

FOCUS REPORT:

Become a butterfly, not just a faster caterpillar

The digital marketing transformation done right

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Digital Marketing Takes Center Stage

The pandemic year has businesses focusing on reaching the right prospects with the right message through the right medium.

BY PAUL NOLAN

As the highly anticipated initial public offering of Airbnb crept closer last year, stock analysts swooned over the company's ability to garner 91% of its website traffic organically — 10 times the organic traffic of its competitor, Booking.com.

"Google searches reflect that Airbnb has eclipsed the equity of century-old brands, in one decade, across markets big and small," wrote entrepreneur and NYU marketing professor Scott Galloway. "While competitors may have equity in a specific market, no brand sits on the iron throne across all markets as Airbnb does."

Zac Harris, director of SEO at Nacho Analytics, which provided its customers website analytics of competitors, had a different take. While acknowledging that Airbnb has elite-level brand awareness, Harris noted that Airbnb's completely branded organic search can be problematic. People who find Airbnb offerings do so by typing "Airbnb Chicago" or other destinations into Google. "That's significant and not ideal because [Airbnb is] missing out on traffic for terms like 'vacation rentals in Chicago,'" Harris wrote.

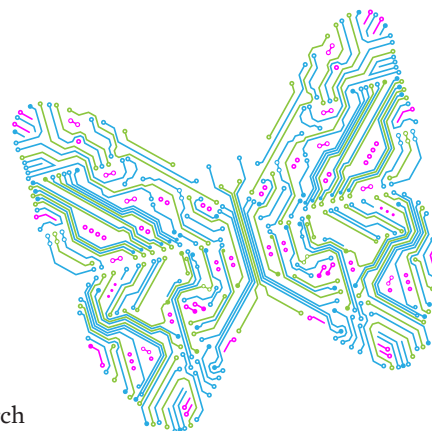
In contrast, Vrbo, a vacation rental company owned by Expedia Group, "crushed" Airbnb when it came to searches that did not mention a brand ("vacation rentals in Chicago," for example). At the time Harris was comparing the two

companies' search performance, 31 of Vrbo's top 100 search terms by volume were non-branded. In fact, for searches that did not include a brand, Vrbo almost always appeared before Airbnb. "In many cases, Airbnb doesn't even land on the first page (and you know what they say about page two of Google)," Harris wrote.

An Ongoing Battle

Ultimately, Harris states in his [2019 comparison](#), Airbnb's overall digital marketing strategy is more effective than Vrbo, but he adds that both companies have room for improvement. He argues that Airbnb is not the digital marketing juggernaut that some investment analysts would have you believe.

Editor's note: Though Nacho Analytics assured its customers that its methodology for providing insights into competitors' website analytics was perfectly legal, the company closed in 2019 after it was shown that it inadvertently exposed proprietary information such as patient names and doctors they visited, vehicle identification numbers of cars purchased and the name of the buyer, and travel itinerary information of



What are we talking about, anyway?

Definition — Digital marketing includes all the elements of online marketing plus tools such as email that companies use to connect with current and prospective customers. As a HubSpot primer on digital marketing states, "the best digital marketers know which channels their audience uses and they have a clear picture of how each asset supports their overarching goals."

Common and emerging digital marketing tools include:

SEO	Downloadable content
Paid search ads	Video marketing
Pay per click (PPC)	Email marketing
Webinars	Link building
Display advertising	Marketing automation
Social media marketing	

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trips booked on Booking.com, Priceline and other reservation sites to third parties.

That's clearly unconscionable, but it doesn't make Harris' insights any less valid. There is more than one way to compete and succeed in digital marketing. It's a continuous battle to stay relevant within your industry, and though it may seem like you're getting trounced, a closer examination may reveal you are doing some things better than your competitors.

Like most everything else in the era of a global pandemic, the digital marketing transformation has been accelerated for most companies. As B2B companies continue to expand their digital marketing efforts, they can cull lessons from the B2C clashes like that between Airbnb and Vrbo.

In fact, says George Westerman, senior lecturer with the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy, because B2C marketers are well ahead of their B2B counterparts in implementing digital marketing strategies, B2B companies would be well-served adopting some B2C digital marketing techniques.

Becoming a Butterfly

"In the B2B world, you need to adopt the methods that the B2C people use in a different way, and that's not going to be natural," Westerman told SMM in a telephone interview. Many

Westerman emphasizes that companies seeking digital transformation continue to focus too much on the digital component and not enough on the transformation. "Digital transformation is using technology to radically change the way you do business. You may do it in pieces, but it's more than just buying digital tools. It's rethinking the way you're working."

In an article published last November updating their 2014 piece, Westerman and co-author Didier Bonnet state that a large percentage of companies continue to struggle with their digital transformation.

"Digital masters cultivate two capabilities: digital capability, which enables them to use innovative technologies to improve elements of the business, and leadership capability, which enables them to envision and drive organizational change in systematic and profitable ways. Together, these two capabilities allow a company to transform digital technology into business advantage."

As Westerman explained during our recent conversation, "One reason it's a struggle is because people think of it only as a technology problem. They try to work the old way only faster or broader, but what they really need to do is think about new ways of working. When digital transformation is done right, you're like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. In most cases,

**"It's more than just buying digital tools.
It's rethinking the way you're working."**

B2B manufacturers still deploy a "catalog approach" to sales, with inside reps relying on frequent touches with prospects and customers to close deals. Even in the pandemic, many B2B companies tried to adapt that approach to the new world order by simply shifting in-person sales presentations to video calls. "That's not how B2C marketing works anymore. Digital marketing in B2C is segmenting customers, micro-segmenting and then trying to hit them quickly with stuff.

"The other thing that happens in B2C marketing that doesn't happen in B2B marketing yet is a lot of experimenting," Westerman adds. "We'll hit you with something, if you don't respond to that, we'll hit you with something else; if you don't respond to that, we'll hit you with something else."

In 2014, he co-wrote an article for MIT Sloan Management Review entitled "[The Nine Elements of Digital Transformation](#)" in which the authors state, "Leading digital change requires managers to have a vision of how to transform their company for a digital world." Successfully navigating a digital transformation requires what the authors call "digital masters."

people are just thinking about digital transformation as becoming a faster caterpillar."

Reskilling to Remain Competitive

Westerman and Bonnet report that in a 2018 survey they conducted of 1,300 executives in more than 750 global organizations, only 38% said their companies have the digital capability needed to become digital masters, and only 35% said they have the leadership capability to do so.

In their article, Westerman and Bonnet explore multiple elements of digital transformation that drive organizational change, including operations, employee experience and business models. For our purpose, we asked them to focus on digital marketing.

"We really need to rethink the back-slapping good guy who sells these things personally with a handshake," Westerman says. "We need to rethink what that person's role is if so much more is moving through a digital channel. When you hire the person who knows everyone in the industry, that's helpful. But there are also ways to get everyone in the industry to know you

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without hiring that person. It could totally disrupt the way we think we succeed in marketing.”

Bonnet points to upskilling employees as a vital component for B2B marketers to get where they need to be. Indeed, in a February 2020 poll by McKinsey, 43% of business leaders reported existing skill gaps, 87% predicted further skills gaps within the next five years and 56% plan to use reskilling programs to plug these gaps.

“I work with a few companies where, six or seven years ago, the marketing department was full of creative and agency people. Today, it is full of data scientists. The companies that have not shifted their resources or reskilled their workers are really struggling,” Bonnet told SMM.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella said as much in a Jan. 30 *Wall Street Journal* story headlined “Businesses Are Being Pushed to Evolve.” “What we are witnessing is the dawn of a second wave of digital transformation sweeping every company and every industry. Digital capability is key to both resilience and growth. It’s no longer enough to just adopt technology. Businesses need to build their own technology to compete and grow.”

Where to Begin?

Besides skill deficiencies, paralysis by analysis could be another reason companies have not made more progress in digital transformation since Westerman and Bonnet wrote their original article in 2014. Steven Casey, principal analyst

at Forrester, says the market research company’s regular surveys of technological investments helps its clients prioritize investments by providing a glimpse at what marketing technology other companies are investing in and what they feel provides the biggest ROI. The most recent Forrester Tech Tide report polled 80 professionals with knowledge of the B2B marketing technology industry between late August and mid-September 2020. Forrester analysts used the responses to shape this list of six B2B digital marketing technologies they classify as providing high business value and worthy of investment:

- Account-based marketing platforms
- Chatbots and virtual assistants
- Customer data platforms
- Marketing event management solutions
- Marketing performance analytics
- Online video content platforms

Interestingly, Casey says digital marketing technologies such as content marketing platforms and social advertising solutions have become less important to invest in separately since newer tools incorporate those elements into their capabilities. Direct email solutions also fall into the category of a technology that

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Digital Is Spared from Sweeping Budget Cuts

How important is digital marketing spend? A [Gartner spend survey](#) of more than 400 marketing leaders in North America and Europe in August 2020 indicated that budget constraints initiated when the pandemic hit would continue into 2021, yet budgets for technology and digital channels may actually grow.

Gartner reports that technology currently accounts for the largest proportion of marketing budgets (26.2%), compared to media (24.8%), in-house labor (24.5%) and agencies (23.7%). CMOs remain bullish about technology heading into the next 12 months: 68% expect their already significant outlays to increase.

Asked which planned technology deployments they would postpone in the event of an economic downturn, marketing leaders say they’re least likely to cut customer data platforms, mobile marketing platforms and digital commerce tech.

workflow management applications. Gartner recommends that B2B CMOs build and promote digital-first programming such as webinars and digitally guided selling tools that help answer customer questions and support conversions.

An ongoing challenge, however, is optimizing the use of technology. Gartner research shows that marketers use only 58% of their existing technology capabilities. Extracting their full value may come with costs such as upskilling marketing talent or investing in



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Digital Marketing Takes Center Stage,

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has been swallowed up by larger platforms, while technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality have not proven worthy of investment for companies outside of a few niche industries.

In its [digital marketing starter's guide](#) for small businesses, inbound marketing software maker HubSpot states, "starting your digital marketing strategy is as simple as starting with why you want to do it, deciding what you want to do, how you're going to do it, what you expect to happen, and when and how you'll measure your success." Clear, measurable goals are a must. Common reasons for creating or enhancing digital marketing efforts include increased brand awareness, lead generation and growth from existing customers.

The overarching objective of any digital strategy, the HubSpot report states, should be delivering a better customer experience at every digital touchpoint to turn them into promoters of your brand. "People don't have the same trust they had with businesses back in the day. But one thing that remains truer than ever is that people trust their peers. When you think about digital marketing, you'll want to consider how you're turning strangers into people who will advocate for your business and products."

It's Still a People Process

While it's imperative to upgrade your marketing technology and upskill your workers, even the most ardent supporters of digital sales and marketing tools agree that connecting with customers and prospects is ultimately a people-oriented process.

"Digital technology should not be a substitute for human connections," Microsoft's Nadella told [The New Yorker](#) in a recent article on the future of offices. "Digital technology should help human connection when there are constraints of space and time."

In a January web presentation hosted by Matt Heinz of Heinz Marketing that was billed as bold ideas for marketing leaders, Heinz and his two featured panelists started by touting the power of...wait for it...the telephone and direct mail.

"Let's start with this idea that sales and marketing have gone completely digital. I push back at that premise" Heinz said. "A year ago, as people started shutting down their offices, there was a roar of approval from the social selling crowd that this was their moment. We're still seeing the telephone as a very prominent and successful component of sales strategies."

"It's not all digital or no digital," said Russ Somers, vice president of marketing for [TrustRadius](#), a review site for B2B technology. "Anytime you have a boom in one area, it creates opportunities in others." Somers says even those marketing solutions that are decidedly non-tech are carefully integrated with digital solutions. "To me, the big thing is that 60% of the people driving purchases are millennials, and they buy

What's Next?

We asked what's trending in digital marketing. Here's some of what we heard back.

Think Long-Term

"B2B digital marketing has usually been focused on rational, short-term activity. Roughly 54% of B2B media spend should be allocated toward long-term emotional brand building for maximum effectiveness. Direct response focuses on people who are lower in the funnel and who are more likely to buy today. Brand building focuses on everyone in the entire category who might want to buy tomorrow. That's how you truly grow over the long-term."

— Samuel Scott, marketing speaker and author of *The Promotion Fix* column for *The Drum*.

The Reinvention of Personalization

"The next generation of personalization is not about cookies or third-party data, it's not about merchandising, and it's not about guesswork. The next generation of personalization is about relying on deep data insights, first- and zero-party data, and using machine learning to derive not only the right content, not only the right offer, not only the right channel, but the right sequence of events that leads to an automated path to conversion."

— Richard Jones, CMO of Cheetah Digital

More Integrations

"While there has been an explosion of new digital marketing tool sets (email marketing, social media, SEO dashboards, live chats/chatbots, automation, webinars, etc), many of these programs have been standalone or difficult to integrate with more standard programs like email and collaboration tools. More and more of the big players are adding direct integrations from these new tools to core business programs like CRM, Outlook, MS Teams/Slack, and calendars that many enterprises rely on. This means companies can get the full picture view of where their marketing is working tied directly into their sales funnels without expansive reports.

— Colton De Vos, marketing specialist, *Resolute Technology Solutions*

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differently. They expect the online and the offline to be really well integrated.”

Successful strategies are buyer- and market-specific, added panelist Sally Duby, a managing partner at The Bridge Group, a B2B sales consultant. Duby said calling customers and prospects on their cellphone was somewhat taboo prior to the pandemic, but has become more accepted since no one is in their office. One chief marketing officer at a prospective client she had reached out to told her that he gets over 200 emails a day from vendors. “You can’t make any traction when you’re one of 200 or 300 in someone’s email, but if you’re only one of five or six that is using the phone, you’re going to get a lot more attention.”

Holding up his cellphone, Somers concurred. “My number of lifelines to be reached has decreased. When you can get in this in box, it is my priority.”

Marketing’s Expanding Role

The emergence of increasingly sophisticated digital marketing tools, combined with shifts in sales strategies that began with increased deployment of buying teams and that was hugely impacted by the global pandemic, is elevating marketing’s role in the B2B sales process.

In the pre-digital era, sales reps primarily drove business growth through relationship selling and marketing supported sales with trade shows, events, sales decks and direct mail, says Nick Heys, founder and CEO of [Jabmo](#), an account-based marketing platform provider. Digital marketing technologies promised to accelerate revenue growth as much as a decade ago, but Heys says tools such as website content management systems, social marketing and marketing automation never really met the lofty expectations that had been set.

He expects marketing to have a bigger role in driving business growth. “In 2021, marketers are going to get a seat at the table,” Heys told [Martech Today](#) earlier this year. “They’re going to move from the back seat to being co-pilots with the sales organization. They’re taking responsibility now for what the salespeople can’t do, and that’s digital selling. ABM is all about digital selling: doing what salespeople used to do on the golf course, in face-to-face meetings, and trade shows, is now being done through highly personalized, sequenced messaging.”

Peter Schoeman, founder and CEO of [The Dog Adventure](#), a website that connects manufacturers with dog owners through content marketing, expects B2B marketers’ role to continue to transform. Schoeman responded via email to a query we posted online.

“B2B marketers will be tasked to do more than drive awareness of their product or brand, they will have to capture leads at every stage and then guide the lead through the process until the very end, targeting the person with tailored messages that keep their interest through every stage of the process — from awareness to conversion,” Schoeman says. “Additionally, B2B marketers’ jobs won’t be done at the conversion stage. They will also have to find ways to build and maintain customer relationships and loyalty through continuous, meaningful communication.”

Setting a Budget

What does all this mean for marketing expenditures in 2021? John Buscemi, principal at marketing agency TriComB2B, [states in a blog post](#) that many companies spend up to 10% of gross revenue on marketing, though B2B companies tend to be more conservative than B2C.

“Our own experience indicates mature B2B manufacturing, industrial, construction and engineering companies usually allow 0.5 to 2% of revenue for marketing. Start-ups and fast-growth market entrants are more aggressive, allocating as much as 5%,” Buscemi writes.

“A same-old, same-old approach to percentages and allocations is still too prominent among many B2B companies. Make sure you build your plans from the ground up each year, especially in 2021, when so much of the landscape has changed,” he adds. “Picking a percentage and developing arbitrary allocations without accounting for your real needs is not only bad for business, but it can also leave you under- or overfunded.”

Buscemi cautions that it’s important not to simply look at current projections versus prior-year marketing spend. Instead, review market drivers, trends and environmental changes that have taken place, and prioritize your plan to focus on those initiatives that deliver value to the business. **SM**



Will TikTok Work for B2B?

It may be time to create your own corporate shanty

BY JAKE RHEUDE

Getting in early on a good idea can play a big part in future success. Ask the people whose families sailed on the Mayflower or those who bought Bitcoin when it was valued at \$8 (at least the ones who held it rather than [spending it on pizza](#)).

There are two dovetailing arguments for using TikTok, the fastest-growing social media platform, as a B2B marketing tool: Its generous algorithm and its lack of polish.

Good Content Gets Rewarded

Anyone who has used TikTok for more than 10 minutes knows the app's algorithm is shockingly astute. Without it, the platform wouldn't be as addicting as it is. The exact formula is proprietary, but we have a pretty good idea of [how TikTok's algorithm works](#):

- Tracks user interactions such as shares, follows, comments and even content users create that borrows from existing content. The number of times a user replays the same video is also a heavy indicator of interest.
- Tracks information in the video itself such as captions, audio and hashtags.
- Use of a highly personalized “For You” page that, like Google's search results, is tailored to each individual user based on their interests and viewing history.

[Third-party reports](#) show that companies advertising on TikTok are getting significantly higher ROI than legacy social media advertising. If you get more engagement for your money, why wouldn't you go with the more cost-effective option?

As TikTok matures into a legacy platform, the algorithm could change and force commercial accounts into the pay-to-play position that is the norm for other social media platforms. Even if the algorithm remains unchanged, an increase in the number of companies bidding for limited ad space may push



costs higher. But there's a long way to go between now and then, and there's no reason why good B2B content won't find its way to people interested in seeing it on TikTok.

There is one feature of TikTok's algorithm that sets it apart from other social media. It's commonplace to find wildly popular videos with millions of views posted by creators with nearly new accounts or a handful of previously created videos that garnered only a few hundred views. In other words, TikTok's algorithm takes a “what have you done for me lately?” approach to promoting videos, rewarding good content without concern for track record or how long you've been on board. Contrast this with Facebook, which is notorious for throttling visibility of new posts in an effort to force creators to buy ads to gain exposure.

The TikTok Look and Feel

What does compelling B2B content look like on TikTok? Many marketers have expressed skepticism about the app's viability as a B2B marketing tool. Almost all of them agreed that if you did post a B2B campaign on the platform, the content would have to be suited to the predominant demographic as well as the medium itself.

“I see the medium of TikTok being used for B2B like any other mature social channel,” says Jonathan Simon of the Telfer School of Management at the University of Ottawa. “When Instagram

first came out, most of the content was pictures with bad filters by wannabe photographers. Today, you can find everything from videos on finance to comedy sketches. No one denies that Instagram is a perfectly viable platform for B2B. It's early in the evolution of TikTok's audience and material, but we've already seen a similar transition away from it being a platform solely focused on lip-syncing to covering a broad spectrum of content.”

The Future Will Be Here Soon Enough

Shopify's TikTok channel is one of the earliest forays by a major B2B force on the app. The contrast between its TikTok content and the company's blog cannot be clearer. The focus is on young entrepreneurs who are looking for ideas on how to [start their own online business](#). They're not going to offer deep dives into more technical or fundamental aspects of running a Shopify store because the vast majority of their TikTok audience is at the top of the marketing funnel, or may not even be at that stage yet.

If you want sleek, well-made content on TikTok you can find it. Among millennials, however, there is a [general desire for authenticity](#) — or a lack of authenticity. It's clear that content doesn't have to be polished or even exciting to do well among this cohort, which is increasingly filling B2B buying roles.

Unlike legacy social media, where a large following is a necessary part of audience capture, you may not be penalized as much for being late to the TikTok party so long as the content you create is engaging yet informal enough to go viral — or as viral as B2B content can go. **SM**

Jake Rheude is vice president of marketing for [Red Stag Fulfillment](#), an ecommerce order fulfillment provider with warehouses in Tennessee and Utah. Red Stag has created a [TikTok account](#), and the team is perfecting its dance moves for a first post.

TikTok-Like Videos Have Multiple Applications

While Zoom and Teams have proven useful for video meetings, businesses are adopting other means of incorporating video into their everyday communication and workflow. Wyzowl, a provider of animated explanation videos, reports that 86% of businesses [use video as a marketing tool](#).

It's an ideal time for companies to recognize the multiple uses of short videos. One great way to start is to use insights garnered from TikTok's playbook, says Sean Gordon, founder and CEO of [vidREACH](#), a personalized video email and sales engagement platform.

Video engagement requires seconds, not minutes.

Attention spans are shorter than they have ever been. Quick, visually appealing bursts are better at grabbing and maintaining attention while providing information and entertainment. This approach doesn't have to be restricted to social media. Video engagement works in emails, on websites and in e-newsletters.

Videos open the door to deeper connections.

By utilizing the personality aspect video has to offer, trust and connection can be built quicker and more effectively with customers, prospects and channel partners. They put personality into your message, allowing the chance to put a face with a name or showcase things you are most proud of, like company culture initiatives or the brains behind your new product.

Video has team-building applications.

Managers and HR leaders can use video for recruiting or training initiatives, to elaborate on your company's mission or kick off an incentive program. In the current remote work environment, video can help companies build camaraderie by fostering stronger relationships. **smm**

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Marginal Gains Can Boost Overall Performance

The secret to improving digital marketing performance is to realize there is no secret

Neil Patel, a leading voice for more than a decade on how to use digital marketing to help grow your business, says the secret is there is no secret. COVID has pushed companies to accelerate and improve their online marketing efforts, so it's more

competitive than ever to stand out from competitors. While there is no Holy Grail, Patel offers insights in a [recorded presentation](#) that companies can take in 2021 to make sure they are doing all they can to enhance their online visibility.



Improve page load time. According to Patel, improving page loading speed is proven not only to increase visits and SEO rankings, but also increases conversion up to 7%. Many companies already use content delivery networks (CDNs) to load static content to increase page load speed. Patel recommends also loading non-static files with CDNs.

Content length doesn't matter as much. Conventional wisdom has held that more is better when it comes to content to rank near the top of Google searches. Patel says that's no longer the case. Your focus should be on quality, in part because Google is using more user signals to rank websites. However, he does advise companies to make longer audio and video content—10 minutes or more. Anything shorter than 10 minutes may hurt your reach.



How high you rank matters more than ever. Over 35% of clicks go to the No. 1 position in search. If you're not in the top 10, you're going to have a difficult time being seen, Patel says. On his [Marketing School](#) audio blog, Patel recommends building less links. If you build too many links too fast, your rankings don't move up as fast and they usually don't go up as high compared to people who are building more quality links slower.

Repurposing and updating content will be the norm. Many marketers focus on creating new content, but with 1 billion blogs online, there is a glut of information out there. Take the existing content you've created and repurpose it. Turn text content into audio and video. Patel says companies should update content more often than they release new content.



Backlinks don't matter as much. Building backlinks may not be worth the time that is invested into it. It's about user experience and value. Search engines are optimizing for relevancy.

Shoot for marginal gains. Accept the fact that there is no silver bullet and focus instead on making small improvements in a number of areas. **smm**



Expand Your Use of Digital Channels to Hit Quota

Even powerful messages can get lost in digital marketing maelstroms

BY SHAWN FINDER

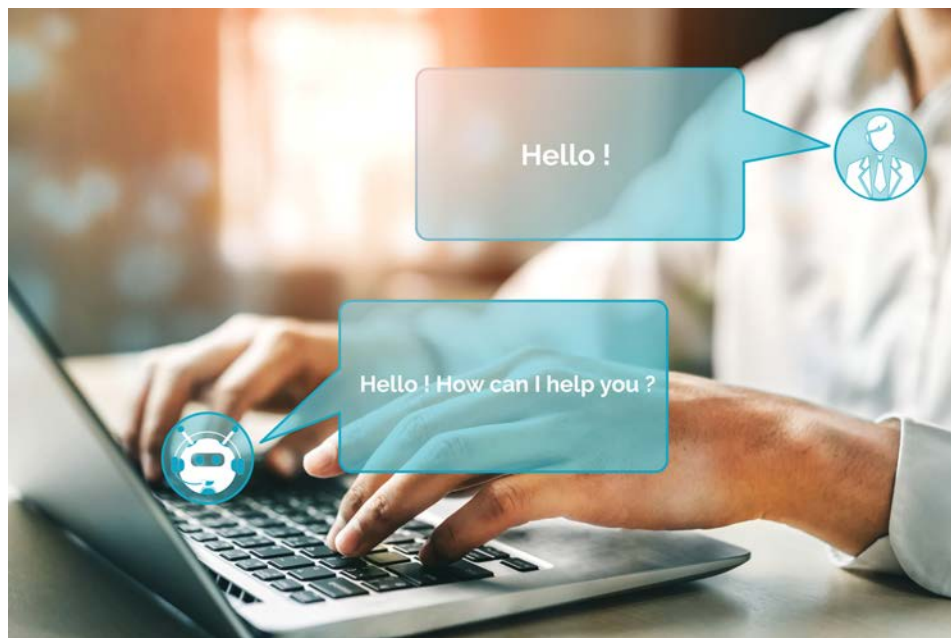
Ask sales and marketing leaders what digital channels they leverage to generate leads and help their teams hit quota and you'll likely get the same answer over and over: cold calls and emails.

These are useful tools, but we're long past the era where companies can rely solely on them to drive business. The biggest problem with email is that personalization is on the decline. Look at your own inbox and notice how many cold emails incorporate an HTML template and have been blasted to tens of thousands of people.

If you want to hit your quota faster than your colleagues or competitors, you need to start taking advantage of the underutilized channels that salespeople have available today.

Video Email: How many video emails do you receive each day? Probably not many. When others are not being innovative with the video phenomenon occurring in communications, it's your chance to stand out by sending personalized video emails to your prospects. Video is an incredibly powerful format. [Cisco expects](#) it will make up over 82% of all traffic by 2022. It's capable of including other mediums, both visual and auditory, which means you can engage your prospects on a deeper level. And since it easily conveys body language, tone and emotional undertones (unlike text), video is effective in getting your message and emotion across. With far fewer in-person interactions expected to be part of the new normal, that's critical.

Conversational Bots: Prospective customers want answers to their product-related questions instantly. No matter how great your customer support reps are, they can take only one call at a time. Conversational chatbots can service multiple callers simultaneously and they're available 24/7/365. Chatbots can help engage prospects and prevent them from bouncing off your website. You can start chatting with your accounts and have them make an introduction for you to the decision-maker at a company. Remember, the decision-maker is the one that will help you hit your quota.



LinkedIn: Use LinkedIn for intangible touches to your prospects in your sequences. This channel can be used to endorse, like, comment and share on prospects' engagement that will only help you expedite your project, close deals and hit quota. Use it to warm up your cold emails and calls, as well as to stay on your potential customers' radar. By engaging in conversations with prospects on LinkedIn, you won't be a total stranger when they see your message in their inbox, which means they are more likely to open and respond to it.

LinkedIn Voicemail: Yes, you can leave voicemails on LinkedIn just like you would leave a voicemail if you were making a cold call. This voicemail can be up to 60 seconds long and help you build trust with a prospect.

Emails and cold calls aren't out of the mix completely, but implementing multiple channels into your sales process is necessary to rise above the din and build trust. It's trust that will get you the sale at the highest price.

If you're wondering what digital channels to use, I recommend identifying which channels your prospects are receiving 100 messages through and which channels they are only receiving five through. Go with the latter. The best way to hit quota is deploy out-of-the-box marketing tools.

Shawn Finder is founder of [Autoklose](#), a sales automation platform that is used by thousands of sales professionals around the world.

Your Social Media Strategy Is Missing One Critical Element

BY STEVE WATT

Imagine if cars came without engines. They would look nice, but they wouldn't do much. You could wash and wax the car all day. Admire how good it looks in your driveway. But there would always be a voice in your head questioning why you bought it. Why you maintain it. What purpose it serves.

Then one day, you see a car driving down your street, and then another. What wizardry is this?

People Engage With Other People

Countless articles have been published on how businesses ought to leverage social media. Most miss an absolutely critical truth.

People don't generally engage with brands. They engage with other people.

If you just want a nice-looking lawn ornament, go ahead and put that powerless car in front of your house. If you actually want to go somewhere, you're going to need a different approach.

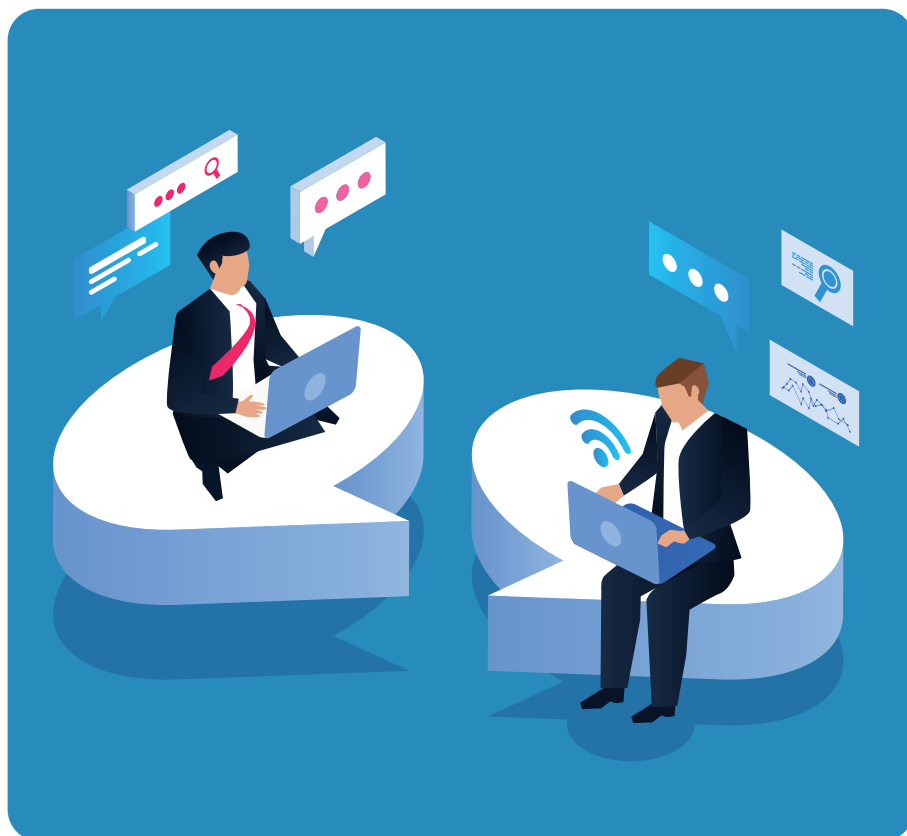
It's Time to See What Social Media Offers

The crux of the social media problem is that we're still seeing it through an old, centralized corporate advertising lens. This leads us to treat social media as a broadcast medium — as a bullhorn.

We're failing to adapt the outdated one-to-many advertising mind-set to a more modern, socially interconnected many-to-many world. When we're broadcasting, we're not conversing. And we're missing a massive opportunity as a result.

A Chorus of Authentic Voices

Together, your employees have a vastly greater voice than your centralized marketing channels. Their collective voice is also far better targeted, infinitely more authentic and much better equipped to engage in real business-building conversations. While you're hollering into your communications bullhorn, thousands of your people remain silent.



Your brand doesn't live in your blog posts or the followers of your LinkedIn company page. If you look closer, you'll likely find that most of the people following your company are either job seekers or people trying to sell you something.

It's in your people's LinkedIn connections where you'll find gold. That's where you'll find your customers, your partners and huge numbers of people who ought to be your next customers.

A Better Way Forward

The social media revolution is entering a new phase. We're in the early days of arming and empowering our people to do what they've always wanted to do: accelerate their careers by building and strengthening relationships with the people who matter most to them and to their growing success.

Social media isn't the only way they do this, but it's by far the most scalable and consistently sustainable way to credibly

establish subject matter expertise, build and strengthen business relationships, and spark value-creating conversations.

In today's pandemic world where many people work from home and face-to-face gatherings of every sort are constrained, enabling your employees to thrive on social media is more important than ever.

Thousands of Bullhorns?

Am I suggesting that you mandate that your people blast your content like an army of mini-bullhorns? Absolutely not. Your opportunity encompasses far more than your content.

The world doesn't need more content. It needs more of the right content in the right hands from the right sender at the right time. We don't need more bullhorns, we need more conversations. And content can be a great conversation starter.

We have a bright future if we move beyond central broadcasting. Opportunity awaits those firms that empower their people to share — at their own pace and in their own way — the content that best supports the relationships and the conversations they value most.

Some of that content will be your brand content. And delivered by your people it will find a larger, more receptive audience. Some of that content will come from industry publications, academic institutions and subject matter experts.

When each of your people has easy access to a curated stream of the most current and most valuable content for *their* clients and *their* future clients, they'll be ready to build and sustain engagement like never before.

A Different Measurement Mindset

To realize the power of this bright future we need to think differently about measurement. We can't judge our success on form fills or other transactional metrics. Relationships aren't transactional. Reputation isn't transactional. Conversations aren't transactional.

Each company will need to find the best way to tie its content to relationships and to revenue. It will look different in each company, and rest assured that many of the most forward-thinking firms are already well down this road.

Putting people into our social media and content marketing strategies is like putting an engine into the car. Only then will you leave your competitors in the dust. **SMM**

Steve Watt is director of marketing for [Seismic LiveSocial](#), a social engagement platform trusted by many of North America's largest banks, wealth management firms, insurance companies and technology providers.

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Services, SPARXiQ

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E-commerce That Avoids Channel Conflict

When manufacturers introduce e-commerce it can actually benefit distributors

BY SEAN PARNELL

“Wait — let me get a pencil and paper to take that down.
(Pause) OK, what was it you wanted?”

No B2B buyer wants to hear that from a vendor when they place an order the old-fashioned way, by phone. Such aggravations, among other factors, have helped spur the growth of B2B e-commerce.

By 2025, 72% of B2Bs expect 41% or more of their revenue to be derived from e-commerce websites they own or operate, according to Episerver’s [“B2B Digital Experiences Report.”](#)

At Innovaxis Marketing, e-commerce for our B2B clients has risen from 5% to 15% or more of total sales. Over the past three years, we’ve seen a 20% to 30% e-commerce annual growth rate, especially in 2020, as in-person prospecting proved difficult if not impossible during the pandemic.

However, according to the Episerver report, 54% of B2B companies are letting one obstacle keep them from selling

online — potential conflict with their channel partners. Businesses don’t want to jeopardize the business that comes through channel partners — as much as 90% — for a relatively small increase from e-commerce.

Best of Both Worlds

“B2Bs can’t let channel conflict get in the way of serving customers,” Ed Kennedy, senior director of commerce strategy at Episerver, states in the report. “Organizations can use serving customers as a good cover for investing in digital commerce, even if it is peripheral at first.”

Without e-commerce, B2B marketers miss opportunities to sell outside their geographical area, expand into new markets and appeal to the increasing number of engineers, purchasing agents and others who want to buy without human interaction.

Even when distributors offer pricing below the manufacturer’s advertised list price, some engineers and purchasing agents are willing to pay more for the item as a



tradeoff for the time they save ordering it from the company's website any time of day without having to talk to someone (especially, perhaps, "annoying sales reps"). This trend is expected to increase as millennials and the digital natives of Generation Z make more B2B purchases.

B2B marketers can minimize channel conflict while also successfully growing an e-commerce presence by serving those who would rather buy direct. Here's how.

Pricing Is Key to Keeping Channel Peace

Fair and consistent pricing is key to keeping peace with and within the channel. Channel partners typically sell significantly below the manufacturer's list price, while also providing other added value (local presence and stock, availability of other products, credit terms, etc.). If manufacturers maintain list price when selling online, one major potential source of channel conflict and distrust is eliminated.

Some channel partners will complain anyway, but manufacturers need to hold firm. If a distributor sells below the manufacturer's list price and is providing sufficient additional value to customers, they should not lose sales to a manufacturer. If they do, they have to look at their own service.

Disputes arise within the channel when a distributor sells at such a low price they lure customers away from other distributors. These distributors are content with thin margins and typically provide no added value. They are a larger threat to a manufacturer's relationship with its best partners (and a big share of business) than an entry into e-commerce.

The best way to prevent this undercutting and resolve disputes is through a minimum advertised price (MAP) policy, under which channel partners agree not to sell below the MAP for any product. The price is set well enough below the manufacturer's list price to maintain the channel partners' pricing advantage but high enough so the channel can make money.

One of our clients, a manufacturer of induction heating tools, was plagued by online resellers selling at prices far below MAP. One of the manufacturer's largest resellers complained of repeatedly losing sales to online sellers after going to the trouble of providing an in-person demo. The reseller, who represented at least 20% of the manufacturer's worldwide business, threatened to sell a competitor's product if the situation didn't change.

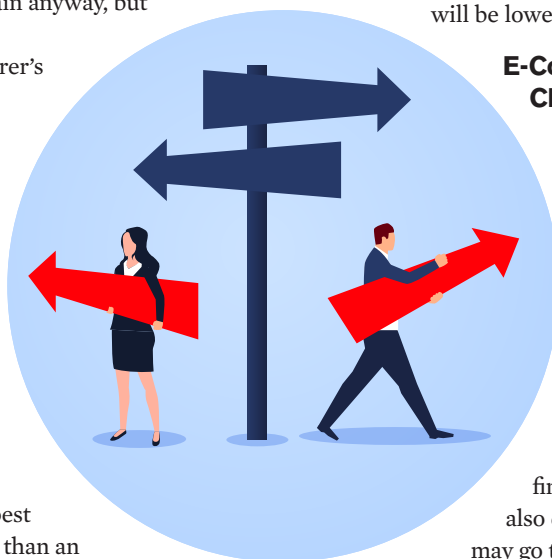
The manufacturer saw the need for a program that not only enforced MAP but offered channel partners incentives such as promotion as an "authorized reseller" on their website and the ability to download pricing, videos and sales tools from their partner portal. Resellers who did not agree or who were found to be in violation later were cut off.

Promoting Distributors Online

Another client, a manufacturer of plastics processing aids, gives distributors a featured position on their website by featuring "Find Distributor" and "Buy Now" buttons. Clicking the "Find Distributor" link brings visitors to a page that promotes distributor value-add with this message: "Our distributors go the extra mile. Having your own local distributor has its advantages. You get great service and technical assistance. And since they are local, you get your order fast."

Drop-down menus enable the customer to find the closest distributor in the U.S. or internationally.

By checking an additional box, the customer can be even more selective, seeing only distributors that have achieved the manufacturer's platinum status and that have "the highest level of service and broadest selection of products in stock, ready to ship." It's a way of providing customers many incentives to do business with the distributors without mentioning the price will be lower as well.



E-Commerce Strategies Benefit Channel Partners

Maintaining an e-commerce site that appears high in search engine results is crucial for B2B e-commerce success, yet it also benefits distributors.

Customers searching the web are usually looking for a product type, not a specific company. A distributor or reseller who doesn't have e-commerce, or whose site is weak, is unlikely to be one of the first to be found. It's more likely the web user will find the manufacturer. If the manufacturer also doesn't have a good site, the customer may go to a different manufacturer who does, even if it offers an inferior product.

An effective B2B e-commerce site also must offer engaging, educational content directed to the prospect's needs and interests. Users and prospects of a product or service that find a helpful blog post will be drawn to the manufacturer's product when they otherwise may have never known about it.

Post-pandemic, some B2B buyers will continue to buy online directly from those manufacturers that offer it, even if they pay more to do so. Some buyers will remain faithful to resellers and distributors, but only as long as they make it convenient to buy. The acceleration of B2B e-commerce is likely to expand. Placing orders by phone, at a trade show or with a visiting sales rep will be increasingly rare and may eventually become obsolete.

Manufacturers and channel partners must be open to this disruption. **SMM**

Sean Parnell is the founder and president of B2B marketing consultancy and agency [Innovaxis Marketing](#). He serves as a fractional/outsourced CMO for B2B clients without a marketing department, and marketing consultant for B2B marketing executives, while serving the Innovaxis team as the head marketing architect.

Too Long... Too Boring... Too Many Distractions

Avoiding the 'terrible too's' of virtual events

BY DARIO PRIOLO AND
JEFF MEYERS

Last year presented unthinkable challenges to marketers and event organizers. From last March forward, virtually every trade show was canceled, from behemoths like Dreamforce to local association meetings. These events are major revenue sources for organizers and important opportunities for marketers to build brand awareness and generate new opportunities for their businesses.

Once the reality of COVID set in, everyone scrambled to make the best of a bad situation. Event organizers swiftly pivoted. In some cases, they moved their multi-day live trade show online, complete with virtual expo halls and networking apps. They also added additional webinars to their sponsorship inventory to generate badly needed revenue.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity to get our message in front of prospects and keep our lead-gen engine humming, we jumped on the opportunity to redirect our live event budget. It seemed like a good deal. Rather than spend on travel we would spend on getting in front of the right people. In total, we sponsored five virtual trade shows and six webinars. In all situations, we would get some promotional exposure, an opportunity to present on a topic for 30 or 45 minutes, answer some questions, and usually receive the registration list.

Sadly, the results were abysmal. Here's what we experienced.

Ghosted By Registrants

Event organizers tried to turn a multi-day live event into a multi-day virtual event. There was usually a keynote by a celebrity or VIP and specialized tracks in some cases. Most were offered free to participants, who basically signed-up for two or three days of back-to-back 45-minute Zoom presentations from us and our competitors.

Early events seemed to get a lot of attendee registrations, most likely the people who would have attended the live event.



Unfortunately, few of those who registered actually showed up. In one case, we were told over 1,200 people registered, but we could see from Zoom that only a couple hundred showed up — and many of these were fellow presenters from our competition. The drop-off rates after the keynote sessions were astronomical.

Dedicated webinar sponsorships and presentations proved to be a bit more effective. But like virtual trade shows, as months passed, registrations and attendees decreased while no-shows and drop-offs increased. The KPIs and ROI of the virtual events that we sponsored were embarrassingly low.

Why did these virtual events fail for sponsors? These virtual attendee sentiments are common:

- We're simply Zoomed out. We'll sit in front of Zoom if necessary, but only if necessary.
- Most presentations are deathly boring. Few presenters have the skill to captivate an audience on Zoom.
- Working from home is fraught with distractions. Once your audience has checked out, it's nearly impossible to bring them back.

It's the "terrible too's" — too long, too boring, too many distractions. We give event organizations credit for trying to

pivot to virtual, but none could recreate the energy, enthusiasm and engagement of a live event.

When it came time to plan our own virtual user conference in December, we were determined to avoid the mistakes we experienced firsthand. Here's how we did it.

1. Minimize Risk: Secure the Right Technical Support

The perfect agenda, content and presenters are meaningless without the ability to connect (and stay connected) with no technical problems. Finding the right partner to help host our meeting and troubleshoot problems was a critical first step. For an in-person event, it's the AV person in the back of the room or backstage managing all of those issues, so that you don't have to. It was also necessary because the platform you choose often includes registration management. Platforms like Zoom and Google Meet are fine for small groups and team meetings, but not a conference like we envisioned.

2. Craft the Agenda – Then Slash It in Half

Initially, we drafted an agenda that looked like a traditional in-person event. We liked the flow of content, the number of speakers and the length of time that we had assigned to each. But taking a step back to review our agenda objectively revealed that we were attempting to do too much and taking too long to do it. We risked taxing attendees' attention spans and our need to keep them engaged. We cut the allotted time for each session in half. If that meant we needed to have follow-up conversations with people who wanted to know more, all the better.

3. Video to the Rescue – Prerecord as Much as Possible

Thinking again of our technical concerns, we didn't want to assume that speakers would be able to connect seamlessly on the big day. A number of sources suggested we prerecord as much as possible, create a "playlist" of sessions, and press play during the event. The intention wasn't to deceive anyone, but rather to minimize risk. So we approached most of the segments on our agenda as individual Zoom meetings, recorded them, and had a production expert polish them with minimal editing.

We did allow for a few key moments of live interaction. As attendees signed on, our key players were there to greet people and have some pre-show banter. We also had a live emcee to welcome attendees, provide housekeeping notes and introduce key segments. He was the glue between sessions and was ready to address any issues that may have come up.

4. Breakout Sessions to Serve Specific Audience Interests

Our audience consisted of two segments. For the majority of our program, the content was applicable to everyone. But we wanted to hold breakout sessions to provide an opportunity to interact and field questions. Scheduling those amidst the main program risked losing people along the way (either due to technical issues or lack of interest). The breakouts were completely live and tacked on to the end as a bonus session. Approximately 75% of attendees participated in those sessions and stayed for longer than the allotted time.

5. Promotion Plan

In the old days (i.e., a year ago), things looked very different, including the time it took to plan, schedule, promote and execute an event. Particularly for events held while travel hasn't been possible, long marketing cycles aren't necessary to lead up to an online event. We allowed several weeks, including five weekly email campaigns. People have had much greater control over their daily schedules and flexibility to join events like ours. The big decision is "Am I interested enough in this?" and "Do I want to commit the time to join?" This ties back to slashing our agenda, which signaled to people that we respect their time.

6. Staying Connected During the Event (Never Let Them See You Sweat)

As you'd expect, the key players were connected during the event via in-app chat, text, and scripts and agendas in Google Docs. There was a moment when things unexpectedly went south. But we were able to pivot in real time, using the script and agenda to make real-time changes. We did this from different parts of the country seamlessly. With the benefit of the prerecorded sessions, we knew exactly how much time we had to make those changes and be ready for the next segment. Staying connected using the technology available was critical to our success.

7. Post Event: Survey, Reuse Your Content

Be ready to launch your post-event survey immediately upon completion so that feelings are fresh. Leverage your content. You invested a lot of time creating it; avoid a one-and-done philosophy by reusing as much as possible. Repackage segments of sessions, especially client interviews, and anything that can stand well on its own. Offer them up as testimonials or case studies and market it as a drip campaign.

Virtual Events Are Here To Stay

Would we have attempted such an event pre-pandemic? We had different notions then of what's professional and acceptable (e.g., presenting at a conference from your kitchen table). But this last year has been a great leveler. We were able to:

- Connect with an important segment of our customer base.
- Impart valuable content and insights.
- Provide a forum for peer learning.
- Expose users to broader use and functionality of our platform.

All of this was achieved in a short time and for a fraction of the cost and effort of doing events "the old way." This experience will certainly inform our decisions and planning when it comes to hosting and choosing to participate in online events. **SM**

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