Why most B2B marketing fails on trust – and what to do about it



Trust – it's the buzzword we hear daily in the B2B marketing space, with pretty much every marketing department and agency laying claim to it in some way.

Trust has changed, they say. Face-to-face trust has become digital, driven by the Covid pandemic, they say. Establish trust online and you'll market more effectively, they say.

None of this is wrong. But what few are articulating is that trust must be preceded by credibility – and this is where much B2B marketing communication just gets it plain wrong. Here's why.

B2B trust: a serious business

First of all, let's be clear: trust is crucial in B2B marketing, and we've written about this many times ourselves. But trust is a serious commodity, and the issue is that too many digital B2B marketing conversations simply lack the credibility on which trust is built. This all too often puts a halt to the buying timeline.

It works like this. Although communication might initially succeed in taking the buyer from unaware to aware, translating that into genuine interest – the next stage in the timeline – is all about credibility, and, the critical link from credibility to purchase (and, eventually, the final stage in the timeline - brand advocacy) is trust.

"That's always been the case in B2B marketing," we hear you say, and you'd be right - but the power balance has shifted immensely. Buyers are now far more in control of the buying process, because they acquire information and research their purchasing options digitally (over 80% of the decision process is now complete before the buyer even speaks to a seller, in fact).

The marketing function, for its part, is now far more in control of the customer acquisition and relationship process (because it manages the seller's digital presence and outreach, and that's what buyers are looking at), and credibility and trust are now qualities that must initially radiate remotely from a screen – not from a personable human in Sales.

And at the same time, whilst B2B buyers in a decision-making unit in the past numbered perhaps no more than three people on average, changes to how businesses are structured and organised mean this has increased to around seven people.

That's seven individuals with whom a B2B proposition has to make a credible connection, remotely, through a screen, before it can move forward to the next stage and gain the trust that is critical to an eventual purchasing decision.

It's a big ask. Yet in the face of these mounting challenges, what is coming out of many digital B2B marketing channels is falling at the credibility hurdle, which means that trust is simply a fence too far. What is going wrong here?

A leaf too many out of the B2C book

The simple answer is that B2B marketing credibility depends, as it always has, on marketing communication that demonstrates relevance, usefulness, and meaningfulness for the intended audience - but this has been eroded as B2B marketing communications take on more of the characteristics of B2C campaigns.

Massive databases to compensate for GDPR in the hope a large percentage of recipients won't opt out; uninformed mass emails shouting about features rather than benefits; jumping to securing a meeting when the buyer's challenge or pain point hasn't yet been identified - it's often a case of mass automation gone wrong.

B2B marketing has become so obsessed with execution that the "what and why" are being overlooked. Strategy has been forgotten, and what this tends to result in is output that can indeed be slick-looking and visually appealing, but that is fundamentally quantitative rather than qualitative in nature.

It's a megaphone that is heard by some but is background noise to most, rather than being the one-to-one conversations through which credibility and trust can be built up over time.

Killing credibility with ignorance

The reason so many B2B marketers and marketing agencies are failing with this approach is twofold.

Firstly, flashy marketing technology or no, it ignores the principles of B2B marketing that, whatever the medium, have not changed: namely, that only accurate segmentation, targeting, and positioning, driving great content and creative, will shorten the buying timeline.

Secondly, however, it also ignores what has changed in B2B marketing: namely that marketers must now align many more separate decision-makers on the buying timeline – as we mention above - and so the audience-centricity must now focus on individuals, not groups.

Each decision-making individual must be understood as a persona, they must be listened to, their minds must be known, and they must be communicated with through content that is specifically relevant to their pain points.

The "all the gear but no idea" school of marketing communications will deliver no credibility and no trust, however prolific its output.

Can we learn anything from B2C?

That said, one staple of B2C marketing that B2B marketers and their agencies must – and often don't – integrate into their B2B marketing to build credibility and move the prospect towards trust is emotionality.

It was long assumed that B2B buying decisions were made exclusively rationally, but in recent years a significant body of both neuroscientific and industry research has shown that a large part of the B2B decision-making process is in fact highly emotional in nature.

Pushing the buyer's emotional buttons through carefully targeted and developed marketing content is therefore crucial in having a credible conversation with them – perhaps never more so than in a post-pandemic world, where the inversion of routines and expectations has both provoked a rise in emotionality and made it a more acceptable personal and professional trait.

From credibility to trust: Cognitive Marketing

All the points we've raised above are neatly summarised in an acronym we often use to describe B2B marketing communications that build credibility to inspire trust - Transparent, Relevant, Unique, Segmented, Timely.

This is Cognitive Marketing - B2B Marketing done properly and thoughtfully. It's about segmentation, granular knowledge of companies and their decision-making units, and articulating a proven solution to a recognised pain point in a way that engages the buyer emotionally as well as rationally.

As the only UK agency currently implementing a Cognitive Marketing approach to B2B marketing, BCM is uniquely positioned to help you. Get in touch and see how Cognitive Marketing can help you stand out from the avalanche of marketing noise, build credibility, win trust, cement relationships, and, ultimately, increase sales.

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