

Spotlight

B-to-B marketing

Verbatim:

'You are much more successful in b-to-b (if you can get) someone who can sell internally for you.'

It takes a committee to buy into b-to-b

Learn to connect with decision-makers



By ALLISON ENRIGHT
Staff Writer

If you think finding the right person to target with your business-to-business marketing is harder than it used to be, you're right. The number of people involved in a purchasing decision is filling up the boardroom, according to Sirius Decisions Inc., a marketing and sales information services company in Southport, Conn.: In 2005, 3.5 more people on average were involved in making a purchasing decision than in 2001.

With so many people weighing in on a decision and no clear go-to target, marketing and salespeople are evaluating the best way to go about making a connection.

"The challenge is to create a dialogue from sales and marketing, and we need to be a lot more intelligent with our approach. People who are lower in the organization used to make decisions, but now it's the boss's bosses and involves more of a team approach," says Brian Carroll, president of Arden Hills, Minn.-based sales qualifying service InTouch Inc., and author of *Lead Generation for the Complex Sale*.

The reasons for the increased red tape are familiar to businesses everywhere: limited time and resources, a desire to limit responsibility and risk, and progressively more complicated problems to solve. "In companies today, buyers are becoming far more concerned about the risks of their decisions, particularly for larger ticket items. No one person wants to take the responsibility (for making a

risky decision) if it doesn't work," says Michael T. Brandt, president of Lakewood, Colo.-based consultancy Marketing Resources Ltd. and a veteran b-to-b marketer.

The solutions to business problems are also more complicated and often expensive, experts say. Job responsibilities are narrower and fewer people are able to contemplate the scope of an organization's problems alone, thus spurring the creation of purchasing committees and multiple decision-makers. This complexity prolongs the b-to-b sales cycle, Carroll says, which can average anywhere from six to 36 months. "The decision to spend \$4 million on a new software service is a lot more complicated than buying a box of cereal. Everyone (in the company) needs to know how (the software) will suit their needs," Brandt says.

In this increasingly knotty environment, successful marketers and salespeople will take the initiative to work together to improve sales and profits.

◆ **Identify and nurture contacts at the target company.** An ideal world would not have cold calls. In the real world, however, they are a necessary means to an end. Preliminary research can ease the way somewhat, such as buying business lists from information vendors such as Dun & Bradstreet and infoUSA for the background they provide and as a starting point for contacts. Marketers also can find information through chambers of commerce,

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Nuture relationship through to purchase

trade show directories and information-sharing Web sites such as Jigsaw (www.jigsaw.com) and LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com).

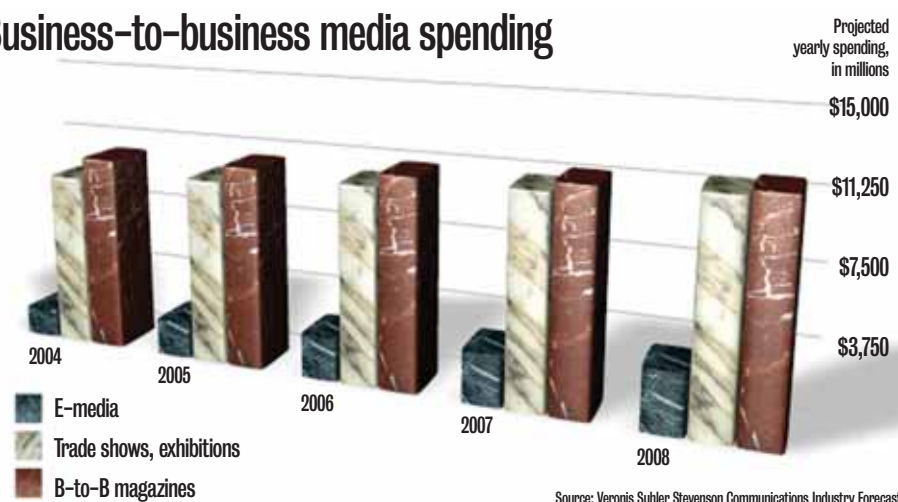
But beware of overindulging in gathering new contact information, Carroll says.

When creating a marketing initiative, many b-to-b marketers overlook the information they already have within reach. "Most (companies) have data that they'll never use because they didn't begin with what they really need to know. The idea is not to try to build the biggest list possible, but the most relevant list," he says. "Develop a profile of your ideal product and customer."

Because products that solve business problems are often industry-specific, the market is limited. Knowing competitors who offer a similar product or solution, and who they are selling to, is a smart place to start.

Once an entry point is identified, marketers can make contact, whether by phone call, direct mail or e-mail. "What I've typically found is that you are looking for a person in the company that is receptive to you. If I can find anybody who is receptive to me then I can ask questions of that person, (such as) 'Who makes buying decisions,'

Business-to-business media spending



"What are some of the problems you see in the company?" Then I can move from a receptive person to the person who understands the problems that I can solve," says Troy Waugh, CEO of Nashville-based Rainmaker Academy, a sales and marketing training program for accountants and financial services professionals.

The lengthy b-to-b sales and marketing

process does have its advantages, especially for marketers. In the months or years it can take to close a deal, marketers have the opportunity to develop relationships and really understand a company's needs, Carroll says. "You want to find the right people in the right companies in the state of conversation and nurture them until they are ready to purchase," says Carroll, who rec-

ommends first finding out how a person or company likes to receive its communications. Phone calls aren't appreciated by everyone; a multimodal plan that may include e-mail, newsletters or events may be more helpful, he says.

Waugh agrees. "You have to have enough bullets in your gun," he says. "Remember, you have a selling process and the buyer has a buying process, and there's also a relationship process going through the middle there."

◆ Focus on function and influence.

Most of the people that you speak to at a company will fall under categories related to your marketing efforts, whether they have final say in the contract or not, says Tony Jaros, vice president of research at Sirius Decisions. The category designations may include (using definitions developed by Sirius) the Champion, a user with purchasing authority; the Influencer, a person without the buying authority but with significant input, such as a consultant or middle manager or user; and the CXO, a member of the executive staff, Jaros says. Marketers also face gatekeepers, such as executive assistants who either will be receptive to your message or keep you locked out,

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and information-gatherers, who may reach out to you for information about your product but lack buying authority.

Treating all levels of authority with respect in your communications is important, because all have some level of input on the ultimate buy.

Furthermore, most buying decisions are made when the salesperson is not in the room. If marketers have created fans within the company through the right communications, the fans they have created on the inside will push the sales process to its endgame. They'll also be the source for continuing a business relationship. "You are much more successful in b-to-b (if you can get) someone who can sell internally for you," Waugh says. A mistake marketers make is relying too much on people's titles. Every company is structured differently, and outsiders can't make assumptions about who has decision-making authority.

"Don't fixate on titles, understand the role," Carroll says. "Fixate on functions. If you understand your customers' buying process, you are going to define which functions you need to target (with your marketing)."

◆ **Talk to the sales team—really.** In the business-to-business economy, marketers pave the way for sales to get their foot in the door, but the sales team gets clued in on the contacts and needs through direct contact. The two departments have to communicate in order to raise the bar on

marketing effectiveness. "If (marketing) has an average of three contacts (at a company), but (sales) knows there are six or eight people involved, you have more work to do," Carroll says.

When marketing is informed of new contacts and their context in the organization, they can target their efforts more effectively and provide the added support sales may need to close the deal down the line.

"I'm one of the believers that marketing and sales have to have a synergistic coexistence. These two functions have to have a closer, better relationship, no matter what feedback mechanism they use," says Brandt, who also suggests that marketers join the sales team in the field to understand this experience.

Pinning down the formula for effective business-to-business marketing is tough; getting the message to the right people, and enticing their interest, even more so. But once a sale is made, turning that client into a repeat buyer is the marketers' responsibility.

"Most customers are repeat buyers," Brandt says. "If you spend a lot of time at the front end getting the (initial) decision made, and the service is there and they trust you, you don't have to prove that anymore. Next time, that eight-person buying committee may come down to two people." ■