
Making the Shift to Digital Sales in B2B



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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 fulfil 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 17 times the firm's 2019 EBITDA.

Our interviews of 2,000 B2B transformation leaders and a deep examination of 20 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 learning 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.

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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