

B-to-B Marketing

13 Ways to Sharpen Your Approach for 2014



It's planning time for many companies as they build their marketing programs for next year, or at least begin to think about it. Our agency specializes in working with b-to-b companies. So when a client asked how they should think about the coming year, we rattled off a few suggestions. Let's get started.

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1 I wish it were as simple as just email marketing. The fact is that email marketing is no longer the slam-dunk in b-to-b marketing that it used to be. Click through rates today average 1.5%, a far cry from the 6% of even a few years ago. No matter how personal or relevant, no matter how much you tailor the message to the recipients stage in the buying cycle, no matter if you even put stars and symbols in the subject line (the latest tactic), people are simply too flooded with email to respond to campaigns the way they used to.

A client told me recently she came to work one day with a single goal: to get her email inbox down to 1500 unread emails! She's not alone, and I've heard other clients complain of being hundreds of emails behind. So while we still send out more than 2 million emails a year at our agency, and while that still is at the top of the list for what's MOST effective on an ROI basis, it's not what it used to be, and we're going to have to develop new techniques to supplement the lead flow email marketing used to provide.

2 Coming back to face-to-face – and the value of top-of-mind branding! Surveys from UBM Publishing, MarketingSherpa, Hubspot, and our own research shows a bit of a back to the future effect: face to face marketing, word of mouth, trade shows and colleague referrals are assuming new prominence (or returning to prominence!) in generating leads and driving brands. In fact, when we ask b-to-b decision-makers what their #1 source of information is, it's not search engines – it's colleagues! That's not to say search isn't critical, of course. It's just that people are so time stressed they rely on trusted co-workers to help them in the search, evaluation and selection process.

Here's a story: a magazine editor at EDN said once that when he was a new engineer who needed to buy something, he remembers feeling like he had all the time in the world! He would create an elaborate matrix with 20 specs along the top and a dozen vendors down the side, and study which component he ought to purchase. Today, buyers have no time for such luxuries, so they ask the colleague in the next cube not because they're lazy, but because they're pulled in too many directions. The meaning for marketers? If you're not at top-of-mind in your market for your category, you're going to lose out on these word-of-mouth referral conversations to the brand leaders in your space.

3

Google makes the rules; the rule is based on relevancy. Search is still the star, and the top of Page 1 has never been more coveted. Every few months, Google tweaks its secret algorithm to make it more complicated for those of us who fight for that real estate. The last change, to minimize multiple listings on the first page from the same company (what they named domain crowding), has reduced rankings and even traffic for many companies. But we'll all adjust. At the end of the day, Google will ALWAYS introduce new changes to drive relevancy, so only the most relevant search returns are presented. That means meta tag/alt tag tactics are dying away, in favor of content relevancy tactics such as social media, domain authority, page authority, blogging, frequency of page shares, Klout scores, retweets and any element Google can think of to favor relevancy.

4

It's coming – social and mobile. No, wait, it's already here. Mobile's long been a play for consumer marketing, but now it's relevant for b-to-b. In fact, our own b-to-b client base saw the portion of tablet and smartphone traffic to their sites just about double in the past 12 months, going from 5.2% in July 2012 to 9.3% one year later. At our agency, every new site today features "responsive design," so the site automatically re-sizes whether it's being viewed on a PC, table or phone. And, we're experimenting with new CRM and lead tracking programs optimized for smartphones that are showing higher participation rates from salespeople, simply because it's mobile and so much faster-easier to use.

5

Conversations, not campaigns. We mentioned earlier that bulk email blasts were showing declining response rates. And we talked about the growth of social media for driving search. Those two concepts come together with savvy marketers who are using Twitter and email to create individual sales conversations rather than bulk blasts. We're even developing the concept in our agency of the Twitter Salesperson – an individual in the sales department who reaches out to company followers with specific tips, advice and help based on their tweets, rather than relying on Twitter for blast messages just about webcasts or trade shows that are sent to everyone at once. And the speed of conversations in engineering-based marketing is important. When people are searching and researching products, they have a question NOW. Live chat or immediate response to emails isn't creepy – it's valued. So mindsets based on speed will become more critical.

6

More data on our customers. We can't market to people based on name, company, industry. We mentioned earlier that bulk blasting isn't relevant or helpful enough to be noticed. We need to know more about specific problems, where they are in the sales funnel, whether they're a current or lapsed customer. We need to know if they've purchased one product line but have no exposure to others. We need to know if they're a young engineer or an industry veteran. Answers to each of those questions have a dramatic impact on what information engineers need, when they need it, and how they want to receive it. Offering a quote to someone who's at the earliest stages of product research simply won't work, and turns engineers away, because you've served up an offer to someone at the wrong time in their funnel. So marketers are using SmartFoms and Progressive Profiling on their lead generation programs to slowly and carefully build deeper and more robust databases on their customers and prospects. It makes marketing not just more relevant to them, but more effective.

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Think outside the boombox. We all know that banners aren't the click machine they used to be. And in fact, we don't even buy top of the page leaderboard banners any longer because they're just not noticed. But we do apply banners as valuable tools for branding, particularly skyscraper and boombox shaped banners. And, one of my colleagues, Mark Johnson, came up with a very clever banner idea where the boombox shape is filled with a video image and play button as the entire banner graphic, taking advantage of the appeal of video today. So while banners still play a role in branding and image-building, they're not effective as a strategy for driving traffic and clicks.

8

Except for Remarketing Banners! Forget what we said in the previous paragraph. There is one area where banners still generate a response, and that's the relatively new technique of remarketing banners. These are banners that are served up to visitors to your site after they've left, on various sites while they're surfing online elsewhere. You may have noticed these yourself – what a coincidence, you've thought, that I keep seeing banners for that store or company site I visited recently. No coincidence at all, of course. Our experience shows that they're tremendously effective in not just getting engineers to return to your site, but that they generate higher quality visitors who turn into a lead or prospect. In fact, our remarketing leads are produced for just a fraction of what we see in other programs.

9

Webcasts and custom eblasts are at the top for lead generation. Our agency buys all types of online and offline lead generation programs – banners, various email ads, directory programs, etc. But there are two programs that work consistently today across all media, for a wide variety of clients, in terms of best response: webcast and custom newsletter programs. In fact, when we do our year-end analysis of cost/lead, cost/impression and cost/click results, those are the two ad programs that always seem to be the top performers. It's likely due to the nature of our engineering audiences – engineers value the tutorial nature of these programs, the problem-solution format of so much of this content. Their time is limited, of course, but when we present them with valuable information to help them do their jobs better, they'll tune in and enter our prospect funnel by sharing their lead information with us.

10

Allocating more budget to content creation. A friend began a marketing automation campaign, installed the software, was ready to go, and came to a screeching stop. "I didn't realize," he said to me later, "how much content I really needed to make these programs effective." While that's true, that's not necessarily new to engineering marketing. We've always known that engineers crave information. They love app notes, tutorials, handbooks, white papers, because there's so much to learn, and technology evolves so rapidly. So this just means that sending out catalogs can't be our primary lead generation tool any longer, and that we have to devote more time and effort to creating other content – white papers, videos, infographics, etc. – that's educational and engaging. So companies will be devoting more budget allocation to those items, and less to traditional marketing like print advertising. And that's been taking place for quite a while now, of course.

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But a word of caution: content quality is still important. Some companies have begun to hire low quality bloggers to generate reams of content for a penny a word. That's not going to work in an engineering world. The quality of what you publish speaks to the quality of your product or service. Don't take shortcuts. It hasn't worked before, and it won't reflect well on your brand.

11

Teach me something, but don't make me read it. We've talked earlier about how time pressured our b-to-b customers are. They don't have time any longer to read an eight-page white paper. Our trade magazines have responded as well with shorter articles – 1200 word pieces are far more common today than the 2000-2500 word features we used to write. It's all about the pictures, videos and graphics we can use to tell our stories. Here's an example: a client created a tremendous giveaway promotion to a behind-the-scenes trip to a NASA facility. So one of our media partners wrote a few blog posts, inviting readers to "click here" to enter. They did fine, each blog post generating 10-15 entries. But one generated 147 entries from a single post! What was the difference? The editor changed the click here link to a click here jpeg where he posted a picture of the entry form! Readers responded far more dramatically to that single, simple change of a picture rather than the words click here. Strange, but true.

12

People like to laugh too. A group of interns at NASA's Johnson Space Center created a Gangnam Style video parody of the popular song that has generated nearly 5 million views! It's quite well done, but it's also a great example of how engineers will pay attention to messages that are entertaining and fun, rather than just the dry spec-sheet facts. One client generated 100 times the response to a video with a "campy" title to a webcast, "Campfire Songs from the Network Edge." The content was just as tutorial, but the title seemed to break through that clutter and get attention from buyers exposed to too many messages that are too similar, dull and routine. Keep them laughing, and we'll keep them coming back for more? Perhaps, but it's a direction worth exploring for b-to-b marketing.

13

Grab me, entertain me, engage me, THEN teach me. It's related to #11 and #12 above, but we have to find more creative and clever ways to talk to our customers than just posting white papers. That's still important, but creating engaging and fascinating web environments in the new parallax animated web environment, creating infographics, constructing engineering calculators, producing animations of our products – those are all must-haves for technical marketers today.

At the end of the day, if we help customers do their jobs better, we'll be valuable to them. But we have to get in front of them first, and we have to push our ideas to the clever, engaging side of what we produce rather than just packaging everything in text. Try new ideas. Approach your prospects from the left instead of the right for a change. The best part of marketing for 2014 is that because so much of it is online, we can see what works in an instant. The analytics drive us to what works, with none of the guesswork of the past. It's a great time to be in marketing!

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About Goldstein Group Communications

Goldstein Group Communications, a b-to-b agency, brings an unusual combination of corporate communications management and b-to-b writing capability to its national client roster. With deep experience in electronics and industrial markets, the agency is able to draw on its skills to articulate with impact and clarity the comparative advantages its clients bring to their customers. Unlike other agencies, staff members for the most part have built their careers on the corporate side of the desk, rather than as agency executives, a perspective that results in a higher level of accountability and measurability in the agency's programs.



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