital performance before they sign up to making it happen. If the resistance is coming from below, it is perhaps more easily remedied through training and mandate. Whereas, if the resistance is coming from above it becomes necessary to play a longer game, which – depending on the specific relationships in question – could require anything from constructing business cases, submitting competitive analysis documents and the exchange of frank words. One thing is clear though, those businesses fully committed to being digital in their outlook are better positioned to thrive in the current (and future) B2B buying environment.

Another factor that could be seen to be impeding digital success is marketers spending time and money on the wrong things. Again, this would be addressed with improved strategic planning and it did crop up a couple of times in the research. Such considerations clearly differ from business to business, as traffic and leads are drawn from different sources depending on the industry in question, but our research did flag inconsistencies with regard to resource allocation and the returns various channels delivered. In particular, email and social media swallowed significant amounts of time without necessarily being clearly linked to revenue generation. While not eschewing anything for the sake of it, marketers must allocate their time and budgets wisely if they are to make digital work for them.

With this in mind we asked respondents to highlight the areas of digital marketing they would be prioritising over the coming year as they sought to ramp up the volume of relevant traffic heading to their websites. Content marketing – predictably – secured favourable feedback, and was selected by 76 per cent of respondents as a priority area.

Which areas are likely to be prioritised by your organisation in the coming 12 months in terms of driving relevant traffic? (Tick all that apply)



The second most selected option was email, and is an interesting case in point. While it was highlighted as a priority area for the coming year by almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of our respondent pool, it was only flagged as being the largest driver of traffic by 17 per cent and as the driver of most revenue by 15 per cent. Depending on the size of their teams and the brand promises they have in place with customers, it may be worth some marketers re-evaluating their focuses here. Similarly, social media is set to be prioritised by 60 per cent. Is this definitely the correct strategy? In some cases it may well be, but not for everyone.

We also asked respondents to reflect on their organisation's use of digital advertising. A quarter (25 per cent) of our respondents stated digital advertising was going to be prioritised over the coming 12 months. This is a fairly significant proportion, and serves to highlight the changing face of digital ad spend in the UK and further afield.

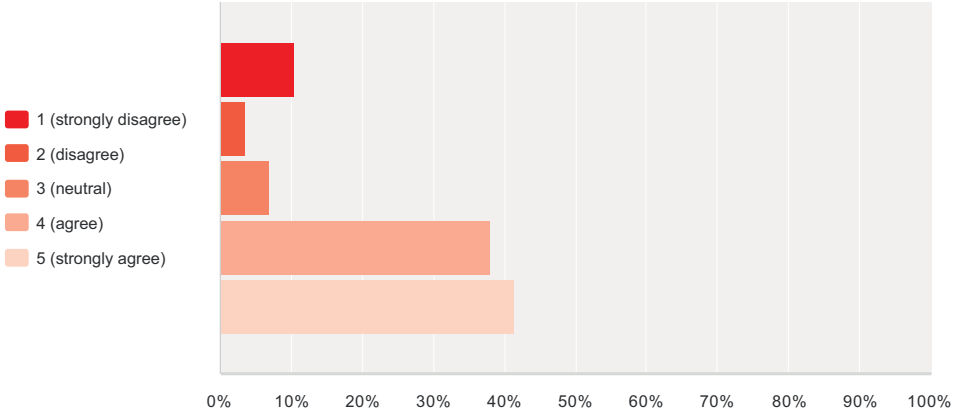
Everyone has grown tired of basic banner and skyscraper advertising, and our respondents are no exception. Such ad solutions were regarded as being unlikely to benefit respondent organisations by 56 per cent, whereas only 36 per cent felt similarly about native advertising. Marketers are significantly more optimistic about seeing returns from paid search, though. Fifty-seven per cent described paid-for search as being either likely or very likely to deliver for their organisation. This trend seems a neat fit with the focus described previously on increasing relevant traffic and generating new leads, and it's clear marketers are aware of the benefits targeted paid-for search can deliver, with only 27 per cent of our respondents ruling out taking advantage of it in the coming 12 months. When we asked those marketers to describe exactly what paid-for search success would look like for them, over half (56 per cent) stated that increased lead generation was what they were looking for.

Taking control

It's clear that – despite the changing digital landscape, the clouds of recession easing away and the renewed focus on emotion and storytelling – B2B marketers are still very much focused on increasing the quantity and quality of the traffic and leads they gather. Time and again we have heard the importance placed on these objectives, and it seems that many marketers are struggling to know exactly how to go about ensuring their time and digital spending are working as hard as they can in pursuit of these goals.

A lack of sophisticated digital strategy is hampering some B2B organisations moving forward, and is something that needs to be addressed as a priority. Improvement without strategic planning is – at best – unlikely. In order to focus the mind on what can seem like a rather daunting task, it's worth remembering a huge 79 per cent of our respondents agreed that visibility and being heard online is a major challenge for B2B marketers.

To what extent do you agree that visibility/being heard online is a major challenge for B2B marketers?



In many ways this is the main issue marketers are battling at present. The chances of securing the desired increases in relevant traffic and new leads increase significantly if brands are able to create a situation where theirs is the voice being heard. Marketers must create, and enforce where necessary, digital strategies that address this challenge. They can then start to prioritise and refine the activities that best contribute towards their goals, as well as their organisation's wider business objectives.

If it all seems a little daunting, then that's because it is. Digital represents both a huge challenge and opportunity for marketers and the brands they represent. The good news is that marketing is very well placed to 'own' digital. It already does in 55 per cent of organisations, and the department should be looking to lead in this area. Marketers must seize the opportunity, and drag their organisations into the era of digital selling.

About B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different formats. Its key products are:

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