



# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND B2B BRANDS: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Rational and objective evaluation criteria are expected in an office product purchase. Business to business marketing is considerably different from business to consumer marketing. From transactional to relationship marketing, the evolution has changed dramatically with Information Technology. As Internet becomes pervasive, so does marketing. Social media was once considered personal in nature and a private network of individuals. But their pervasiveness has prompted businesses to explore its potential to connect with their customers.*

*Do businesses in the B2B domain engage with customers in the social space? Which are the most important SNS that they use? What is the nature of this engagement and is there a potential for improvement? We explored this little researched area of marketing with an exploratory study on B2B products in the social space in India. We studied the activity of three office electronic product manufactures on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.*

*We found that the lines between what is B2B and B2C are blurring. Brands do not have a clear social strategy and generally create content that is adapted to the different media. Information based content is generally expected and shared in this domain.*

*B2B brands can leverage the numerous opportunities that are available on these SNS networks to take their brand beyond their immediate network, with content that is share-worthy. These would help to reach new audiences and cement the brand values in the minds of prospective customers.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Online Brands, B2B Brands, Social Media Branding, Social Media Marketing, Social Media Research, Indian B2B Companies, Indian Brands, Indian social media, Facebook Marketing, Twitter Marketing, LinkedIn Marketing, social media fan research, social engagement, brand engagement, brand posts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing is changing dramatically with burgeoning connections between brands and customers. Today's customer does not consume brand related content only through pre-defined media streams. Brand information is scattered and dispersed through brand initiated and non brand initiated channels. How does B2B marketing change in the light of this new brand reality? Does the old rules still stand? Do brand management for B2B brand still go through the rational, evaluative, information rich path that it had in earlier years? Or is there an opportunity for the brand to forge new connections with its customers through the emerging information networks?

Marketing has traditionally drawn lines between its two major segments- the B2C and the B2B marketing. Strategies for both have been different and focused on what was assumed to completely different audience types. While the B2C marketers have concentrated on building brand love with consumers, and creating compelling advertising messages, the B2B marketers have recognised their audience as a researching, negotiating set of buyers who are focused on functional performance, rather than relying on their friends and family network to be influenced. This is the world view that is altering in the light of new interaction channels between the sellers and buyers. The rigid walls of selling in the B2B environment has become porous, and the individuals who buy are becoming visible beyond their professional roles. This has and will have profound implications on B2B marketing.

## 2. B2B MARKETING

Capturing the varied ages of B2B marketing, Wilkie and Moore (2003) describe marketing thought as developing along five stages of: a) pre-marketing (before 1900), b) founding the field (1900–1920), c) formalizing the field (1920–1950), d) paradigm shift (1950–1980), and e) intensification of shift (1980–present). With little product differentiation and perceived homogeneity of business markets, rational, economic-based decision making was the perceived norm rather than the emotional choices that customers are likely to make in the B2C market (Hadjikhani and LaPlaca, 2013). Naude and Holland (2004) proposed that business-to-business marketing has evolved from a transactional approach, through the relationship approach, and into a new era that they call information marketing. This transition was augmented by the emergence of Internet Technology and its usage. Companies have loyal, satisfied customers who recommend them to others and generate positive word-of-mouth (Harrison-Walker and Neelay, 2004). With the advent of the Internet, businesses are able to both interact with large numbers of customers, yet treat them as individuals (Mohammed et al, 2004).

It has become natural for like-minded professionals within brand communities to share content, which contributes to B2B interactions (Bruhn et al., 2013). Social media tools are becoming an interesting component of B2B marketing because of the roles of personal relationships and interactions in these markets (Huotari et al, 2013). B2B brands generally offer communication that is high on information, the need to be perceived as an expert being the goal of the communication. Information is generally presented as rational and delivering clear value as the decision makers would go through a controlled, informed process before making a buy.

### 3. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social Media has become a significant addition to the marketing mix of brands around the world.

Social media usage by brands has been studied by authors extensively, primarily in the B2C sector (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Simula *et al.*, 2013). The study of B2B communication and participation in the social context is still nascent. The larger US companies have been able to build substantial virtual communities on FaceBook, and has built sizeable audiences for their content-rich materials on YouTube, Slideshare and elsewhere (Brennan and Croft, 2012). A study conducted by Social Media Examiner (Stelzner, 2015) found that B2B companies too, have started to pick up on social media use. More than 70% of all B2B marketers use at least one of the “Big 4” social media sites (LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) to distribute content (Pulizzi & Handley, 2016).

The increasing dependency of consumers on social media has had an impact not only on business, but also, increasingly, on communications between businesses. Social media provides an ability to generate content online using social media (e.g., wikis & blogs) and social networking (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) (Sood and Pattinson, 2012). The authors elaborate that the social exchange layer of IMP social recognises the importance of social media and face to face interactions. Signalling methods represent the social gestures and contribute directly to social bonding (or otherwise) between parties via social exchange.

### 4. SOCIAL MEDIA MOTIVATIONS FOR B2B COMPANIES

Berry and Parasuraman (1991) in their seminal work on relationship marketing stated that relationship marketing can be practiced on any or more of three levels, depending on the type and number of bonds that a company uses to foster loyalty. Level one is characterized by financial bonds; level two by social and financial bonds; and level three adds structural bonds to the mix. Level Two emphasizes personal service, staying in touch, learning about wants and needs, and customizing the relationship in response. Level two can be made easier and more personal with the use of social media technologies.

The utilization of social media is now spreading also to the business-to-business (B2B) sector (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). This has implications on how, when and where B2B marketers interact with their customers (Schultz *et al.*, 2012). Companies in a B2B contexts use social media as communication to enhance customer relationships, support sales and build their brands, as a recruiting tool, a seeking tool and a product information and service tool (Andersson and Wikstrom, 2017).

B2B marketers have also begun to investigate how to utilize social media in their marketing efforts, and to use them to gain valuable information from customers, network with customers and establish a communication dialogue with customers (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). B2B business use Social media for specific goals that include targeting and consumer relationship management (Moor *et al.*, 2013). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have pointed out that B2B marketing professionals effectively employ these sites in branding strategies. McKinsey (2013) has surmised that B2B firms can increase sales innovations and reduce time to market if their marketers use social media sites. It appears that the more innovative users of B2B social media are striving to position themselves as experts and seeking to influence the direction in which markets evolve by providing content-rich social media material (white papers, blog postings, and so on).

Harris *et al.* (2003) found empirical evidence for determinants of attraction in business relationships. The authors found that familiarity, similarity, reputation and knowledge of alternatives, can impact on a prospective party's attractiveness. Familiarity, they argue, refers

to the degree to which the parties have the opportunity to interact. The author surmises that similarity impacts upon perceptions of attraction because individuals prefer to work with others who have similar backgrounds, attitudes personalities and styles of working. Reputation is related to the area of expertise and knowledge within a firm. It was found by Järvinen et al (2012) that B2B companies use social media in several novel ways of attracting new customers, examples of which are demonstrating expertise, increasing awareness and engaging customers.

Companies use social media to be present in the mind of the potential future clients, the familiarity that B2B marketing tries to achieve can be leveraged through the social space. The concept of attraction was considered as a valid factor, given that attracting new customers is of importance for B2B in social media. There is potential in attracting new clients as they identify with the characteristics of the company related to the way they present themselves in social media. The type of information that is shared by the companies could differ, however one common denominator that was found was that the information should somehow be related to showing off the company's competence. They use social media to end up in the search process once a customer engages in a search (Kvick-Nastaj & Gebert-Persson, 2013). Adoption of social media sites for B2B marketing is driven by the marketers' perception of those sites' usefulness, usability and utility (Lacka and Chong, 2016).

According to Ryan and Jones (2009), social media marketing consists of two basic elements, raising the online profile of the business and managing the reputation of the company by monitoring, assessing, responding to and influencing online conversations. In a major study in UK, B2B SNS activity was found to be used to attract new customers (91%), to cultivate relationships with their audience (86%), to increase awareness of their brand (82%) or to communicate the brand online (73%). Receiving feedback (46%) and interacting with suppliers (14%) were found to be less popular reasons for using SNS (Michaelidou et al, 2011).

Sarin (2013), offering a comprehensive chronology of Indian B2B market, writes that until 1991, the "license and permit Raj" was the dominant trait of the Indian economy. Capacity being the major asset, the selling task of B2B marketers was mainly restricted to "networking" with the members of the buying centre and the management of aggrandisement. The opening up of the Indian economy post-1991 led to the rapid tuning up of Indian B2B marketers and this led to a corresponding increase in the value of marketing in B2B firms. The increased use of IT in business relationships has augmented the value of various internet platforms in B2B marketing.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We studied three companies, Canon India, Epson India and HP India brands on three SNS for one month. The three major SNS identified were LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. There were both quantitative and qualitative evaluation criteria that were used to assess the posts. Frequency and richness were parameters used to evaluate quality, while semantics was used to understand the objective of the post. The data was collected over a month (August 15-September 14, 2018). We coded the data on type of post (text, image and text, video or animation), we categorised it into category of post (Brand related, Industry related, Customer related, Non brand Post, Event Information and Special Offers) and nature of intended audience (B2B or B2C). Customer response was coded with Likes, Shares and Comments.

We analysed a total of 325 brand posts made over a one month period (Aug 15-September 14, 2018). Facebook had the maximum share of posts (116/325), followed by Twitter (107/325). LinkedIn had 102/325. The posts were fairly even in all the media under study, implying that the brands were focused on all three.

**Table 1** Brands and their posts

Website	No of Posts
Canon India	103
Epson India	122
HP India*	100

\*HP India did not have a separate handle for the country on LinkedIn, and therefore HP main brand postings were taken into account on this SNS.

### Type of Posts

Text only posts were only a few (9/325). Many posts were a combination of text and image (61%). Posts that included images were more likely to generate higher levels of brand post popularity (Sebate et al, 2014). The brands also used video posts considerably (35%).

The three media were used symbiotically to promote brand content. The posts on most of them were similar, and the posts were re-positioned based on the SNS channel goals.

### Content Strategy

More than 50% of the posts were product or brand centric, the key message was either to promote a product, or for branding. Around 20% of the brand pertained to industry specific content, or content that of interest to the relevant business group. Another 20% was completely off-brand and generic in nature, primarily commemorating special days. Around 10% content was to promote events or brand activation by the brands.

### Audience

67% of the brand posts were intended for the B2B audience, while the rest were for B2C or general in nature. This explains the change that many B2B brands experience now, when their brands have started viewing their audiences from a customer prism, capitalising on knowing them as individuals, and tailoring a dialogue with them through their SNS communication.

**Table 2** Use of medium by brand

Brand	Facebook	Twitter	Linkedin
Canon India	29.00%	28.00%	42.00%
Epson India	40.00%	37.00%	22.00%
HP India	36.00%	33.00%	31.00%*

\*data based on HP, and not country specific brand.

**Table 3** Content Strategy

Medium	Product/brand news	Industry news	Customer Image	Non Brand	Event Promotion	Special offers
Facebook	41.00%	14.00%	1.00%	25.00%	18.00%	1.00%
Twitter	57.00%	7.00%	0.00%	23.00%	13.00%	0.00%
Linkedin	59.00%	33.00%	0.00%	8.00%	2.00%	0.00%

## 6. DISCUSSION

Among the engagement metrics selected to evaluate engagement with brand posts, 'Likes' proved to be an unreliable measure. There were very high spikes in Likes, in case of brand ads and similar content, likely due to brand posts being boosted as promotional measures. 'Shares' were a more reliable metric to measure engagement with content. Shares were maximum in case of specific product post or industry related posts, as is in character with a B2B brand. Brands still continued to use non specific posts though they did not achieve any social traction. E-mavens are motivated to forward information to others in his or her social network as a way of helping others (Ho and Dempsey, 2010), which should be a key factor in creating socially shareable content.

The key marketing objective was to promote features of specific products and was rational in its objective. Creative routes were used for product presentation in some cases, but these were primarily benefit led, as is to be expected from the category. Around 20% of the brand pertained to industry specific content, or content that of interest to the relevant business group. This is also indicative of the audience group that the brand was attempting to reach, which was their business partners. Even the generic posts could be tailored either to B2B or B2C audiences. The blurring of lines between a business and consumer audience was being perceived in case of office electronic products such as printers, scanners and cameras. They were also of interest to the B2C audience, and this could be studied in a later study.

## 7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Social is an interaction and an opportunity. The B2B brands studied here are contributing content, but to the best of our knowledge, not leveraging this opportunity to connect with their target audience. The three SNS networks have been used for identical purposes, to share common messages. There has been little differentiation based on the medium.

B2B social media can be enriched by the used of SNS specific interaction. Interactive chats by industry experts, mini events that encourage participation, partnering with other brands or content creators and influencers, post event coverage are some of the interesting concepts that brands have successfully engaged in with social media (Honkaniemi, 2017).

The 'social' in social media is what makes it so powerful. There are so many distractions on the social space. With competing voices to attract audiences, brands need to create content of distinctly high quality, intended to inform, influence and engage their audiences. Brands in the B2B sphere are considered to be knowledgeable and can be resources of relevant expertise. Education is a major objective that can be achieved in the social space from this premise. Thought leadership is certainly a direction that need to be explored in this role. The B-B social media space contains multiple important stakeholders for an organization, including current and potential customers, potential employees, shareholders, competitors, industry thought influencers and casual observers and to reach them meaningful and focused social media conversations on ideas or issues of mutual interests should form the basis for strategic engagement (Heath et al, 2013).

Customer interactions, customer heroes and their expertise are other important social content that has not been used much on these pages. Here lies a veritable mine of excellent testimonials, and information source that can augment the brand, and honour your B2B partner. This can also help to take the posts beyond the network, by tagging vendors, partners and other industry alliances. Use of testimonials or customer comments have been found effective for other industries such as the travel industry (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

Lingqvist et al (2015) terms this the 'consumerisation of business buying'. B2B marketers need to equip themselves to meet customers at different points on their journey, using digital

tools. Business buyers too are exposed to multiple interaction channels, and are exposed to information about products and services that are shifting their perspectives. These events may be triggered much before an authorised sales representative makes his pitch. Influence, as in the consumer world, is now multi faceted and thereby B2B marketers need to focus their energies in devising strategies to meet this new demand for information and dialogue.

Showcasing employees are another smart way to bring the people behind your brand into the social space. SNS networks are about people and forging connections with and through real people give a genuine foundation to a social strategy. Behind the best social strategies is an insight about the people who are your business partners. Create and weave stories around content that is of interest to them, and make that share-worthy, so that you can create a following beyond your immediate reach.

## 8. FUTURE RESEARCH

Research can focus on different industries to explore the social media usage and potential. The brands identified in the current study have overlapping audiences, they have products in both B2B and B2C segments, which may cloud results. Completely B2B categories can be studied to see whether social media usage can be effective in these too. This study has been a representative one, longitudinal studies can reveal more insights. Comparative studies with brands in international markets or other emerging markets can be revealing in commonalities or future directions for the brands to engage in.

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