Industrial Marketing Management 54 (2016) 164–175

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

Harnessing marketing automation for B2B content marketing☆

Joel Järvinen *, Heini Taiminen

School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, PO Box 35, FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 March 2015
Received in revised form 22 May 2015
Accepted 7 July 2015
Available online 5 August 2015

Keywords:
Case study
Digital marketing
Marketing and sales alignment
New technologies
Sales funnel
Social media

ABSTRACT

The growing importance of the Internet to B2B customer purchasing decisions has motivated B2B sellers to create digital content that leads potential buyers to interact with their company. This trend has engendered a new paradigm referred to as 'content marketing.' This study investigates the organizational processes for developing valuable and timely content to meet customer needs and for integrating content marketing with B2B selling processes. The results of this single case study demonstrate the use of marketing automation to generate high-quality sales leads through behavioral targeting and content personalization. The study advances understanding of the organizational processes that support content marketing and shows how content marketing can be combined with B2B selling processes via marketing automation in ways that achieve business benefits.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent advances in communications and information technology (IT), and the rise of digital content and social media in particular, are transforming the ways in which individuals and businesses search for information and interact with one another (Dennis, Merrilees, Jayawardhena, & Wright, 2009; Greenberg, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). A fundamental shift in the B2B sector involves the growing influence of digital communication channels in customer purchasing decisions (Lingqvist, Plotkin, & Stanley, 2015; Wiersema, 2013). A Corporate Executive Board study of more than 1400 B2B buyers found that customers rely heavily on online information sources and complete nearly 60% of a typical purchasing process before contacting a seller (Adamson, Dixon, & Toman, 2012). This active role played by B2B buyers in searching for and evaluating information online has given rise to a new marketing paradigm referred to as '(digital) content marketing.'

In this study, the term 'content' refers to all forms of digital content. We employ the definition of content marketing presented by Holliman and Rowley (2014, p. 285), who tailored the concept to the B2B context as follows: "B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome." This definition highlights the role of content marketing as an inbound marketing (i.e., pull marketing) tactic directed at generating valuable content based on the needs of potential buyers who have already searched for information on a product or service (Halligan & Shah, 2010).

The use of content marketing is becoming widespread in the B2B sector. According to a recent survey, as many as 86% of B2B marketers ($n = 1820$) in North America use content marketing tactics as a strategic marketing approach, and 47% have a dedicated content marketing group in their organization (Pulizzi & Handley, 2014). However, existing knowledge on B2B content marketing is largely based on research reports produced by commercial research institutions (e.g., Content Marketing Institute, eMarketer, Marketing Profs), and academic research on the subject remains in its infancy. One exception is a study conducted by Holliman and Rowley (2014), who interview 15 B2B content marketers from various industries and offer a number of insights into best practices and the challenges of content marketing in the B2B sector. The present study employs a more focused approach, as it concentrates on the organizational processes that support content marketing and their relation to B2B sales. Indeed, the relationship between digital marketing and B2B sales has attracted very limited attention in the existing literature (Pomirleanu, Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Nill, 2013; Rodriguez, Dixon, & Peltier, 2014).

Understanding the role of content marketing in B2B sales is particularly crucial given persistent conflicts between marketing and sales departments with regards to lead generation and management. Sales representatives criticize the quality of marketing leads, and marketers criticize sales representatives' poor follow-up skills (e.g., Biemans, Brenčič, & Malshe, 2010; Homburg & Jensen, 2007; Homburg, Jensen, & Krohmer, 2008). Insufficient lead follow-up is indeed a serious issue

---

☆ Submission declaration: This full-length manuscript is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and its publication has been approved by all of the authors.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: joel.jarvinen@jyu.fi (J. Järvinen), heini.taiminen@jyu.fi (H. Taiminen).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.07.002
0019-8501/© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

in the B2B sector, and one study has shown that sales representatives ignore approximately 70% of all leads generated via marketing (Marcus, 2002). Clearly, if the majority of marketing leads are never contacted and instead disappear into the notorious 'sales lead black hole' (see, e.g., Hasselwander, 2006; Sabnis, Chatterjee, Grewal, & Lilien, 2013), content marketing efforts toward producing sales will prove fruitless.

IT developments present opportunities for fostering cooperation and strengthening the interfaces between (content) marketing and B2B selling processes. Wiersema (2013) argues that by integrating marketing and sales systems, marketing teams could acquire deeper insight into the customer data in customer relationship management systems (CRM), and sales teams could in turn learn more about activities and leads generated through marketing efforts. The integration of marketing and sales systems is essential, as sales departments often employ their own sales management tools, from which marketing departments are deliberately excluded (Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy, 2006).

One IT tool that is attracting increasing attention in the B2B sector is marketing automation. Vendors of the software (e.g., Eloqua, Hubspot, Marketo, Pardot, Silverpop) claim that the tool allows companies to align marketing and sales system interfaces to improve and accelerate lead qualification processes via 'lead scoring and nurturing,' thus targeting potential buyers through the use of personalized content. Assuming that the vendors deliver on these promises, B2B companies may be able to use marketing automation tools to deliver more effective content marketing strategies and thereby improve lead follow-up practices. From interviews with 72 executives and 30 B2B researchers, Wiersema (2013) finds that one of the key developments in the B2B sector lies in the technological automation of manual tasks performed by marketers. To our knowledge, however, no academic study has yet investigated the benefits of combining content marketing and marketing automation technological tools.

Based on this context, this study achieves three objectives. First, it advances knowledge on the organizational processes of B2B content marketing in terms of creating and delivering timely and valuable content based on customer needs. Second, the study examines ways in which content marketing strategies may be combined with B2B selling processes via marketing automation and the benefits and challenges of such an approach. Third, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on marketing and sales alignment in the B2B sector by illustrating ways in which marketing and sales systems may be integrated through advancements in IT.

To achieve these study objectives, we perform an in-depth investigation of an industrial company that has benefitted considerably from content marketing and marketing automation integration. More specifically, we exploit the sales funnel conceptualization (see the definition presented in Section 2.2) outlined by D'Haen and Van den Poel (2013) as our guiding framework and explain how the case company capitalizes on content marketing and marketing automation techniques to support sales processes at each funnel phase.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We begin by elaborating on concepts of content marketing and marketing automation. We then elaborate on the sales funnel framework and describe the potential role that content marketing and IT tools may play in this framework. In the section on methodology, we justify our use of a single case study and describe the data collection and analysis methods employed. We then present the study findings. We conclude with a discussion of the study's theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and research quality, and present avenues for future research.

2. Integrating content marketing tactics with B2B selling processes

2.1. Content marketing and marketing automation

Although content marketing can employ content in traditional formats (e.g., customer magazines and brochures), the digital environment has popularized the term: 'content marketing' for many authors refers purely to content in digital formats (Handley & Chapman, 2011; Rose & Pulizzi, 2011: Wuebben, 2011). According to Chaffey and Smith (2013), the most commonly used formats of digital content include pictures, videos and animations, e-books or shorter customer guides, white papers, podcasts, webinars, infographics, blog texts and social media posts. The primary business objectives of B2B content marketing are related to promoting brand awareness and image, fostering customer engagement, and increasing sales through customer acquisitions, lead generation, upselling and cross-selling (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Pulizzi & Handley, 2014).

Content marketing is closely related to social media marketing; their business objectives are largely aligned and the notion of storytelling rather than promotional communications is central to both concepts (see, e.g., Christodoulides, 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Rose & Pulizzi, 2011; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Moreover, content marketing is a technique or approach employed in social media environments (Pulizzi, 2011). In this sense, social media can be understood as a set of channels and platforms to deliver and share content.

Marketing automation involves a software platform that can be used to deliver content based on specific rules set by users. The objective is to attract, build and maintain trust with current and prospective customers by automatically personalizing relevant and useful content to meet their specific needs (Hubspot, 2015; Kantrowitz, 2014). The term personalization generally refers to the customization of marketing mix elements (e.g., content personalization) at an individual scale (Montgomery & Smith, 2009). The goal is to treat a person as a maverick with individualistic needs and to design content to meet his or her expectations. According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), the more personal and relevant a message is, the more likely that the message will be noticed, thus increasing its effectiveness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Marketing automation capitalizes on techniques similar to Web analytics (see, e.g., Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Phippen, Sheppard, & Furnell, 2004; Wilson, 2010) by tracking website visitors' online behaviors (i.e., navigation paths and page views) through the use of cookies and IP addresses. The two tools differ in that marketing automation employs advanced capabilities for identifying individual customers and following their behaviors over extended periods of time, and these functions are typically limited in Web analytics software tools such as Google Analytics. Notably, tracking individual behaviors over time requires that a visitor first identifies him or herself by completing a website contact form.

Marketing automation exploits both active and passive means of learning about potential buyers. Active approaches involve directly asking questions, and *passive approaches* involve utilizing information on past transactions or clickstream data (Montgomery & Srinivasan, 2003). In the marketing automation context, active approaches refer to content delivered to customers that includes links to websites associated with questions (e.g., 'would you like to learn more about this topic?' or 'would you like our sales representatives to contact you?'). Based on these active and passive tools, a software program can personalize messages and detect the buying stage a potential customer is engaged in (Kantrowitz, 2014). To summarize, while content marketing and marketing automation tactics offer promising opportunities for B2B sales, very little is known regarding how B2B companies can harness these tools to guide potential buyers engaged in different stages of the B2B sales process.

2.2. Content marketing and marketing automation within the sales funnel framework

The sales funnel framework illustrates the sequential narrowing of a firm's customer base from all potential customers who may be interested in a firm's products and services to those "closed" customers who actually make a purchase (Cooper & Budd, 2007; Dalrymple, Cron, &

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1027411

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/1027411

Daneshyari.com