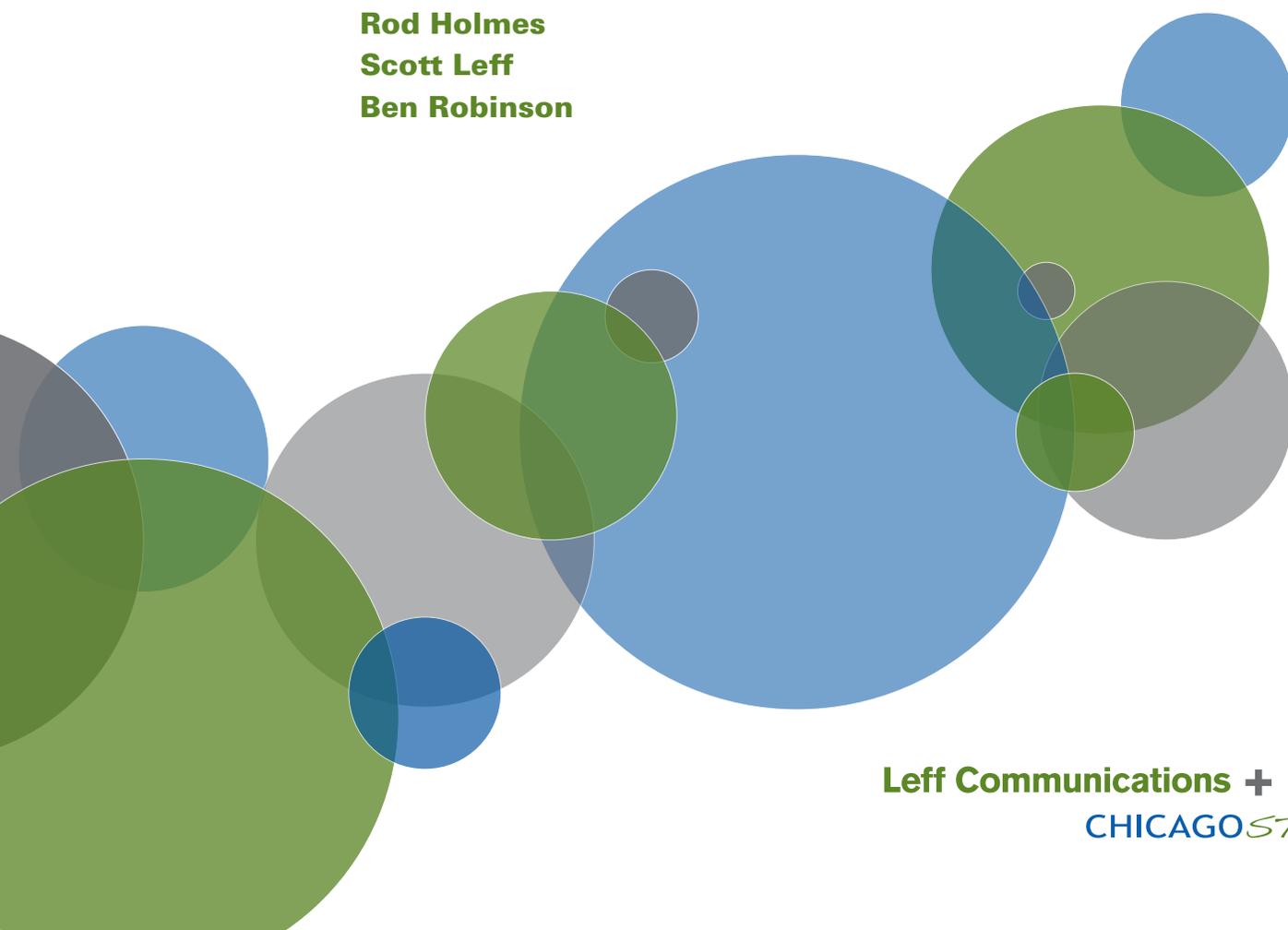


How B2B companies can unlock the value of online marketing

Online marketing channels hold enormous potential for B2B companies seeking to reach potential customers. Yet too many businesses either try to do too much or allocate their resources in a haphazard way, resulting in ineffective campaigns. By understanding the elements that make up the online marketing ecosystem and developing a phased strategy that can build on early successes, B2B companies can ensure that their investments in digital content and marketing reap the greatest returns.

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Over the past decade, the rise of online marketing, fueled by the emergence of social media, user mobility, and increased access to information, has upended how companies present themselves to potential customers. As a result, executives at business-to-business (B2B) companies, such as professional services firms and technology companies, find themselves under increasing pressure to engage across the full range of channels for fear of missing out on opportunities.

B2B companies have vastly different business strategies than the business-to-consumer (B2C) companies such as airlines and consumer goods companies that have deployed social media to such great effect. Since B2C corporations market to individuals, the sales cycle is generally short, the purchase decision can be emotional, and the barriers are low. For B2B companies, the equation is exactly opposite: a long sales cycle; a decision that's based on trust, referrals, and professional reputation; and purchases that can involve substantial investments and multi-year engagements.

All the same, many B2B executives have gone hurtling down the online marketing path without a clear idea of what they hope to achieve, only to lose momentum and largely abandon initiatives when the results fall short of their lofty aspirations. Having a well-defined strategy is imperative, since these efforts should lay the foundation for extended conversations that ultimately lead to engagements. Success isn't defined in terms of Facebook fans but in the conversion of prospects to customers.

In addition, many midsize B2B firms don't have the staff or resources to mount a multichannel, integrated campaign. Engaging in social media campaigns, when well executed, requires a significant commitment, and companies must

develop and post content on a regular basis for the initiative to make an impact. If the marketing department consists of just a handful of people, sustaining a robust effort across numerous channels simply might not be realistic, and dedicating a team member to social media is equally unpalatable when such efforts aren't directly connected to business goals.

Wading through the available online communications channels and tactics can be a daunting process, and some tactics are far more effective than others, depending on the industry and the audience. Therefore, companies should first understand the online marketing ecosystem and how each of the components fit together. Next, they should adopt a phased approach using selected tactics that align with their business strategy. Last, to ensure such efforts deliver the expected results, companies must retain the necessary resources and expertise. By following this approach, executives can build momentum and support their existing sales and marketing efforts.



Understanding the online marketing ecosystem

The many online tactics and communications channels make up a marketing ecosystem, where the individual components interconnect to engage prospective customers. In this ecosystem, the company website acts as hub of activity: while not every customer discovers a company through its website, the majority of prospects will visit the website at least once—and optimally many times—to learn more about the company. It's during these visits that companies have a prime opportunity to establish or strengthen the relationship by showcasing their knowledge, expertise, and the value they can ultimately deliver.

In general, online marketing tactics can be segmented by their primary objective (Exhibit 1). Some are designed to attract people to the company's website, others are meant to demonstrate an organization's experience and insight, and others are used to nurture long-term relationships. These categories of tactics should work together to attract prospects and drive them into the sales funnel, where dialogue and engagement can move them through each phase until conversion.

bigger. The following items are the primary means of extending a company's reach and increasing traffic to its website.

Search engine optimization

Every individual who is actively seeking information specific to a business problem should be able to find it easily, and that's where search engine optimization (SEO) marketing comes in. In a perfect world, companies want to be on the first page of search engine results, and preferably the first item on the first page. SEO is part art and part science, and the algorithms that search engines such as Google and Bing use are constantly evolving.¹ SEO can be broadly divided into two types:

Organic SEO. In general, organic SEO is based on the relevancy and recency of the content



Driving people to the website

The explosion of online content will continue unabated, so since companies can't make the haystack smaller they need to make the needle

¹For instance, several months ago Google introduced a new algorithm called Panda. Previously, tweets and retweets were really important, but Panda made sharing a link on Facebook the most powerful social media trigger.

Making sense of the online marketing ecosystem



on a website. Companies can focus on keywords, post new content, and optimize their website to improve their ranking. Websites can be optimized for SEO by ensuring that the code on Web pages is geared to search engines. Search engines have also begun to put more weight on social media content such as blogs and forums.

Paid search marketing. A complement to organic SEO is paid search marketing, also called pay per click (PPC). With this tactic, companies select a group of keywords that are relevant to the product or service they are marketing. PPC campaigns are very effective for companies seeking to gain immediate visibility—since the cost is based on the number of individuals that click through, and they can analyze the campaigns using a number of metrics to gauge a campaign's effectiveness and return on investment (ROI).

Social media

The attractiveness of social media to business can be best summed up as a direct path to an engaged target audience. However, each channel can be used in a slightly different way. For instance, many companies use Twitter (200 million registered users) as a way to distribute content and commentary, while Facebook (750 million registered users) often acts as an annex to the company website. LinkedIn (100 million registered users) can be a valuable tool to engage either industry colleagues or to interact with groups of people with similar interests.

The Big Three. In a recent survey on B2B marketing, 55 percent of respondents said they use Twitter to distribute content, followed by Facebook (54 percent) and LinkedIn (51 percent).² These results indicate popularity, not effectiveness, and based on responses to other questions, companies appear to be using these channels without a clear goal. The typical B2B company won't

be posting special offers to its Facebook page, nor is it likely to have tens of thousands of followers on Twitter. Since LinkedIn is a professional networking site, it's more reflective of the target audience and can also be a key channel for content distribution.

Other channels. While forums (sponsored by both companies and individuals) and review sites reach slightly different audiences, their common objective is to establish a voice in the industry and draw visitors to the company website, often through the promise of privileged information, insight from experts, and answers to frequent questions.

Online publications

Sometimes the most effective way for a company to promote its ideas or leaders is to tap into the readership of established online publications. Many sites have an existing, engaged audience but face the same challenge as other information providers: developing a steady stream of valuable content. By contributing articles on industry topics, B2B companies can introduce themselves as expert voices. Business leaders can also participate in interviews or roundtable discussions to showcase their breadth and depth of knowledge. However, it's important to work with credible publications and offer a strong, clear point of view to achieve the desired result: getting readers to want to learn more about the company of the author or interview subject.

Landing pages

As an extension of a company's website, the landing page serves as an entry point for engagement. It can take different forms: a stand-alone page created to complement a banner ad; as part of a microsite devoted to a topic, conference, or campaign; or as an additional page on a company's website. Regardless of the type of land-

²B2B Content Marketing: 2010 Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends, a joint survey by Marketing Profs and Junta 42 (www.contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/B2B_Trends_2010.pdf).

ing page, the objective is the same: to get a visitor to take some action that sparks a dialogue with the company. Once this engagement begins, the company needs to shift gears to start building a relationship.



Delivering value to visitors

A decade ago, the corporate website was little more than an online brochure for the organization. Since that time, websites have developed functionality to showcase a range of content types, from podcasts and video to blogs. However, the websites of many small and midsize businesses are woefully out of date from a design and SEO standpoint.

As the gateway to the sales funnel as well as the main vehicle for dialogue with current and potential customers, an effective website should include key content types.

Blogs

Blogs are an important content vehicle for two primary reasons: first, they provide a less formal, more authentic forum for sharing information and insight that can't be found anywhere else. Second, new blog posts published on a regular basis help to support organic SEO. While many companies have been hesitant to commit the necessary resources to maintain a blog, the industry leaders understand the value of blogs in establishing a connection with the customer. A 2011 Hubspot study on business marketing found that fully 65 percent of businesses had a blog, and 57 percent of these companies had acquired customers through their blog activity.³

Video blogs have become a particularly effective format to share information. Whether a low-tech production from a Flip cam or a professionally produced clip, videos offer another way to expand on key topics and use graphics and white boards to bring ideas to life.

White papers

Unlike marketing collateral, the white paper takes a neutral point of view and addresses a specific issue or business challenge. It generally includes analysis, research, and insight accented by design elements and graphs. The McKinsey Quarterly, first published in 1964, is recognized as the grandfather of the white paper, and its analytical rigor and proprietary research have set the standard. White papers are particularly attractive vehicles for B2B companies, since their focus is on relationship building. According to a 2010 Eccolo Media study, for instance, 78 percent of respondents had used white papers in the past six months to evaluate a technology purchase.⁴



Nurturing relationships

The customer nurturing process can be one of the more difficult phases to execute in the online marketing ecosystem, since it requires a sustained effort to stay engaged with customers. One of the main obstacles is that for this process to be effective, a number of departments such as marketing, sales, communications, and public relations, must coordinate their efforts.

One trigger for activating the nurturing process is to obtain contact information from website visitors. Frequently, companies will create a sepa-

³*The State of Inbound Marketing*, HubSpot, February 2011 (www.hubspot.com/state-of-inbound-marketing).

⁴*2010 B2B Technology Collateral Survey Report*, Eccolo Media, September 2010 (www.eccolomedia.com/IMAGES/PUBLICATIONS/2010_B2B_Technology_Collateral_Survey_Report.pdf).

rate landing page to promote a white paper or event. Once a visitor provides an e-mail, it's added to the content distribution list. Several tools have proved particularly effective in nurturing business relationships.

E-newsletters

These regular e-mails contain a compilation of the latest published content, articles, news, and upcoming events, all reminders of the breadth and depth of a company's expertise. Every e-newsletter should have a call to action (from an alert on special offers to a reminder to forward the e-mail to a friend), be well designed, and comply with e-mail regulations. B2B companies should strive to send out e-newsletters on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, depending on the level of content and activity.

Webinars

Essentially an online presentation, webinars allow the company's leaders to make a pitch to a targeted, engaged group of people. While webinars can be incredibly effective, they usually rise and fall on the capabilities of the presenter. When treated as an online PowerPoint presentation, they can be awkward and uninformative. To avoid

this fate, speakers should prepare as if they're appearing before a live audience and rehearse the Q&A section beforehand.

In-person events

Similarly, in-person events, whether seminars, roundtable discussions, or industry conferences, can extend a company's presence beyond the web-site to spur connections and conversation. Although these events typically require a sponsorship fee to participate in a keynote address or seminar, they allow leaders of B2B companies to engage directly with a target audience and demonstrate their expertise in a business setting.



Implementing a phased approach to online marketing

As small and midsize businesses attempt to develop a cohesive strategy that delivers the greatest return on their investment, many become overwhelmed by the number of options and the pressure to maintain activity in as many channels as possible. This approach is generally a recipe for diluting resources and staff unnecessarily.

A phased approach to online marketing



Building a foundation

- White papers
- Landing page
- Paid search



Expanding the effort

- E-newsletters
- Blogs
- Social media



Deepening the conversation

- Social media
- Video blogs
- Webinars
- In-person events

In addition, conventional wisdom advocates giving some of these tactics as much as a year to start paying dividends—an eternity for business leaders looking for measurable progress in the short term.

For these reasons, B2B companies should adopt a phased approach that can score a few quick wins and build momentum before expanding the effort to include additional tactics (Exhibit 2). The following framework offers a basic strategy to integrate online marketing tactics into existing efforts. It doesn't require substantial investment up front—no website redesign or additional full-time hiring—and starts to lay the groundwork and processes for later phases.

Phase 1—Building a foundation

Since most B2B companies rely on experience and insight to differentiate their organization from the competition, a white paper, paid search marketing, and a landing page form a natural, complementary package to reach the target audience. A high-quality white paper can take weeks to develop, write, and design. However, it's well worth devoting the time to do it right, since the finished product can act as linchpin content for the campaign. While the white paper is being created, companies can research the most relevant and effective keywords to mount an effective paid search campaign.

A dedicated landing page should also be developed as an addition to the site, with copy that introduces visitors to the company, offers the white paper in exchange for an e-mail address, and directs traffic to the main website.

Companies can benefit from this discrete effort in a number of ways: the white paper can be used in multiple settings—as a leave behind for in-

person client meetings, in direct-mail efforts, and at scheduled events. It can also begin to establish a company's experts as important voices within the industry. The paid search campaign produces reliable data on the market and can measure the effectiveness of keyword selections as well as the terms users entered into search engines to reach the ad in the first place. Last, the landing page enables companies to track visitor behavior through Google Analytics to determine the volume of traffic, the number of people who signed up, and whether they also visited the main website.

Phase 2—Expanding the effort

Once companies have started to gather visitor e-mails in a database—the trigger—they will need to ramp up their efforts to stay engaged with these prospects. The nurturing process can be set into motion with a monthly newsletter, but it's beneficial to develop a pipeline of content to continue to provide value to recipients. The white paper can also act as a launching pad for subsequent, shorter pieces that go into more detail on specific issues. In addition, the marketing and communications departments can contribute to the newsletter by promoting upcoming events.

When traffic to the site reaches a certain level—business leaders should determine the tipping point in advance—it makes sense to launch a blog effort and mobilize the collective intelligence of the organization to fill the pipeline. As more blogs are published, the website's organic SEO will begin to increase, contributing more traffic from online users doing research in advance of purchasing goods and services. Blogs can also provide content to populate the company's Facebook and LinkedIn pages (settings can be configured to import the blog feeds automatically) and Twitter account.

Since all of these efforts are complementary, organizations should be able to cover a lot of additional ground without a corresponding increase in effort. For instance, every event can be promoted across social media channels; slides can be extracted from sales presentations to anchor blogs; press releases can be repurposed for Facebook posts; and responses to newsletters, comments on blogs, and external conversations can all provide important direction on what customers care about.

Phase 3—Deepening the conversation

The continuing efforts in phase 2 will establish an ongoing presence for prospects as well as attract potential customers. At this point, companies should consider committing the resources to produce more dynamic content to enrich the dialogue and set the stage for more meaningful engagement. For the blogs, that means videos, surveys, and guest posts from outside experts—all very low-cost ways to bring ideas to life and spur dialogue. For Facebook and LinkedIn, it could mean creating content geared to existing groups that have been formed around specific interests. On Twitter, a company could choose to become a trusted industry voice by aggregating select content from other sources to augment its own.

To capture more value from the growing e-mail distribution list, companies should invest in events that translate online relationships to deeper connections. Webinars, for instance, are natural outgrowths of white papers and can be used to showcase experts in a live setting, go into greater depth on topics of interest, and answer questions. Similarly, in-person seminars, roundtable discussions, and keynote addresses at conferences offer valuable opportunities to make direct contact with prospects and expand the

conversation to address issues that they might be experiencing.



Getting started

The main components of phase one—the white paper, paid SEO, and a landing page—are fairly straightforward, but each requires a specific set of skills to be effective.

Effective online marketing relies on distinctive content, which is incredibly difficult to develop. An outstanding white paper calls for a unique combination of business acumen, industry knowledge, marketing expertise, and writing skill. Tone is also crucial: openly advocating for a specific solution betrays the company's sales pitch and can also fail to deliver the promised value to prospects who download the paper. When developing content, businesses should ensure they have access to experienced freelance business writers who can get up to speed quickly on the client, the industry, the campaign, and the audience.

Selecting the right Web marketing partner also presents challenges. The world of paid SEO is rapidly evolving, and keeping pace with developments requires constant attention and targeted expertise. In addition, quality Web programmers who can deliver high-quality work on deadline and also communicate any issues proactively are at a premium. Since many marketing firms outsource these tasks to contractors, companies should confirm that they are getting a team of experts rather than a project manager leading a team of hired guns.

An effective landing page is a mix of three components: persuasive copywriting, design, and

Web programming. Failing in any of these areas can obscure the call to action and prevent visitors from taking the desired steps. Another challenge is that it requires close coordination between parties who have a good understanding of the strategy.

To get it right, companies should identify and retain the right talent: experienced writers and editors who can shape their expertise and convey it in an authentic way to their audience, and online marketers with a proven track record of getting results, particularly from paid search marketing. The benefits of this combination can be the difference between an online marketing campaign that starts successfully and delivers impressive results and one that loses focus and momentum before achieving any real impact



The marketing efforts of B2B companies must accomplish a number of goals: enhance reputation, strengthen relationships, establish a credible voice in the industry, and create new opportunities. In the online marketing ecosystem, some channels hold incredible value, while others will be nominal at best. Selecting the best tactics to support the business strategy and rolling them out in a coordinated way to build on early successes can be difficult. However, the impact of getting it right—in the form of greater engagement, more valuable conversations, and ultimately more customers—is well worth the effort. 🧠

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