



A Harte-Hanks White Paper

# Create and Nurture B2B Demand with Social Media



Learn the ten essential tips for the effective integration of social media into B2B demand generation and nurturing.



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# Create and Nurture B2B Demand with Social Media

Social is the hot marketing topic among business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) marketers. While it's true that social media can support brand and community building, the approach can also be effective at driving and nurturing demand within all stages of the business-to-business (B2B) sales funnel.

This white paper discusses 10 key tips that are a must for B2B marketers looking to integrate social into an overall demand generation and nurturing strategy.

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## Introduction

Marketers in both the B2C and B2B arenas are considering how to incorporate social media into the marketing mix – that is, if they aren't already doing so. And if they are, they are considering how to get more from their efforts.

Many in the B2B world wonder how to use social to generate more qualified leads, support them through the funnel, and nurture those who are not ready to buy, but otherwise meet the criteria for sales. Can social be successfully integrated into the multichannel marketing plan? Absolutely! As with other marketing efforts, however, the most important foundation is a well-planned strategy that ties back to overall brand and direct marketing objectives.

Who drives social media marketing in B2B? According to the “2009 Business Social Media Benchmarking Study” conducted by online directory Business.com, some 66% of the 2,948 respondents said their company's marketing departments are the main drivers of social media efforts. The study also revealed that among the most popular metrics for measuring success were engagement with prospects, revenue generation and prospect lead volume and quality.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect to consider: **Is B2B a prime audience for social marketing initiatives?** Forrester Research indicates that business

technology buyers, as a group, participate socially more than the average adult US consumer. In fact, 95% of those surveyed read blogs, view videos or listen to podcasts online. Only 2% report that they don't participate in any social activity at least monthly.<sup>2</sup>

**Only 2% of B2B buyers report that they don't participate in social media at least monthly.**  
- Forrester Research, Inc.

<sup>1</sup> “2009 Business Social Media Benchmarking Study,” Business.com

<sup>2</sup> “Forrester's North American And European B2B Social Technographics® Online Survey, Q1 2010.

While it appears that B2B might be fertile – mostly untouched – ground for introducing a social marketing component into the marketing mix, the overarching idea is to integrate social with existing campaigns and not to fall prey to the temptation to do it as a stand-alone. What follows are best practices for using social strategies to help prospects become socially connected with a business brand's product or service, and nurture their interest until at each point in the B2B sales funnel.

## 10 Key Elements

What may be surprising to some is that the key elements to an effective social media strategy are not all that different from those required of other media – whether digital or traditional, online or offline.

Concepts like developing a sound strategy, knowing the audience, being mindful of each communication channel's capabilities and limits, etc. are not new. What is new is the connection of the immediacy of social engagement with the typically longer sales cycle in the B2B environment, and the practice of creating a planned approach for capturing and retaining buyer interest.

By following these ten best practices, B2B marketers will be better able to deliver results from social media efforts that are desirable, measurable and sustainable over time.

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## 1. Establish social demand generation objectives

A company or brand's social demand generation strategy should meet four criteria:

1. Align with overall business, brand and direct marketing objectives.
2. Connect easily to the objectives of specific campaigns.
3. Integrate inbound, outbound, physical and digital media to facilitate dialogue.
4. Allow both for targeted action and measurable results.

### **Some examples of social demand generation objectives include:**

- *Grow the awareness of trends and concerns that relate to products or services*
- *Grow the awareness of a product or service among influential followers/buyers*
- *Attract target audiences to events, offers, communities*
- *Qualify leads for sales*
- *Move qualified leads further into the sales funnel*
- *Create or nurture a community of customers and/or prospects to grow qualitative customer insight and to support both new and repeat sales*

## 2. Be part of a community

There are basically two ways to become socially engaged:

- 1) Be part of a community.
- 2) Create a community.

B2B marketers should begin by identifying where people are talking about their brand online. The most immediate goal is to understand what they are saying by evaluating volume, frequency and sentiment. Then, marketers

should identify what networks people are using and get to know the places in which the voices are the loudest. Are they public or private? Who are the influencers? How are people joining in the conversation?

While the first reaction might be to jump in and respond, it is best to take a step back and observe to get an idea of how and when to respond. Then put a strategy in place for joining and supporting relevant communities in a way that also supports the objectives of the campaign or program.

Creating a community is often tempting – it takes only minutes to set up a group on LinkedIn, for example. And in Forrester’s most recent “North American And European B2B Social Technographics® Online Survey,” business decisions-makers ranked online discussion forums and support sites as the most impactful of social media information sources when deciding their last purchase.<sup>3</sup>

Before attempting to build their own community, however, marketers should be sure they have all the ingredients in place to make that community truly successful.

***Five essential ingredients for a successful online community:***

1. Defined objectives for the community – why it exists and why the target audience should want to participate
2. A base of customers willing to engage with and support the brand and each other online
3. Resources to monitor and nurture conversations in the community
4. Content of value to the target audience, in the format(s) they want
5. Tolerance for open discussion – even if it is not uniformly positive

<sup>3</sup> “Forrester’s North American And European B2B Social Technographics® Online Survey, Q1 2010.

### 3. *Respect the medium*

Being social is all about the conversation. It's about being honest, transparent and creating value. Social mediums are not the places to sell – leave that to Web sites, brochures, online demos, etc. Respecting the medium means not polluting it with overtly promotional materials and messages. People see through it and are turned off by it when participating in social networks.

A better tactic is to contribute through ideas, insight, education and thought leadership. The key is to provide information and tools that help people to answer questions and solve problems. This approach

(which can include judicious use of invitations to relevant presentations, Webinars, white papers, events and other content), demonstrates understanding of the audience, promotes useful dialog and B2B retains a larger audience.

**The key is to provide information and tools that help people to answer questions and solve problems.**

### 4. *Know the influential, and build a strategy to reach them*

After monitoring conversations for a while, marketers typically get to know who the influential people are – the ones that others follow and listen to most. Getting this group to follow and promote a brand's messages is a tremendously powerful way to attract relevant followers and build a strong social presence.

There are tools to for mapping social networks and identifying key influencers, but whether uncovering them is automated or manual, the next step for marketers is to get the influencers' attention – to get them to follow the company's brand or thought leaders and engage with them constructively.

As noted above, this process starts with having meaningful content and messages. With that in place, it is time to engage.

Here are a few tips for getting influencers to take notice:

**Four tips for attracting the attention of social influencers:**

1. Follow them on Twitter and re-tweet their relevant messages.
2. Subscribe to their blogs and post links to their content.
3. Mention them in Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. as appropriate.
4. Join communities where they are active and, after demonstrating credibility, invite them to join other groups/blogs/communities that may meet their interests.

When planning an influencer strategy, marketers should consider and leverage their reach. How many contacts does each of these people have? Can they get others to join, inquire, take action? The key to creating an effective influencer strategy is to be disciplined in the approach and to have online activity driven by the social community's interest – not forced by the promotional needs of a company or brand.

## 5. *Align messages with communication channels*

After a B2B marketer knows who is saying what about a brand or topic, and where, it is possible connect conversations to campaigns. To do this effectively, marketers should take time to understand how each network works – for instance, Facebook = casual, LinkedIn = business, Twitter = a bit of both.

It is essential to create messaging appropriate for the channel, and the only way to do this is to know the networks well enough to know what works – both the content and the format. For example, in order that a tweet on might be re-tweeted with a brief commentary, limit the character count to 120 or so. Do not use all 140 available characters.

Similarly, marketers and subject matter experts should offer varied content over time. Offerings might include links to articles of interest, thoughts/opinions on industry news, tips and suggestions, tools, details on challenges and solutions facing the target audience, and even humor.

Spending time up front is time well spent in knowing the purpose of channels, how customers and prospects are using them, and what types of content to offer.

## 6. *Connect to the sales funnel through landing zones*

The big idea in integrating social into B2B demand generation strategy is to get prospects into and through the sales funnel. One of the most effective ways to drive this behavior, and measure it, is to have users connect to the brand or product through landing zones.

Examples of landing zones might include a Web landing page, a blog, microsite, game or link to a white paper or other piece of content. Whatever function the landing zone serves, it should clearly and simply offer visitors the opportunity to convert – to raise their hands and be identified. The object of the landing zone is to deliver to the visitor what was promised and move that person through the sales funnel.

**Tweet to promote a thought leadership piece at the same time as an e-mail blast for a more promotional offer.**

Timing is key and can be used to advantage. For example, time a social post with a traditional online or offline element. Tweet to promote a thought leadership piece at the same time as an e-mail blast for a more promotional offer. These tactics maximize exposure and awareness of each element, which in turn helps to lift campaign response.

## 7. It's all about the content

Content is king in the social world, just as it is in other marketing channels. To succeed marketers must think like a publisher. Social networks are not the places for “brochure ware.” Most companies are a treasure trove of valuable content that they’ve never promoted socially – white papers, case studies, videos, articles, blogs and more.

Social media invigorates every piece of content that’s never been posted online. If the content is still relevant and provides an opportunity to identify, nurture or retain customers, then promoting it socially not only strengthens the brand but also saves time and money by lowering or removing the cost to get it into the market.

## 8. Create a social campaign calendar

When leveraging social media to create and nurture demand, it is as important to develop a plan and a calendar as it is with any other type of marketing effort. With each effort marketers should include a way to track where to put content and when to post.

To start, a social media calendar could be as simple as a spreadsheet that outlines who will push content, when, and what that content will be. This approach works as a starting point for a campaign-level program – it helps marketing teams to achieve the basic objectives of delivering relevant content to the marketplace.

Later, as the program and team matures, dialog and immediacy move to the fore. Campaign-level calendars remain essential to ensure key messages are delivered; however, to engage influencers, buyers and the broader marketplace over time requires people who will start and participate in online conversations, share timely news and opinions, and locate items of interest to share with their audience. At this point, an enterprise-class social media platform and the personnel to manage it may be necessary.

## 9. Measure from awareness to lead to sale

Social networks enable marketers to manage and effectively measure behavior all the way from awareness to lead to sale. The resulting data set is potentially enormous and complex, yet offers unprecedented opportunities to understand audiences and shape marketing efforts accordingly. Marketing teams should therefore include staff that understands the Web and the social space, especially the science of tracking.

These professionals must know the ins and outs of Web analytics well, and have the tools to track where each social connection starts and ends. This is especially important in B2B, where marketers typically communicate with a smaller group of decision makers and influencers more frequently, and where longer sales cycles often complicate the ability to connect marketing programs to sales results.

## 10. Test, test, test

Social can be both forgiving and unforgiving. It's easy to put something out there and then delete it immediately, which can't be easily accomplished with traditional online and offline channels. That said, companies and brands can be quickly and unceremoniously unfriended or, worse, targeted for disparaging reviews and comments, if they are too promotional or too "loud."

Online users are fickle. As with all marketing, the best approach is to test the way through to the right content. And, again, be honest and truthful in all social communications, especially social, will help avoid making too many mistakes.

## Conclusion

As more and more B2B marketers immerse themselves in social marketing, the more crowded and loud the landscape will become. Now is the time to plan and execute a well thought-out approach for testing social and using it to supplement existing brand awareness, demand generation and lead nurturing strategies. Marketers who take these steps now will demonstrate value and

attract followers ahead of their competitors, and position their brands and their marketing programs for greater success when (not if) competition for the attention of influencers and buyers intensifies.

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