

Why the B2B buying journey is changing (but not in the way you think)

BRANDS OF THE FUTURE

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To connect with consumers in the future, B2C marketers will need to turn their focus from awareness to experience. But, in the B2B world, things aren't that simple. Tom Pepper, Head of LinkedIn Marketing Solutions, UK, explains why...

The way consumers buy things is transforming. They are increasingly trusting technology to anticipate what they want, and will soon start trusting technology to make their purchases for them, too. In many cases, the new [B2C buying journey is barely a journey at all](#). It's immediate, personalised and frictionless, and it's made conscious consideration a voluntary add-on.

In the B2B world, anyone who makes and influences buying decisions for their business is also a consumer. You'd be forgiven for assuming they are being influenced by these changes in the same way, but that's a dangerous assumption to make.

Because, while B2C journeys are getting shorter, automated and more passive, B2B journeys are becoming longer, more complex, and more emotionally charged. As Demand Gen's 2017 [B2B Buyer's Survey](#) reveals, 58% of buyers said that the length of their buying cycle had increased, while only 10% claimed that it had become shorter.

B2B and B2C buyer journeys are moving in different directions

B2B buying journeys may be becoming more personalised, largely driven by sales technology and social media, but that personalisation produces very different results to B2C journeys. Just because you can approach a B2B buyer in more targeted and sophisticated ways doesn't make it any easier to get them to sign up for your services. B2B decisions are more complicated than choosing what to watch on Netflix.

For a start, B2B buyers are almost certainly not making decisions alone. Unlike many B2C choices, B2B decisions are increasingly complex and tend to involve increasingly diverse buying committees. In some sectors, such as IT, it can take a [small village](#) of people to make a decision. And, after schooling themselves by reading free content online, more and more people are wanting a say in the decision-making.

That means more people for B2B marketers and their sales teams to convince. The impact of content in the B2B world is one of the reasons why brand awareness is growing in this field – and why formats like video, which can establish an emotional connection with a wide-ranging group, are increasingly important.

B2B buyers don't necessarily want a shorter journey

The emotional stakes for B2B decisions are often far higher than for B2C ones. Reputations, livelihoods, hopes and dreams are on the line. That's why the buyer's journey

is increasingly autonomous – not automatic. We all know the stat claiming B2B buyers spend up to 90% of the decision journey educating themselves. They use this content to delay the moment when they need to reach out to a sales rep – not because they don't like talking to sales, but because they want to exercise independent judgment and form an initial impression first. The last thing they want is to be easily led.

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How thought leadership drives the B2B buyer journey

A recent study which LinkedIn was involved in underlines the role that thought leadership content plays in the decision-making process. More than a third of decision-makers engage with such content every week; 52% say they use thought-leadership content to vet an organisation, 41% say they have included a company on an RFP on the strength of it, and 48% say thought-leadership has led them directly to award business to a supplier. On the flip side, more than a third say they've removed a business from consideration because of poor quality thought-leadership.

This suggests that being able to identify and reach the right audiences is not enough to close a B2B deal. It's what you do with that opportunity to connect that counts.

Personalisation has to go deeper than knowing who to talk to; it has to shape what you say to them when you do.

When LinkedIn [asked B2B buyers](#) what influenced them to engage with a vendor, the single most important criteria was whether that vendor understood their business model. We found that buyers want to deal with subject matter experts who empathise and understand the issues they face – and this is what highly relevant B2B thought-leadership content can deliver. Almost two-thirds (63%) of decision-makers define valuable thought leadership as

that which relates directly to a topic they are working on.

This degree of personalisation depends on a closer working relationship between sales and marketing – and this is perhaps where the accelerating nature of B2C buying journeys can teach B2B a thing or two. It's not just about automating buying choices but blurring the lines between where marketing ends and sales begin.

48% of decision-makers say thought-leadership has led them directly to award business to a supplier

Beyond the hand-off – the need for seamless sales and marketing integration

Much B2B ink has been spilt discussing where the hand-off should be between sales and marketing on the buying journey. But, in 2018, that's no longer the right question. The most successful B2B sales and marketing organisations are those which integrate both types of engagement seamlessly throughout the consideration stage, delivering the right type of interaction that's most relevant at any given moment.

As our data proves, prospects who have been exposed to a company's Sponsored Content on LinkedIn are **25%** more likely to respond to an InMail from a sales rep at that company – and **10%** more likely to accept a connection request. Once they are connected to a sales rep, they are significantly more likely to share content they receive from that rep's company. The two relationships are mutually reinforcing – and they deliver the coherent, relevant engagement that B2B audiences really value.

Most importantly, aligning genuine sales with marketing throughout the buyer journey gives marketers more opportunities to close deals quickly – once the buyer is ready. Ultimately, thought leadership content from the marketing team has the potential to short-circuit the

traditional buyer journey and lead directly to the award of the business. That's the moment when a B2B buyer journey could start to more closely resemble a B2C one – but only if a fully aligned sales and marketing organisation is ready to take advantage.

The B2B buyer's journey won't be changed overnight by a new piece of technology that sweeps away friction and transforms the way people buy. It can only be changed by people who are enthusiastic about these new opportunities and understand how they can add value for their prospects. Technology is enabling and creating opportunities for B2B marketers – but it's still their job to convert them.

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