Making the Shift to Digital Sales in B2B

The old methods of demand generation won’t work in the always-online era.

A new, digital era of B2B sales and marketing is upon us. It’s driven by corporate customer demand for online access to their suppliers’ offerings and expertise. Taking advantage of this shift is challenging because it requires moving from deeply embedded B2B sales and marketing models to data-driven, digitally powered partnerships between sales, marketing and analytics.

The rewards of digital demand generation – a pivotal piece of the B2B digital transformation puzzle – can be significant. For example, GE Healthcare Life Sciences, a biopharma business, grew by building an extensive digital demand generation operation that engages researchers through thought leadership content and software, allows customers to fulfill orders through an e-commerce portal, and supports online research into unique, custom biological agents. In March 2020, Danaher completed the purchase of what is now called Cytiva for seventeen times of the firm’s 2019 EBITDA.

Our interviews of 2,000 B2B transformation leaders and a deep examination of twenty real-life cases underlined the need for demand generation strategies that address the unique dynamics of supplying corporate customers.

Our 4C framework turns the best practices we’ve uncovered into pragmatic steps suppliers can take to create tailored, digital demand generation strategies.

**Clarify target**

Traditional demand generation efforts are built upon understanding customer segments and their underserved needs. Effective B2B demand generation efforts go further by clarifying the roles of decision makers and influencers in authorising suppliers, adopting supplier offers and co-developing solutions or operational improvements with suppliers. We’ve found that depicting decision making roles in some form of flowchart or diagram is a best practice for understanding decision making in different buying and use situations, prioritising targets and providing role-relevant content. The key...
to success is to make sure that all the decision
makers and influencers are unambiguous, their
specific roles are clarified (e.g. who sets the specs,
chooses the vendor, approves the budget) and the
sequence of activities are well understood.

This sort of information is rarely captured in
customer databases, and quantitative research is an
ineffective tool for understanding the nuances of
who has decision making or influencing power in
different situations. Therefore, you will need to
interview your own sales team, intermediaries and
different customer stakeholders. A structured
approach that starts with a few key customers and
extends interviews over time to additional
customers across a range of segments or industries
is often the best way to better understand decision
making.

Avery Dennison, the world’s leading supplier of self-
adhesive labels to corporate customers, clarified
their target decision makers and influencers by
forming industry vertical teams, undertaking
customer research to understand each vertical and
using a decision workflow tool to depict decision
making to the entire sales and marketing team.

Avery Dennison found that procurement teams were
only the key decision makers in a limited set of
repurchasing situations. Line engineers, packaging
designers and marketers played a crucial role
whenever manufacturing changes, packaging
design innovation or new product innovation were
involved. While procurement teams prioritised unit
cost and financial terms, the engineers were
concerned with manufacturing run speed and
changeover times; marketing and package
designers cared most about the ability of the label to
make an impact through colour, materials and
special shapes. These priorities varied by
industry. Graphic impact was not as important for
pharmaceuticals, for instance, while bottling run
speed was crucial in beverages.

The firm channelled these learnings into online
content and in-person experiences such as an
innovation workshop tailored to different decision
makers within each vertical. The effort paid off
handsomely, more than tripling their pipeline of
leads and boosting conversion by over 40 percent.

Capture attention

Initial supplier interaction is crucial because it starts
a process of engagement with multiple decision
makers and influencers. Attention capture must
provide sufficient relevance for the initial contact to
involve others at their company. To break through
the noise, effective B2B demand generators tailor
attention-grabbing efforts to the target’s context.

For target decision makers who are actively seeking
information, B2B companies can deploy:

- **Always-on marketing** including SEO/SEM,
  retargeting and website optimisation to
capture the attention of those who are
seeking a product, service or solution.
- **Thought leadership marketing** through
  content sharing is effective for seekers
looking for information but who have not yet
zeroed in on the solution they require.

To reach decision makers who are not in search
mode, but will respond to an idea with the potential
to move the needle, B2B can deploy:

- **Omni-channel marketing** (social, email,
online and offline, etc.) and experiences
targeted to segment profiles based on some
combination of profession, function, industry
or online behaviour that indicates they may
be willing to respond.
- **Account-based marketing** that supplements
many omni-channel tools with sales-force
involvement when information responders’
organisational roles (e.g. laboratory director)
and specific company, rather than
profession, function or industry are the best
indicators of their willingness to respond.

Identifying information seekers is a relatively easy
task that can be accomplished by observing their
online behaviour and whether they move rapidly to
searching for solutions or become involved in
thought leadership content. Responders take more
time and diligence to find through repeated test-and-
learn experiments that target a selected group. A
single experiment is not sufficient because one must
determine whether it is the media, the message or
the recipient that is inhibiting response.

Cultivate interest

An effective cultivation pathway lies at the heart of
most successful demand generation strategies. It
provides the content and experiences that enable
you to surmount barriers to purchase. The best
pathways focus the prospect on what’s important to
them while allowing them to move at their own pace.

This should not be confused with simply providing a
lot of content and information. Presented with
excessive or inappropriate content, prospects can
easily become distracted and never engage with the
content that will drive them to purchase.

A high level of personalisation based on the
customer’s challenge or opportunity as well as their
business context and role in decision making is
required for effective cultivation. There are two
basic approaches.

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When there is insufficient data for personalisation, allow the customer to choose the path by identifying the challenge and the context they are most interested in. This usually comes in the form of a menu of introductory information or guides to content they will find most useful and relevant based on prior research into the segment or industry needs. For example, SAP’s customer experience business unit invites online prospects to learn more about their marketing, e-commerce, data or sales clouds then enables them to self-direct their navigation through potentially relevant content.

When campaigns can be personalised (particularly in the case of existing customers), a technique called next best move is advisable. Based on the customer profile and their entry point in the experience, a tailored piece of content is served to them. As consumers engage with the content, the quality of the content customisation improves, based on an (often AI-assisted) ongoing series of testing-and-learning experiments.

Rena Patel, digital marketing and brand manager at Capgemini, pioneered a customer cultivation pathway through a brand website filled with content pathways for key topics such as cloud computing and big data to answer customer questions and challenges. She concentrated on using LinkedIn to draw interested decision makers and influencers to the website and amplify reach. Ultimately, Patel’s approach delivered over 100,000 new LinkedIn followers, 1.8 million shares, and a million website visits. By year two, it generated US$5 million in sales impact; that figure later increased to an estimated US$20 million in annual sales.

Convert to action

In B2B, disintermediation via call centre or ecommerce options can create conflict with valued channel partners as well as damage relationship-building among salespeople wary of losing bonus payouts and diminishing influence. Suppliers must balance the advantages of a direct, online customer buying relationship with the need for intermediary or sales team support to service the target market. Three best practices have emerged:

- Harmonising offers, incentives and rewards across channels to avoid privileging one channel over others and ensure that internal sales teams remain motivated.
- Synchronising online and personal interactions to make experiences seamless for the customer and empower sales team and channel partners.
- Integrating ecommerce’s role into a customer support system by adapting it for poorly served customers, product lines, regions or segments and ensuring that other channels can reap a share of the rewards.

Schneider Electric has embarked on a B2B digital transformation that includes expanding ecommerce. To mitigate channel conflict, Schneider has integrated distributors within their platform and created customised programs for tier-two sellers. Although the platform is open to large customers, most of the offers are targeted to SMEs and allow customers to purchase, arrange delivery, obtain specifications and test certificates as well as contact the product support centre and customer care.

This article is based on our book, The Definitive Guide to B2B Digital Transformation. Visit our online resource hub to access a wealth of insights, research, webinar recordings, video interviews with senior executives and other information.

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