Traditional versus Online Marketing for B2B Organizations: Where the Line Blurs

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Abstract

The rise of the internet has opened the way for a whole array of marketing techniques tailored specifically for this new medium. Even so, online and traditional marketing tactics are not wholly opposed to each other, quite the contrary. Many of the primary outbound marketing tactics are still viable by themselves. With some of them, there is already a lot of overlap with the realm of online tactics. And, in some other cases, they've completely morphed into the strategies of internet marketing. Understanding the way in which traditional marketing can improve the efficiency of online tactics is key especially in the business-to-business (B2B) environment, where the buying cycle is a long, arduous process, driven by multiple stakeholders with different agendas. The aim of this paper is to analyse how traditional marketing principles apply to net-enabled B2B organizations and how traditional marketing philosophies translate into the online world. In other words, with the help of the B2B sector, we would like to pin point the exact converging points between traditional and internet marketing, how they can complement each other and thus bring new insights for nowadays digital marketers.

Key words: B2B marketing, Internet marketing, B2B customer experience, Content marketing, Online consumer behavior, Relationship marketing
J.E.L. classification: M310

1. Introduction

The rapidly evolving internet technologies as marketing and communication media are reshaping the ways in which companies interact with their customers. The dawns of the digital age we are currently traversing make it imperative for businesses to seriously consider online marketing techniques in order to maintain competitive advantage (Brady et al., 2008).

So, as digital becomes paramount, what happens with what we generically call traditional marketin? Where is the place of good old traditional marketing principles and practices in a digital world? How much are the two intertwined? Or is it that, when it comes to marketing tactics, digital really is the new traditional?

We are aiming at clarifying these aspects by correlating secondary qualitative data analysis with our own empirical knowledge. More precisely, drawing from the existing literature on these subjects and from the practical online marketing experience in the business to business (B2B) sector of one of the authors, the purpose of this study is to observe how traditional and online marketing strategies are being designed and implemented nowadays and how they influence, replace or complement each other. We are thus hoping to add another layer, pellucid as it may be, to the understanding of Internet marketing and its current development stage.

The choice of applying a specific B2B lens to our endeavor is not arbitrary. B2B marketing only benefits from a fraction of the research in comparison to the business to consumer (B2C) sector. Hopefully such studies and others to come will help mend the still such evident gap in this field.

Moreover, B2B companies are slowly but surely succumbing to the need of competing as modern digital businesses. They are embracing the digital revolution, innovating more and more around the sales funnel and the whole customer experience. This obviously requires a certain commitment to digital at a strategic level, gaining management consensus around a shared vision, as well as rapid learning of new marketing skills and practices. But how about the old ones, that have been paying off again and again? With stakes these high, B2B marketing managers out there are under tremendous pressure to find the right balance between what traditionally works for their customers and satisfying their new needs as co-participants in the digital transformation. Therefore, the ambition of this paper is to shed some light into some of the best ways to do just that.

2. Theoretical background in online and offline marketing techniques: converging and diverging points

With the rapid spread of Internet-enabled channels and their adoption by consumers worldwide, marketing approaches across industries are being enhanced by the accelerated infusion of digital marketing instruments and tactics. Theory teaches us adopting a customer-centric mind-set is critical (Kotler, 2003; Brady et al., 2008), hence the multitude of such persuasion tools marketers use to create a truly effective Web experience (Constantinides, 2004) for their customers:

- *Corporate website*: the prime interfacing platform between the firm and its online clientsas one of the first go-to resources consulted in the decision-making process, must be seen as a vital instrument of customer information and service rather than simply an online brochure or catalogue;
- *Social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Google+, Youtube etc.)*: another main building block of the consumers' Web experience, representing these days a prevalent source of information; the extensive use of such platforms at a business level highlights the fact that information control now lies with the customer (Mangold&Faulds, 2009; Michaelidou et al., 2011);
- *Corporate blogs;*
- *E-mail marketing(Direct Mail or newsletters);*
- *E-conferences (webinars);*
- *Search Engine Optimization (SEO);*
- *Online advertising (pay per click).*

As expressed here above, the rise of social networking sites marks a shift from traditional, unidirectional, push-communication to communication in a network environment, where information is pulled according to the audience's needs and interests (Shankar et al., 2003). As opposed to the traditional consumer, the digital-savvy one has therefore more control over the communication process and can adopt a more proactive attitude, enabled by the Internet as a communication agent.

Moreover, the social component in social media turns them into a privileged medium for users to disseminate information about brands. Trusov et al. (2009) provides a very good analysis of how they generate word-of-mouth in comparison with traditional marketing vehicles. Another key overlapping point between the 'old' and the 'new' is thus finely iterated. In addition to this aspect, we must take into consideration the impact of social media in the context of mobile connectivity. The advent of mobile technology has acted as a catalyst for social networks usage in the context of digital marketing communication (Mort &Drennan, 2002; Yadav et al., 2015).

So what are the differences between the traditional and online buying behavior in the current context of hyper-connectivity as opposed to back in the day, when such digital tool were not as widely spread? Maybe counter-intuitively, research in the past has in fact highlighted there are no big differences, having argued that only one new important step has been added to the online buying process, that of building trust or confidence (McKnight et al., 2002; McMaster, 2010; Bhargava, 2012). This appears indeed to be a crucial component in business interactions generally

and even more so when it comes to online customer experiences.

One of the strategies used by online marketers in order to convey trustfulness in what may be perceived by customers as a cold, impersonal medium is digital content marketing in various forms (Bloomstein, 2012, Jefferson &Tanton, 2013). Fill (2009) describes content marketing as an inbound marketing technique especially effective in the B2B realm. As explained later on by Holliman and Rowley (2014), content marketing is perceived as a useful tool for achieving and sustaining trusted brand status, as well as promoting ongoing interaction and engagement with the brand community. Effected through all of the above mentioned vehicles and then some (press releases, e-books, e-guides etc.), it requires companies to develop a deep sense of understanding of their target audience's information needs and buying consideration cycle. The same authors also imply that content marketing brings about a partial metamorphosis of brands into established media in their respective fields, thus shifting from a 'selling' (traditional marketing) to a 'helping' (inbound marketing) mind-set.

Furthermore, research also underlines the synergic effects of a positive brand image built over the Internet *next to* the company's traditional channels (Bauer et al., 2002; Harrison-Walker &Neeley, 2004). In other words, most if not all of these digital tools and strategies can benefit from being accompanied by traditional initiatives. We are certainly living in an increasingly digitized world, but traditional marketing with its outbound methods are not completely out of fashion yet. Quite the contrary, depending on the industry and usual interaction channels between the company and its audience, they can be complimentary to Internet marketing channels and, at times, even preferred.
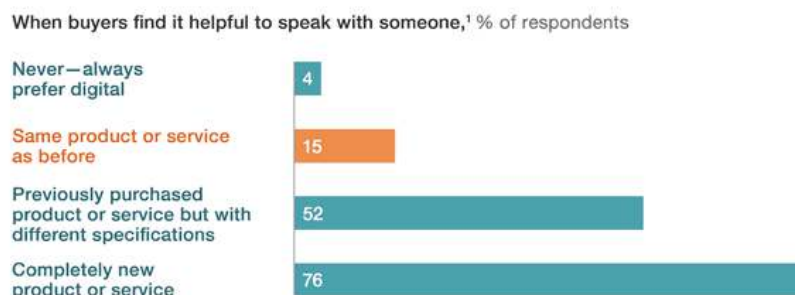
3. B2B marketing: adapting tools and tactics to consumer behavior and preferences

B2B companies face a more difficult time in comparison to their B2C (business-to-consumer) counterparts to attract and retain customers (Kotler&Pfoertsch, 2006). The B2B buying process is generally more complex, with more decision makers and influencers interfering up to the final purchasing decisions. Many competing marketing channels, both traditional and digital, are being used to address the variety of needs of B2B customers. These can be very different at different stages of their decision making process, requiring a balanced approach across channels. Depending on the type of product or service being sought after and on the type of transaction (recurring or new, as you can see in the image below), marketers need to adapt and, at times, envision interactions with these customers either via digital-only, traditional-only or hybrid channels.

Again, as Harrison-Walker &Neeley (2004) clearly pinpoint it, all this is particularly relevant in the B2B sector, where customer relationships often go deeper, as stakes are usually higher. Customization is also more widespread in B2B (Lilien, 2016), implying some extra marketing and communication efforts. Last but not least, longer and more complex buying consideration cycles involving more individuals usually imply a mix of communication tools and tactics being used at different times of the buying consideration processes, with different persons.

As reiterated by Angevine, Plotkin& Stanley (2017), a McKinsey customer decision journey survey from 2016 underlines some B2B customer preferences from this point of view:

*Figure no. 1: B2B consumers' interaction preferences in a digital world*

When buyers find it helpful to speak with someone,[1] % of respondents

Never—always prefer digital	4
Same product or service as before	15
Previously purchased product or service but with different specifications	52
Completely new product or service	76

[1]In person or by phone. Respondents were able to choose more than 1 answer.

Source: Angevine, Plotkin& Stanley, 2017

One of the takeaways from the above mentioned study for B2B managers out there is thus to design and build hybrid journeys for their customers, combining both digital and human interactions for them. This should be done throughout the whole decision making process, so that they can choose their preferred interaction type at any stage.

Figure no. 2. Different types of interactions during the B2B customer journey
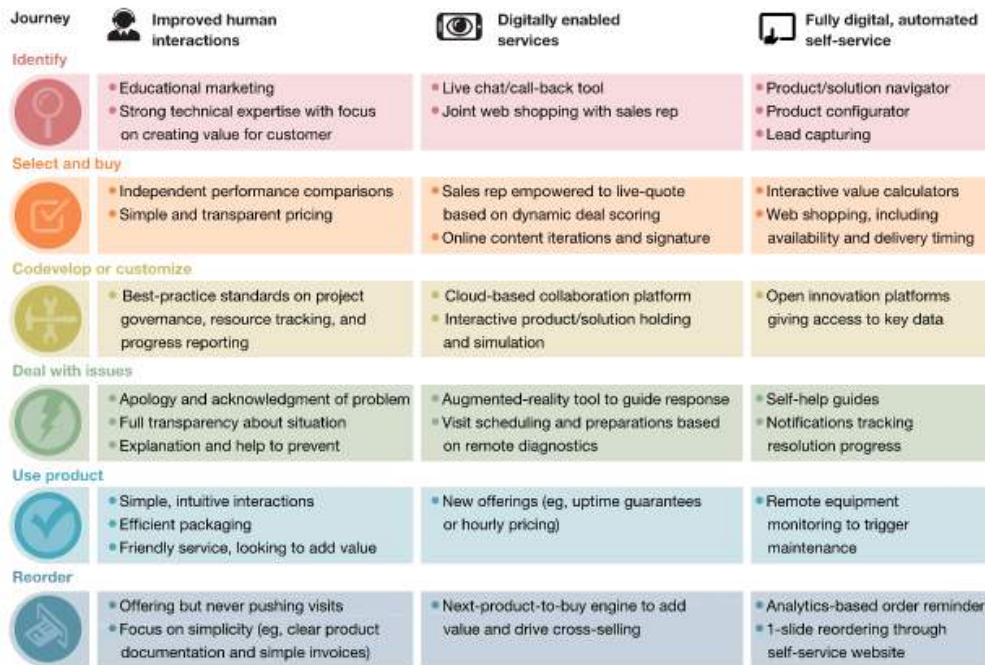
Source: Maechler et al., 2017

Although our argumentation wouldn't consider aspects beyond the identification, selection and buying phases at this point, we believe it is very interesting to observe the same differentiation patterns for later stages of the B2B company – customer interaction. Each of them responds to specific customer needs in a specific point in time; it is only via an optimized and customized mix that the best customer experience can be achieved.

Nevertheless, returning to the parts of the image above that are the focus of this article, we can definitely identify a lot of elements from what we have analyzed so far. But, throughout the first two types of interactions, there is another important underlying aspect that pops out: building relationships. This is an extremely important factor for B2B organizations, which need to develop and nurture their relationships with their customers at all levels (Grönroos, 2004).This means that sales and marketing teams in B2B organizations need to develop strong relationships with individuals in several relevant departments of the customer organization.

Along these lines, marketers' role goes beyond that of attracting new customers and accompanying them through the pre-purchase stage. As Godin (2017) puts it, they are also actively involved in the post-purchase stage by continuing to nurture relationships and thus form strong bonds with their customers in the long run. This has been proved to foster customer satisfaction, which in turn fosters loyalty (Grewal et al., 2003; Shankar et al., 2003), repeated purchases (Walters, 2008) and openness towards new products or services (Wise &Zednickova, 2009).

The relationship building aspect of B2B interactions is particularly rich to look at from our analysis' stand point as it seamlessly encompasses both online and traditional marketing tactics, with very high returns on investment all across the line (Ambler, 2003). If for the former we could definitely recall social media interactions (Cawsey& Rowley, 2016), direct mail, guest posting and retargeting, the latter comes in strongly with face-to-face meetings, phone calls, networking or industry events and even handwritten notes. The synergies are obvious, different tools and tactics need to be used concomitantly or separately in order to achieve the desired results. There is one condition though: integrated marketing communication rules ought to be respected (Mulhern, 2009), as in coherent message and attitudes need to be maintained across all channels.

4. Conclusions

Evolving Internet technologies continually present new opportunities and challenges for both researchers and practitioners in marketing. In a world where online interacting takes up more and more of our resources of all kinds, we wanted to look at how timely traditional marketing instruments still are, how are they used in combination with online marketing techniques and how are these actually combined in order to achieve great strategies.

Starting from converging and diverging points in online and offline marketing tools and tactics, we outlined some noticeable similarities and differences between some traditional and virtual B2B consumer preferences.

We came to the conclusion that a B2B company requires tailored marketing strategies to differentiate itself via customer experience. When having to deal with more than one single customer per transaction during a lengthy process, such as in the B2B sector, ensuring a unique, great, consistent experience pattern for all of these individuals isn't always feasible. On the other hand, the winning approach seems to be congruent with making sure that, in any stage of the decision-making process (and purchasing cycle further on), they are met with a multitude of coherent messages across different channels, online and offline, out of which they can individually choose the one(s) that best suit(s) their needs.

In terms of limitations of our analysis, we would definitely have to look deeper into studies analyzing the effectiveness of all the different tools and strategies taken into account. A comparison between the different methods used by B2B companies to measure the returns on investment of their online and offline efforts would be more than welcome in this direction. Not only will it provide more insight into which really are the strategies of tomorrow, but it will also add to the existing literature on how marketers develop and use online metrics and analytics skills.

In terms of future research suggestions, we would include covering some rising topics in digital marketing, such as effective usage of marketing automation and tailored development of UX design and buyer personas. As practical experiences develop in these fields, scarcity in research sources should diminish.

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