

# 2015 B2B Outlook

The trends that will shape business-to-business marketing this year—and how you can leverage them to increase customer engagement and ROI

Chief Marketer asked several B2B experts to share their thoughts on the top B2B marketing and tech trends for the year.



## WHY YOU SHOULD ASK "WHY?"

*Mike Neumeier, principal and co-founder, Arketi Group*

Heading into a year forecast to hold more economic ups than downs, B2B marketers are getting their collective swagger back. While still focused on delivering leads and helping sales sell, marketers should have the confidence and courage to invoke the “why?” factor when planning, executing and measuring marketing programs.

Our firm recently hosted a roundtable for some 70 B2B marketing and PR executives. Nearly all agreed that small, tightly defined prospect lists—maybe as few as 50 or 100 names—are the new norm. Shotgun campaigns aimed at a broad list of targets simply no longer pay off. In 2015 we’ll see marketing working with sales to define highly targeted groups of prospects by asking, “*why is this prospect group a true bull’s eye for us?*”

At the same roundtable, 91% of marketers said they plan to develop more content in 2015. That said, all agreed that content is under greater scrutiny and subject to higher expectations. The “content for content’s sake” approach of recent years has led to content overload, and untenable marketplace noise. Avoid content fatigue by asking, “*why is this content something a solid prospect will value?*”



In the rush to jump on the social media bandwagon and leverage marketing automation, many of us are guilty of putting channel above the content in the marketing mix. Now dawns the realization that channels are key but not all channels are right for all content, or all audiences. Pinterest for engineers, anyone? In 2015, let’s start by asking, “*why does this communications channel trump audience or offer?*”

Big data is starting to give B2B marketers big headaches. And big dirty data is like a New Year’s Day hangover that won’t go away. Many marketers are waking up to the reality that 20–30% of prospects in their databases go bad annually. We all acknowledge data and analytics are no longer nice-to-haves but must-haves. But before we open the data floodgates even wider, let’s ask ourselves, “*why is this a metric we need to know?*”

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## THE CHANGING CUSTOMER JOURNEY

*Russ Green, EVP, director of account services & business development, Godfrey*

Depending on what statistic you like the average B2B customer is 50-70% of the way toward a buying decision before sales is engaged. This changes everything.

Since marketing generally owns the website and all other communication channels and content, marketing has much more responsibility for getting the customer to the buying decision. Marketers need to understand that journey, and how it differs for different types of buyers. They need to know where their audience is in their journey, what they are trying to achieve, what information they need and how they want to receive or access it. There has never been

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## KEEP EM' LOYAL IN 2015

### IDEAS FOR MAKING RETENTION A FOCUS OF YOUR B2B STRATEGY

Marketers who really want to improve their customer retention need to focus first on how customers are actually using their product or service, says Russell Kern, president and founder of The Kern Agency.

"Usage is the first step for loyalty and retention—usage creates preference and preference creates retention," says Kern. "But getting feedback and making improvements isn't always top of mind for B2B marketers, because transactions aren't as frequent [as they are for consumer marketers]."

Marketers need to cultivate relationships not only with the company that is making the purchase, but with the individuals responsible for the buying decisions. "There has to be respect and trust and confidence," he says.

Because the decisions to purchase aren't as frequent, loyalty becomes about listening to the customer and offering upgrades to increase delight to create customer advocates. "They next time [your contact at the client] wants to renew, you want them to renew with you—no matter what company they might be working for," says Kern. "It's about more than transaction frequency."

How a company acquires a customer and the quality of the customers they acquire plays a huge rule in retention and lifetime value, he notes. "If you have a churn problem, are you pushing them away intentionally or unintentionally? Are they being pulled away and if so why?"

There can be many issues behind churn, including product delivery issues, customer service flubs and communication breakdowns. "In B2B, loyalty is often more about the customer's experience along the way—engagement, training and education will lead to repeat sales and contract renewals. It's critical for B2B marketers to demonstrate value extension for customer's investments."

Marketing automation is a great stepping stone into better customer retention, notes Russ Green, executive vice president, Godfrey.

What loyalty means in B2B depends on the company's vertical. For example, says Green, for companies in the equipment market, aftermarket parts and service is huge. "Connecting with users for follow-up can be a multistep program, and you need to create a 'customer for life'."

Many B2B marketers are only now starting to look at retention as a profit center. "That's the challenge and the opportunity, and you need to put the full organization around it," Green says. "It's a business strategy and marketing is an arm to execute it."

For tech providers, the relationship isn't about price concessions but about working with the customer to give them support or help them with planning a roadmap, to keep them in step with the latest innovations.

"You need to change the conversation and enlarge the vision of you're your product is and what you can offer the customer," he notes. "Look at your direct and non-direct competitors—for tech companies the competition may come from a technology that hasn't even been invented yet."

Where can marketers create that conversation? There are a number of venues, including social monitoring and live events, ranging from large scale events to more intimate lunches.

"You want to get face to face and give people a reason to either come to you or let you in," he says. "You can't just have a single focus, you need to look beyond the initial sale." —BNV



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a greater need to have insight into the audience.

Storytelling is all the rage in B2B, but it's nothing new. In the past, storytellers were salespeople. If you've ever been to a trade show, a sales meeting or flown during the work week, you know the kind of people we're talking about. Good salespeople are natural storytellers because they understand what people relate to. What's different is that sales isn't engaged during the early parts of the buyer's journey, so now marketing needs to include storytelling in its toolbox.

The change in the buyer's journey, and the respective roles of marketing and sales, create the need for much tighter alignment of sales and marketing. B2B has been slower to acknowledge the shift in the buyer's journey and adapt to the new reality. One reason is that sales still closes, takes the order and gets full credit, even though their contribution is relatively less than in the past. This is similar to the fallacy of "last click measured" analytics, where brand advertising and public relations aren't seen as contributing to top-line success because they don't generate measurable results, i.e., clicks.

Today, sales still has the vital role of closing the sale, but management needs to acknowledge the increased role of marketing in creating sales opportunities and filling the funnel. Likewise, the "hand-offs" between marketing and sales must be tighter so the buyer continues on the journey unimpeded.



## THE HUMAN TOUCH

*Christoph Becker, CEO/CCO, gyro*

The timeless story of a person, a dream and a plan is something people are connecting with in a magnetic way. They see businesses as drivers of change and now, more than ever, as people. That is why B2B marketers must dial up human relevance.

The very soul of the company must be exposed, shared and celebrated. And it must begin internally first. Culture building is more essential for B2B companies than ever. Every employee must be a brand ambassador and advocate. In this transparent social media world, your customers know when you are trying to fake it. It won't work anymore.

The only way to succeed amid the multichannel assault of noise that exists is to make them feel something. Otherwise they will just become numb.

You must ignite emotion because emotions are what truly drive business decisions. In fact, in this age of big data, 62% of decision makers said they trust their gut first and foremost, according to a study of 720 senior executives conducted by Fortune Knowl-

edge Group and gyro. Additionally, 65% said human factors like culture and corporate factors are the deciding factors.

In many ways, this affirms that the humanity of business is the driving force. All of the data that exists is powerful and is not to be discounted. But, despite it all, business decisions are made emotionally and justified rationally.

Each day the very idea of business grows more dynamic and more inspiring. It is now our job to make it even more humanly relevant.



## CREATE A DIALOGUE

*Grant A. Johnson, CEO/Founder, Responsory/Johnson Direct*

In 2015 B2B marketing will start to catch-up with trends that have been dramatically impacting consumer marketing over the past few years. B2B marketers will need to plan for a shift away from traditional marketing campaigns and focus, or at least test, creating an ongoing dialogue with key prospects based on their titles, roles, responsibilities.

As such, the role of content will continue to grow in importance to help you achieve your goals, and create relevancy for your brand with prospects and existing customers. Coupled with content will be a better use of technology to improve tracking and measurement. But while technology, like marketing automation and data analytic tools will play an increasing role in creating efficiencies and test scenarios, they pale in importance to meaningful content.

It will become harder and harder to get that content to key audiences solely with organic social media, as almost all platforms are trying to monetize their software. Thus, it is critical to create a content marketing plan that included both organic and paid placements to maximize effectiveness and, ROI. Electronic public relations (E-PR) that incorporates both online and offline PR strategies and tactics will prove quite powerful to those who can perfect it.

Mobile use as a marketing medium is, quite simply, exploding. As people rely more and more on their mobile devices as communication tools, even B2B buyers, smart marketers will incorporate better micro-targeting and testing of banner ads and content-inducing landing pages and offers. At this point, do not even think about any online work (websites, microsites, landing pages) that are not responsive. If you design without taking into consideration multiple platforms and devices, you will fail. Responsive design is a given in 2015.

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## 6 TIPS FOR BETTER B2B SOCIAL

### IDEAS FOR INCREASING YOUR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT THIS YEAR

**1. Context matters as much as content.** Linda Boff, executive director, global brand director, GE, noted at BMA14 that her brand rarely just posts in social media about themselves. Rather, they choose to share information about science and technology, to create personality and dialogue around the brand's ideals. "You can't just create content and forget about it," she said, noting that brands must think about the particular social channel when crafting their message. "When we're on a platform like Vine, we need to think about what we can do with 6 seconds."

**2. Speak like a normal human being.** Engage your users in social and speak like you actually have a familiarity with the English language. "Comment in natural words that buyers actually use," said Karen Walker, senior vice president of marketing, Cisco Systems. "Clean up your language—marketers can create great stuff but you need to go back and see if it is actually readable."

**3. Remember, everyone else can do it too.** Digital media is in a reactive period, noted Paul Miller, CEO of UBM Tech. In today's marketing world, anyone can start a blog, Twitter account or Facebook page in minutes. "Publishers face the challenge that everyone is a publisher now," he said, and that means working harder than ever to make your content unique and relevant.

**4. Make "mobile moments."** Many social interactions happen on the go, and marketers need to consider how to make their engagements useful and memorable to consumers, said Josh Bernoff,

vice president/principal analyst, Forrester Research. "A 'mobile moment' is where someone pulls out a mobile device to get what they want, immediately, in context." As examples, he cited USAA, which was the first financial services company to offer customers the ability to photograph a check for deposit, and Krispy Kreme, which create an app to let hungry consumers know when a nearby store had hot donuts.

**5. Create a connection.** If you're trying to sell via social, remember that in this medium, your mantra should not be "always be closing." Instead, says social selling evangelist Jill Rowley, "always be connecting." Share other things socially besides your own content—think of what would be the B2B equivalent of cat pictures for your audience. And if you're a B2B marketer, keep that con-

nection professional—don't post your wedding pictures on LinkedIn, and when you do try to connect with someone, don't be generic. Take the time to write why you want to connect with them.

**6. Consider your audience when going global.** Anil Bhattacharya, CEO of Singapore-based GetIT, noted that he's seen European and American brands trying to replicate their domestic content internationally without considering cultural differences. "You need to understand the platforms and nuances of different countries," he said. Remember that while English language content may work in some countries, it won't be welcomed by audiences universally. And consider that the lines between business and professional lives are blurred in Asia. "People don't want to buy from people they don't know." —BNV



### TEAMWORK TAKES CENTER STAGE

*Ruth Stevens, president,  
eMarketing Strategy*

Solid teamwork between marketing and sales should be an aspiration for 2015. As marketing provides more qualified leads, the opportunities for customer interaction increase and sales and marketing will figure out better ways to go to market together.

To increase those qualified leads, marketers will get more strategic about the content they produce. Content marketing is all the rage now, and rightly so, since it's been an important element of the B2B marketing toolkit for decades, even if it wasn't recognized by that name. To make sure your content is relevant to the needs of prospects at every point in their journey, perform a content audit, study your customers' buying path by segment, and plot out the right content pieces to fill in the gaps.

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Also in 2015, data—and those who work with it—will get some respect. Part of the reason B2B marketers suffer with incomplete or inaccurate data about customers and prospects is that the people who manage data sourcing and maintenance are usually at the bottom of the totem pole. In 2015, it's time to give these people the training, incentives and motivation they deserve. That will result in better market access and more relevant, personal marketing communications.



## THE TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION

*David Jones, VP/CMO, Jackson Mktg, Motorsports & Events*

One of the biggest influencers in the B2B event marketplace is technology. As a whole, event technology is becoming more universal, automated and streamlined.

Technology has made event measurement more accurate, streamlined and in-depth. On the same note, it has made measurement far less invasive. Geofencing and geolocation are great examples of this. It subliminally tells B2B event marketers how many people come to the experience, exhibit or conference, how long they stay, and where they interact and engage.

Another trend impacting the B2B event space is the importance of creating digital extensions of a live event. By using technology such as live streaming, social media, and crowd-sourced content, we are able to extend the reach of that event far beyond its physical space and time to audiences around the world.

And of course, mobile friendly events are now the norm. Event registration sites should be responsive in order to optimize usage on mobile devices, and any events longer than one day should consider incorporating mobile event applications into the mix. These not only allow attendees to navigate and network more seamlessly, but they also extend the life of an event before and after it actually happens. When used in the proper context and way, these applications provide enormous value, from content curation, social integration and audience participation to analytics and post-event extensions. They're also a much more green, eco-friendly way to disseminate content, such as maps or agendas.



## TELL A STORY

*Fergus Rooney, CEO, Agency EA*

B2B marketers are using a content first, storytelling approach for inbound marketing, creating relevant, engaging content like videos, blogs, case studies and webinars that fit within in the B2B sales funnel. According to the study "B2B Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets & Trends," 70% of B2B marketers are creating more content than they did one year ago, and more than half plan to increase their content marketing budget in 2015.

Tracking and measurement is an area with which marketers still struggle. Only 21% of B2B marketers say they are successful at tracking ROI. This is still an enormous margin for growth. In 2015, we'll see increased budgets and focus on tracking and measurement, whether it's measuring campaigns, conversions, websites or digital ads.

B2B is still catching up to mobile users in 2015. As publishers such as Yahoo! continue to build platforms for better mobile advertising, B2B marketers are investing heavily in in-app mobile ads and mobile-friendly sites. And for good reason. Recent studies show that nearly 80% of B2B purchase decision makers are regularly researching purchases on their smartphones. With continued growth in mobile device usage, it has become more critical than ever to have a website that is optimized for mobile users.

Many people are advocating for marketers to employ a shotgun approach trying to meet the customer where they are wherever they are. Instead, consider specific strategic choices in social strategy. B2B marketers don't need to be on every social network, only the social networks where their buyers are active. But on those specific channels, B2B marketers need to be very active and available—networking, nurturing leads, asking and answering questions, making content available. For those networks in which buyers are not active in a business context, leave them.



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