

## OF THE MONTH



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**S**ocial media is an important issue that is on the minds of senior management of many organisations both large and small. Businesses worldwide are taking to the likes of YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter in hopes of becoming better engaged with their customers and prospects to ultimately drive more business.

There is no doubt that social media can serve many useful purposes, including creating more engaged customers. We must remember, however, that business to business (B2B) has some distinct characteristics that have serious implications regarding how you engage with your customers.

First, unlike in a business to consumer (B2C) context, decision-makers and buyers in B2B are in most cases not one and the same. In B2B, the decision-makers who control the purse strings and have the authority to sign the cheques and those multi-year contracts are not the same people who will actually be using your products or services.

Second, B2B transactions are often highly complex, involving big dollars and high risks, and they require that the customer and service provider or supplier are working closely together for a significant period of time – quite often for a number of years.

These two fundamental characteristics have significant implications in terms of your approaches to customer engagement. Social media will likely continue to have an increasing role regarding how service providers and suppliers target influencers, and provide relevance and value to users in B2B organisations.

However, 'traditional' face to face methods of interacting with the decision-

makers from your customer organisations will continue to be a key means of getting customers to do more business with you. Part of the reason for this is that there is often quite a lot at stake with the purchase decisions that decision-makers must make for their businesses, not to mention their own careers.

As a result, decision-makers want to be able to meet suppliers face to face, shake their hands, have a chat with them and get various types of information from them – information that is not going to be available or best delivered through a social medium. Furthermore, as Sean Geehan, author of *The B2B Executive Playbook*, stated in an interview last month with the Business Marketing Association, "It's a struggle to get B2B decision-makers to use [social media] channels for business purposes."

### SO WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

B2B marketers and strategists must:

→ Engage in strategic dialogue with the decision-makers within their business customers' organisations. This can be achieved through a number of means, such as customer workshops, meetings, executive forums and advisory councils.

→ Use these dialogues as an opportunity to:

- understand the decision-makers' objectives, issues, needs and priorities (and be sure to gain an understanding of their drivers and motivations – both from a company as well as a personal perspective), and
- suggest new approaches and unique ways of looking at their business.

Remember that your role as a product or service provider can have

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huge implications in terms of whether or not that company achieves those ever so important KPIs and also potentially whether or not the decision-makers get those bonus cheques or that next promotion! Decision-makers need to have that trust and confidence that your organisation really understands their business and can really deliver what it takes to meet their objectives.

Therefore, engaging in effective strategic dialogue with your customers' decision-makers will enable your organisation to develop the appropriate go to market plans, value propositions, and product and service offerings that will result in strong leads, sales and marketing ROI.

So, by all means, continue to use social media where appropriate, but don't forget the basics, because at the end of the day it really is all about people dealing with people! **M**



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