

Real Time. Real People. Real Conversations.

The three trends that affect your B2B online communications and the changes you need to make to stay relevant.

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Foreword: keep it real...

By John Bottom, Head of Communications & Content, Base One

It takes a while, but eventually everything comes full circle.

For thousands of years, the only way humans could communicate was in person. Direct, real conversation between individuals was essential for survival. Over the centuries, however, mankind has continually improved its ability to communicate. From the printing press to WordPress, we have found it gradually easier and cheaper to connect with an ever-growing number of people. But this acceleration is now coming to an end. Anyone can send a message instantly to millions of recipients at virtually zero cost, using equipment that is widely available and understood. In terms of speed and efficiency, human communications has pretty much come to the end of the road.

In recent years, therefore, the spotlight has shifted. Marketers are spending less time thinking about the mechanics of communication, and more time thinking about the style and content. And it has become clear that the area where a competitive edge can be found is in an essential quality of the communications. And this is where we go back to basics.

The simple truth is that people buy from people – which has prompted marketers to humanise their communications. Brands are no longer content to broadcast their messages from a distance, shouting offers and pronouncing product launches from their ivory towers; instead they are looking to recapture some of the personality and emotion that characterises the one-to-one conversation.

This development has been accompanied by the appearance of a new generation of consumer – and with it, a new type of supplier. The mysterious Generation Y is now making its presence felt in the workplace; younger professionals who are not only entirely comfortable with the myriad of digital communications platforms available today, but who expect a more personal, more immediate, more direct interaction with the companies they buy from. In turn, they are served by providers who understand this need, and who help them to deliver more personal communications.

As the entrepreneurs behind The Chat Shop, a successful online live chat start-up, Jonny Everett and Joe Bush are at the heart of this new movement, and I was delighted to be asked to write a foreword to their paper. If you're looking for a summary of how B2B marketers need to react to recent developments, look no further than Real Time. Real People. Real Conversations. And there's no one better to explain how this new world works, since they are both real young and real young smart.

Introduction

This is the world we live in.

Here's the part where we tell you what you might already know, but not really pay attention to. There's a number of emerging trends that are currently affecting, and that will continue to affect, how people communicate. The more forward thinking B2B companies have realised that it is not businesses that buy products or services, but people. These people buy differently. They now discover and define a need, research potential solutions and by the time they engage with you have possibly already decided on you to be their supplier. So we've seen a step change, 'content is king' and inbound marketing is here to stay. But good inbound marketing requires the effective use of channels, and whilst we're spoilt for choice, how well are they really being used? You might be on those channels. You might use those channels. But how much thought have you put into what really makes that channel work? To understand how to better communicate with your customers, we need to consider 3 major factors:

- Real Time
- Real People
- Real Conversations

This paper looks at key trends in online communication, and how this affects B2B communication strategies across:

- Email
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Live Chat

With each of these, we'll assess how changing trends impact the channel and what you need to do to make sure you're not left behind.

"Most good business decision makers have a social presence nowadays whether that be on LinkedIn, Twitter or having a blog – so if you aren't communicating in this space, then you are missing a trick."
Jacqui Keep, Marketing Executive, Powwownow

Real Time. Real People. Real Conversations.

1. Real Time

I want it all, I want it now. Technology is only going to get faster. Information is at our finger tips 24 hours a day. This is changing the way people buy. Across B2C and B2B, consumers are now researching first. It's not just about your site, but access to information across a number of channels. These conversations are going on, whether you're in them or not . There is no 'opt out', just 'lose out'.

Google calls this the ZMOT (pronounced ZEE-mot)[2]. Post stimulus, your customers now go out and find out about a product or service from an array of different online sources and often form a short list before even speaking to you.



"…Today you are not behind your competition. You are not behind the technology. You are behind your consumer." – Rishad Tobaccowala. Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, Vivaki (quoted from ZMOT paper)[2]

In short, people are looking for suppliers like you and it's your job to ensure you are on their short list. Never before has time been such a critical factor in securing deals. We have already seen a slight change in the channels preferred by B2B, but only slightly:

"These conversations *are going on*, whether you're in them or not . There is no 'opt out', just 'lose out'."

Non real time:
Direct mail. Call for a brochure. Throw out a lot and hope it sticks to the right people.

Semi real time:
Social Media has helped move B2B into dialogues where useful exchanges of information can take place. But, as we'll see, there is a huge gap between how B2B buyers want to use social media, and how B2B is currently using it.

Real time:
Customer appetite for instant communication tools such as live chat is rising heavily year on year. Leading brands are expected to offer it as a channel. Engaging customers instantly – that's really real time and gives you the best chance to influence an onsite ZMOT.

2. Real People

The Y generation

They're coming. The generation that grew up with computers and who were the driving force behind

"…Today you are not behind your competition. You are not behind the technology. You are behind your consumer." – Rishad Tobaccowala. Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, Vivaki (quoted from ZMOT paper)[2]

"Those who used Facebook and LinkedIn as a means of engaging in direct conversation rated these channels more highly than those ho were simply sighnposted by them to published information." The Buyersphere Report, 2012

"20-30 year old B2B buyers were twice as likely to use social media as their 31-40 year old counterparts." The Buyersphere Report, 2012

the Web 2.0 shift, will be moving into influential B2B buying positions over the next decade. And guess what? They will use the channels they are used to using, and will expect to be able to use them in the way they're used to. In fact, 20-30 year old B2B buyers were twice as likely to use social media as their 31-40 year old counterparts[3].

That means you need to start making sure your online channels are delivering the Y factor, so to speak.

The Contextual world

The Contextual world, as Robert Scoble[4] calls it, is coming upon us. This world not only delivers at pace, but it also delivers customised data that is specific to you. One of the accelerators to this process is a 'maturing in social data'. As our social networks grow and develop to even more personalised platforms, people will come to expect the web (and in turn marketing) to be personal and to speak to them as individuals. Marketers will need to begin 'incorporating [your] information into [their] experience in real time'[5]

3. Real Conversations

'Social' Media

Real people want to have real conversations with other real people. Many B2B companies still use their social media platforms as a loudspeaker, not a platform for conversation. People want to speak to the people behind the brand, not a corporate slogan.

The funnel is dead

A recent study found 87% of consumers now travel a less linear more complex pathway to final purchase[6]. These are the same consumers that, as buyers, you want to buy your B2B products and services. This means you need to be able to engage them over the channels they choose, when they want, if you're going to have any kind of influence over who actually ends up becoming a customer.

That's the landscape:

1. Real time
   a. More informed buyers - ZMOT
   b. Shift to real time information access
2. Real people
   a. The Y Generation is coming
   b. Shift to a Contextual world
3. Real Conversations
   a. Engaging is social, broadcasting is not
   b. The funnel is dead

These three trends summarise a number of shifts that you are most likely aware of, but how much do they actually influence your communication with customers in the online space?

In order to better understand how each online channel is affected by these changes, and what you can do to gain more from these channels, we'll look in detail at each. Starting with your old friend and favourite- email.

Email

Email is certainly not dead. It exceeds phone traffic and is still the dominant norm of business communication[7].

It's still important to B2B customers, 39% say relevant supplier emails were their chosen source of information when selecting a supplier. That's third only to supplier websites and word of mouth[3]. It's safe to say that email isn't going anywhere for a while. But how does email keep up with these changing communication trends?

Real Time:

This a "non real time" tool when being compared to other digital channels, but it still has its place. Timing of delivery can help compensate for the non real time nature of email. Emails after a download of content, reminders on how features of your product or service can help customers, or purchase of a new product or service are good criteria to trigger emails to make them feel less static[8].

Real People:

Bulk email blasts don't cut it anymore. People want to feel like you've sent them something relevant to them – spammers beware. Increased personalisation is a must. This doesn't have to be complex. A large part of better personalisation revolves around better and more in depth list segmentation. Splitting your audience in a more detailed way ensures more relevant content lands in their inbox. Content that speaks to that person – not your entire mailing list.

Real Conversations:

One to one emails are the medium of choice for most business exchanges, but they form disjointed dialogues, not conversations. In order to get talking in the first place, you need to have first followed the above point and increased the personalisation and relevance of the email. Keeping the conversation going means strong personal calls to action and invitations. Including related content and articles is a good value add, whilst embedding social share and follow options encourages the conversation to move on to other platforms.

Create real time:

- Create tailored emails that are sent after an event, such as a whitepaper download
- Monitor your customers' product/service use. Help them get more from your products or services before they ask

Connect real people:

- Sort your list! How is it segmented? Cut the data another way and combine data sources to give you a more focused customer group so the messaging will really speak to them
- Increase you personalisation, adding softeners such as 'Hi there [FIRSTNAME]' are easy ways to make the email feel more personal with little extra effort

Start real conversations:

- No one is going to open the email unless you nail the above, so nail the above points
- Include related content that the reader will find useful. Embed links to share and participate in the conversation through a multitude of social channels
- You want them to continue the conversation on the channel they choose, and that might not be email! Be aware of where they go next

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Facebook

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If Facebook were a country it would have the 3rd largest population in the world[9]. Yet many B2B Marketers still see it as unimportant, due to it's private nature. Those same people you're selling to are the same people who have made Facebook the phenomenon it is.

Facebook is important in the B2B space, but you will only see its value if you start using it for what it is – a social platform '…just 38% of businesses even attempted to use the social network for engaging with customers and journalists'[10]

Real Time

This falls into the "semi real time" space. Having an active wall is critical to success. A graveyard page does not show you care, believe it or not. Interacting in a reasonable time with posts and items on your page means at least once a day. Giving a timely response is the cornerstone for being successful in the other two criteria – after all, no one wants to talk to themselves.

Real People

It's social, so be sociable. Facebook is not the place for your corporate mission statement.

'…just 38% of businesses even attempted to use the social network for engaging with customers and journalists' Econsultancy

If you want to come across as interesting, be interesting. This means allowing the people behind the brand to come through as themselves representing your brand.

Real Conversations

Most social media suffers the same fate – it becomes a one-way broadcast medium. This is especially bad for Facebook. It's designed to be personal and very social. Using it to only publish links to your own content and articles misses the point. Keep it light hearted and sociable.

Create real time:

- Timely responses. Not days or weeks. Once a day is sufficient, more if there is a lot of activity
- Update frequently but remember it's quality over quantity. Don't become annoying or you'll see your fan base fall

Connect real people:

- Be authentic, be human and don't sound like a legal contract. Remember it's Facebook and Facebook is for friends
- Don't only talk about your products and services; share other interesting content, videos and especially photos. Photos on Facebook generate 53% more likes than the average post[11]

Start real conversations:

- THE cardinal sin on Facebook is ignoring legitimate questions or comments on your wall. There is nothing worse than taking the time to reach out to a business, on a channel they're offering, only to be ignored
- When someone does post, comment or like as appropriate. And not just the same comment repeated over and over

LinkedIn

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The business network. If there was ever a clear case for being involved it's on here yet only 47% of B2B Companies actively participate on LinkedIn[3].

It's worth noting that if you don't create a company page, LinkedIn will, if employees start to cite you as their employer. So get it up to speed and if it's out there take ownership.

Unlike Facebook, LinkedIn has a lot of value in individual efforts, not just company pages. Get your company page up to date but then encourage and empower employees to take ownership and action of their own accounts to further your visibility.

Real Time

Firmly in the middle of "semi real time" channels. As with the other social networks, contributions need to be timely and regular. The newsfeed gives a great opportunity for good content to spread, as a 'Like' will display this content across that persons network. LinkedIn users have a longer attention span than people on other social networks so you have more time to work with using text heavier updates[12].

Real People

It's a professional network so keep a professional tone. This does not mean being dry and robotic but business and self-promotional updates are acceptable here, as people are expecting a business angle. LinkedIn advises you to only add people you know to your network and this advice should be followed. As with all channels, the quality of your connections, not the quantity is key. Don't feel you have to become a 500+ LinkedIn member at all costs. Knowing your contacts is much more valuable than having a large number who are acquaintances at best.

Real Conversations

Contribute. Don't just sell but actually help people. Join groups that are relevant to your field and that you are able to contribute to. Then offer some advice, just because you can. There is nothing worse than someone posting a question in a group only to be met by 100's of suppliers asking them to email their requirements. It's dry, unimaginative and ineffective. Give and you shall receive.

Create real time

- Try and share something once a day
- Keep your company page up to date with current products and services

Connect real people

- Use LinkedIn Introductions or InMails for cold introductions, but don't go straight in with a sales pitch
- Find who's been viewing your profile. Send them a message saying you noticed they've looked you up, and thanking them. Opening a dialogue is a great way of warming a cold contact
- Offer contacts within your company next to products and services. People can then engage with a real person and not just with a contact form

Start real conversations

- Be more promotional but make an effort to contribute selflessly. As with all the social channels, you want to start conversations
- Join groups of interest and follow companies and competitors, offering feedback and commentary on articles and ideas you like
- Share white papers, research and blogs you contribute to to help get people talking, just remember to reciprocate if they post theirs
- Be aware that LinkedIn can now also "auto post" your updates to Twitter. If your post is longer than 140 characters it will get cut off on Twitter, which isn't a great conver…

Twitter

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With 175 million Tweets per day there is a lot of activity on Twitter, but also a lot of noise. As Robert Scoble rightly says 'our computers bring us a lot of noise'[4] and Twitter is a non-stop stream of updates – pretty noisy. The biggest B2B downfall of Twitter is constant and non stop mindless broadcasting. If you follow The Times you expect a stream of news, no one wants a non stop feed of your company news and only your company news. Get social to make the most of the medium.

Real Time

At the very edge of "semi real time" and "real time". The fact it's not instant, but a single message in time keeps it on that side of the fence. Twitter needs monitoring and a lot of it. If you're going to keep up, this medium will take the most work. Setting up alerts and triggers on keywords and brand names is critical. For those that are on top of their game, Twitter can be used to identify and get in touch with prospects at the exact time that they need your service[13].

Real People

Whilst you can maintain your own personal Twitter, you will always be associated with your employer or business so bear this in mind. It's worth stating clearly on your profile why you're on Twitter and what someone who follows you can expect. It's fine to be personal and share family and other news if it's a dual account but if you're worried that expressing a lot of personal opinions might be controversial, utilise a company handle and a locked down personal handle. Whatever you decide, do not act like a robot.

Real Conversations

Team Follow Back? No. Follow people that are of interest to you and don't get bogged down in the race to have '000's of followers. This is a broadcast technique – how can you start a meaningful engagement when your feed is crammed every second? Try to add comment or thoughts to retweets and respond to those posting content you agree, or even better disagree with. "Keep the conversation going" as Twitter says!

There is one more interesting use for Twitter that many firms are still yet to leverage – customer service. Just 4% of the top 50 UK tech companies use it for this purpose[10].

Here's the thing. Whether you use it for customer service or not, people that have a negative product or service experience will Tweet about it, and not always @you. That means that there may well be a lot of negative sentiment floating out and about that you're not dealing with. Consider how that may affect a prospects ZMOT and you'll start to realise just how 'in' this channel you are already – whether you're doing something about it or not.

Create real time:

- Keeping on top of the Twittering is hard, alerts and monitoring software are the way to go
- Think of what needs your prospects have, utilise these as key words to throw up some Twitter leads

Connect Real People

- State your aim. Are you there for personal reasons, businesses reasons or both?
- Be personal, but don't forget, you can never really achieve separation from your company

Start Real Conversations:

- Follow people that interest you, you don't have to follow everyone that follows you
- Add comments and constructive feedback to others Tweets
- Direct Message when needed, for sharing personal details like emails. DO NOT set up those annoying instant direct messages when someone follows you. They are self-promotional, often uninformative and show you're only there to broadcast, not engage. Stop it!

Live Chat

It's instant. Two real people, having a real conversation. It's a proven conversion and lead generator. In short, live chat ticks a lot of boxes when it comes to the changing nature of conversation, as well as making a good business case for the bottom line.

Live chat is being seen more across the B2C space but is still being underutilised in B2B, considering the results it gains for those who take the plunge.

In the B2B space it's all but non-existent. Why? The Buyersphere 2012[3] report indicated time and again that a significant proportion - over 70% - of B2B buyers found suppliers' websites had the biggest impact on their decision. That means that your prospects' key decision criteria and ZMOT still have a large dependency on your website. Engaging prospects onsite creates a chance to influence their decision using the full force of the three key communication trends discussed.

Real Time

"Live chat provides an alternative channel that many of our visitors prefer. The exchange of information is immediate and for many is less threatening than talking to a sales person over the phone. From a numbers perspective, the ROI has been very positive."[15] Steve Dodsworth, Senior Manager, Sales, Marketo

Live chat brings real time in every sense. Instant interaction is available at the click of a button. Websites are a non real time tool, but live chat changes that. The 83% of users that admit to needing some form of assistance with their site journey can get it instantly. Bearing in mind that 51% say they will try once or give up immediately when they require assistance and you'll start to see why the real time nature of live chat is critical[14].

Real People

Interaction with a website is minimal. You are left to navigate alone, relying on good copy and well placed calls to action to make the user feel that they're being spoken to. The chance of delivering a site that rings true with a multitude of prospects, all with different personalities, is slim.

Real Conversations

"To get in touch with us, just fill in this 8 field contact form and we'll get back to you". Most website contact methods do not start conversations, if anything they end them before they can begin. As a test, take your contact form page views, and divide by the number of completed forms received. If engaging in conversation instantly on your site is not an option, then real conversation is a non starter.

Create real time

- Instant conversations at the click of a button when your prospect wants to speak to you
- Greater ability to influence prospects' ZMOT with targeted triggers and operator led browsing options
- Existing customers want to feel valued. Offering instant connection to an agent makes for a happier customer, and one that is more likely to become a brand advocate which is worth its weight in gold

Connect real people:

- A real person, typing messaging to another real person
- Names and faces in the chat allow your brand to gain personal association in the prospects mind. You're no longer a faceless brand, but one with a personal connotation in that customers mind, helping you remain prominent when being short listed
- 41% say they are more likely to trust a website that has live chat available[14]

Start real conversations:

- Your website is closed for conversations, it's the hub of your inbound, but engaging instantly is not a possibility. Prospects and customers alike arrive looking for the information they want in order to create their purchase decision
- The ability to discuss content that your prospect is currently engaged with means that you can start talking about things you know they're interested in

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By offering the choice of real-time help, businesses can do more then just prevent website abandonement. They can effectively support customers throughout their entire online journey, increasing sales, building customer trust and cementing loyalty.

What now?

Just as there are three major trends, you have three choices:

1. Ignore these channels completely

Not recommended.

2. Pretend to do these channels

You talk about taking action, you may even make a plan. You might be on a few channels, but they're dormant. Real steps towards making your online communications a key part of your strategy never gets out of the gates. One of the major contributors to a situation like this, is resource. Underestimating or under allocating sufficient time to build and manage these channels is common and will make the potential results difficult to achieve.

3. Embrace the change

Wholehearted acceptance. Making these channels core to your business. Learning about how these channels work best, integration with existing channel operation, and strategies to make these channels work for you. It is possible and it can happen.

If you're on board, here's your 5 step plan.

Your 5 Step Plan:

1. Strategy:

- The key here is integration across channels.
- Each channel requires a strategy, but there must be an overarching plan to integrate efforts across channels.
- Remember, you want all these channels to fuel each other, not either or.

As a starting point, fill out this checklist for your 5 major competitors:

- What channels are they on
- How active are they
- Are they broadcasting or conversing
- What do they do well
- What do they not do well

2. Ownership

- One person needs to own these channels
- If you're a larger organisation, you may need an owner per channel, with an online communications lead
- Whichever way you do it, the key here is that everyone knows who is in charge of what, and that those in charge are 100% empowered to make the decisions they need
- This is no place for over regulation and micro management if you want it to work. Empower and let go

3. Process

- Where do you want to utilise these channels? What for? To drive sales? Customer service? Support?
- It's important to note that whatever you decide to use these for, if they're available, some customers will use them for whatever they'd like to use them for – meaning you need to be aware!

4. Measure

- Track, monitor, measure
- Start with high-level metrics such as 'Likes' and work your way down into the nitty gritty where the deeper insight lies
- It's important that your metrics include the correct balance of quantity and most importantly, quality

5. Delivery

- This is the hard part!
- Whatever channel we're talking about, it takes time and that means resource
- If you want this to work, it is not ok to use the new intern, nor tack it onto the cleaners to do list. You get the point. Too often it's bundled into someone's role, meaning it does not get the attention it requires as they already have a full time job
- Remember that the more real time the channel, the more resource it requires, meaning your Twitter and Live Chat need careful staffing considerations
- Outsourcing is always an option. Outsourced providers don't just bring staff, but if you choose your partner carefully, they bring a huge amount of knowledge and skills across their chosen channel, meaning they can give them the TLC they need. After all, it's all they do
- Whatever option you choose, give it the proper tools it needs to succeed!

"The measure of success for any business on social media is the level of engagement the brand has with its target audience, it must be taken into consideration that it is not necessarily huge numbers, but the quality of your engaged market."
– Liam Doolan, Founder, Habit Box[15]

What's the message?

We've discussed three key trends:

1. Real time
2. Real people
3. Real conversations

Each of these shifts are very real, and have already happened. What cannot be stressed enough is that there is no 'opt-out'.

The changes in how we communicate affect how we think, how we consider alternatives and ultimately what we buy. The excuse of being a B2B company is not sufficient for ignoring 'consumer' trends, as those same B2C consumers are the decision makers, influencers, budget holders and champions that you need to buy from you.

If you take away just one thought from this paper it should be this:

The way people communicate has changed. The way they consider purchases has changed. Those same people are your target market. They want you to communicate with them, on the channels they want to communicate on. And if you're not present and participating, someone else will be. It's not about B2B, but P2P, person to person.

For those that choose to, these online communication channels can become a pivotal part of your marketing, sales and ultimately business success.

We hope that this paper has helped you to start taking steps towards making that a reality.

And of course, if you loved, hated, agreed, disagreed and anything in between, please get social and share your opinion, using the buttons in the footer.

Thanks for reading.

If you're not present and participating, someone else will be. It's not about B2B, but P2P, person to person.

About The Chat Shop

The Chat Shop was set up on the idea that onsite communication is absent in an increasingly connected world. The idea of Real People, Real Conversations are the foundations that The Chat Shop is built on.

We believe that technology should enable connections, but that in order to do so, it must be utilised properly.

The Chat Shop offers Fully Managed Live Chat, removing a key barrier to live chat adoption – staff, Chat Strategy and Live Chat Implementation. With the focus always being on delivering communication channels that excel for both business and their customers.

We work with businesses across B2B and B2C, to help realise the huge value in opening the web to instant, personal conversations.

About the Authors

Jonny Everett

Jonny started his career in consulting, working across an array of projects with some of the UK's largest companies. After spending time working in London and across Europe, Jonny decided to start his own company with co-founder and friend Joe and The Chat Shop was born. Focused on how business can create better online connections with consumers, Jonny works to create real relationships between businesses and it's customers through the power of conversation. In his spare time Jonny enjoys basketball and is an active referee in the UK. On the weekends he's partial to a beer and a good time with friends.

You should follow him on twitter: @jonnychats

Joe Bush

Beginning in earnest at the age of 13, Joe started and sold a number of ventures ranging from web design to import companies. On the few times Joe's had a boss, he's turned around an ailing retail chain into a profitable venture. Moving onto bigger challenges, Joe's applied marketing experience and business nous helps The Chat Shop stay chatting. He's a trained mixologist (he makes cocktails) which means the office gets a few fancy drinks before any social occasion.

You should follow him on twitter: @chatshopjoe

Contributors:

John Bottom @basebot
Steve Dodsworth @stevendodsworth
Liam Doolan @_liamdoolan
Jacqui Keep @keepjacqui

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