

COLUMNS

How customers want to interact online

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Adriana Lynch is chief marketing officer of ChiefOutsiders

By **Adriana Lynch**

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If there is anything the last decade has taught us and that the COVID-19 pandemic punctuated in grand fashion it is that businesses must get digital, or they may become invisible.

Branding once an exercise that involved plastic signs, billboards and newspaper print ads has now firmly taken up residence in the world of bits, bytes, smartphones, wearables and, occasionally, a desktop computer.

The digital transformation, already fully ensconced when we dropped the ball in 2020, picked up considerable steam in the last year or so. Now, forward momentum in the digital strata is not just required, but mandatory, to assure business growth, especially in the business-to-business (B2B) arena.

Customer behavior is changing. About 15 years ago, the one-two punch of social media and email campaigns entered the picture and established a new method of showcasing your expertise as a means of getting people to look in your direction.

Post COVID-19, a **McKinsey study** on B2B buyer preference showed how much of each phase of the buyer's journey is being done online in a self-service way. The punch line: there has been a dramatic change in consumer behavior over the past three years.

In the research/education phase, there has been an 85 percent increase in the preference for B2B buyers to conduct their research online.

In the evaluation stage, the results are even more dramatic: a whopping 238 percent increase in buyer preference for self-serve looking for information on the companies' Web site.

The implications for a B2B marketer are huge. Now it must literally compete online, providing the information for which buyers are looking and be armed with a comprehensive content strategy to win.

Learn how customers want to interact online. What the past decade taught us and what COVID reiterated in the past couple years is that the conversation around digital goes far beyond just plain awareness.

In fact, the businesses that are the best at digital branding have constructed a lead-generation machine around these

capabilities. They have taken the knowledge of clients' needs and wants and translated it into an incubation device that effectively appeals to this group.

So, what are some of the ways that you can change the thinking within your business to improve the success of your digital branding efforts? Here are four critical elements that every marketer should master:

#1 Know the decision makers

In B2B in particular, you will often find multiple decision makers involved in the buying process. That is OK. This simply means we have to appeal to each of their "decision journeys."

We have to understand their challenges and obstacles, whether they are a chief financial officer or an engineer. Invariably, they will have different selection criteria, success metrics and the like.

#2 The "Amazon" Effect

With so much buying activity across the digital space during COVID, a remarkable thing has happened.

Now, even B2B buyers want the same type of information and transparency in their professional lives as they get when they make personal purchases from Amazon.

These buyers give a thumbs-up to live chat and clear, concise information, and a thumbs-down to having to dig for information, deal with technical issues and to overly complex Web sites.

#3 Big M, Little m

It is time to draw a solid, unbroken, line in the sand.

Marketing currently with a capital M relates to what we have mentioned here: real insights and strategies that will drive new business and grow your company.

No longer is it satisfactory to lean on "little m" tactics, such as pretty pictures that look gorgeous but say nothing.

#4 Marketers: The business development rep's best friend

No longer should marketers consider themselves an ancillary resource to more sales-oriented folk. They should take hands-on responsibility to ensure that their activities drive as many qualified leads to business development as possible.

Equally as important is to be in close coordination with business development so the leads that come in get the attention they deserve.

Research shows that up to half of sales go to the partner or vendor that responds first.

In the past, we have done a great job, as marketers, of saying we are experts, but then throwing the ball over the fence to business development. That is an old way of doing things.

Now, we should be aligned and attached at the hip as we jointly journey further and further into the funnel. This includes being aligned on the funnel metrics that are used to measure efficacy and success.

TIME IS OF the absolute essence in today's marketplace, and you must find that extra gear to operate your digital branding machine.

When you decide to turn on your digital machine, you need to know exactly what you are looking for and to be ready to respond.

So, how is your company's digital brand presence? Are you relevant or invisible? If you want to know, a digital audit to see how your company stacks versus the competition is a great place to start.

Adriana Lynch is partner and chief marketing officer at [Chief Outsiders](#), Orange County, CA. Reach her at alynch@chiefoutsiders.com.