

## B2B Social Media: The Rules of Engagement

In business-to-business marketing, social media—Twitter, Facebook, blogs, wikis and more—are here to stay, and have vast potential for reaching audiences. But what can social media offer that traditional B2B media cannot?

Answer: Engagement. Social media “audiences” are now active participants. They still receive messages, but they also send them, rework them, comment on them. Engagement has produced a marketing landscape undreamed of a decade ago. Even E-mail has been surpassed in popularity by social media in terms of Internet use, according to a 2009 study by The Nielsen Company. That reflects the unique engagement capabilities offered by social media—capabilities that are now available to B2B marketers seeking maximum impact.

The power of social media engagement makes participants feel almost like they are engaging in a face-to-face conversation, something traditional media can't match. Social media participants can react to messages, express opinions, challenge statements and create content of their own. All this can be done quickly, with give-and-take similar to dialogue.

This immediacy opens up new opportunities for B2B marketing. Marketers can gain valuable insight into the moods and opinions of potential customers, in real time, receiving and tracking responses. Blogs and forums, for example, can provide instant feedback on marketing initiatives, corporate images, products and services. The paradigm is shifting from a one-way street (marketer reaching audience) to a matrix of interconnected conversations. And effective interaction (combined with effective products/services, of course) can turn “audiences” or “prospects” into actual company advocates, because engagement makes them feel part of the process.

Of course, two-way social media interactions leave marketers with “nowhere to hide”—dissatisfied customers aren't shy about expressing their opinions. But even this can benefit companies by giving them instant input and quick access to the truth. Savvy and prepared marketers can respond quickly, re-engaging the audience, acknowledging concerns and making product or service adjustments. For example, when end users recently turned thumbs down on an Internet-based service provided by a large materials supplier, finding it confusing and cumbersome to use, social media response tipped the company off and led to improvements. A few years ago, a survey might have been needed to discover why the service was underperforming.

These quick-response capabilities are a big reason why the importance of social media engagement is clearly recognized by U.S. marketing executives. A recent survey by the Marketing Executives Network Group revealed that three of the top four reasons for using social media were engagement-related (learning customer preferences, rapid feedback and engagement in general).

But engagement in B2B marketing is more than interaction. It's also about where the interaction takes place. People today expect easy access to interactive media—and business people tend to have above average social media expectations. What's more, B2B prospects are also getting used to being participants in a discussion, not members of a “target audience.” Social media engagement, with real discussions and real input, is likely to bring rewards for marketers. On Twitter, a B2B company can quickly gain an impressive following by regularly tweeting about key business issues in a particular field. The results: Prospects become micro-blog hosts, interacting about issues of new products, corporate news, thought leadership and more. Social media like Twitter, and especially LinkedIn, put engagement at the fingertips of B2B prospects.

When social media are used is also central to the issue of engagement. Traditional advertising relies on the “interruption model” of communication—marketers pick the best time to send a message for an audience to deal with. In the social media environment, participants can choose when and where to share comments, create content or initiate a discussion. That makes them feel more connected and empowered, which can help create advocates of the B2B marketer. More and more, B2B consumers are coming to expect a sense of engagement.

The benefits of this type of B2B engagement have been demonstrated numerous times by marketers who encourage participation and discussion. When Nokia Siemens Networks sought a thought leadership position within the global telecommunications industry, they turned to an online community portal called Nokia Siemens Networks *unite*, a hub for issue-based, user-driven content about telecommunications products and services. Within months, Nokia Siemens Networks was well positioned against competitors across thought leadership topics like vision, innovation and service.

Similarly, the FastLane blogging site created by General Motors has provided a direct channel of engagement with GM dealers, suppliers, employees, customers and investors. The blog gives GM a “human voice,” and is helping make contributors feel valued, increasing the chances for user advocacy.

By turning audiences into participants, engagement can give B2B marketers impressive return on their social media investment. Engagement makes the difference between an audience “getting the message” and getting into a fluid, interactive discussion about your products and services. That’s the kind of discussion that could lead to increased interest and increased business.

**ENGAGING B2B  
MARKETING AUDIENCES  
AS PARTICIPANTS  
IN AN INTERACTIVE  
ENVIRONMENT INVOLVES:**

**How** participants relate to one another: like people holding a conversation, including a give-and-take dialogue and immediate feedback in real time.

**Where** participation takes place: almost anywhere, thanks to today’s communications systems and the development of social networks like Twitter.

**When** participation takes place: increasingly, at the convenience of clients and prospects, who choose when and where to express their opinions, give feedback and even create content.

**What** the results of participation are: increased visits to company websites, increased feedback or any one of dozens of other possible metrics.

What’s the next step for social media users after engagement?

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