



10 B2B BRAND TRENDS TO WATCH IN 2017



When people ask us to comment on the hot up-and-coming trends in business branding, we rarely miss the mark in terms of spotting what's coming.

What is more difficult to predict is precisely when the trend in question will actually move to mass B2B marketer adoption.

In 2011, we had the foresight that B2B brands would adopt mobile-friendly websites in mass. We were certainly ahead of the times. With the Google Algorithm shift in 2015, B2B brands began moving to mobile-friendly interfaces.

While we may be ahead of the times in our predications, the following 10 trends may not simultaneously take off in 2017, they most certainly will do so in the not-too-distant future. So don't feel bad if you're not ready to adopt them. However, you most certainly should be watching them as we move into the new year.

Happy Next Year!

1.

Employee-Focused Branding

For many B2B companies, attracting and retaining top talent is one of the biggest challenges they face. According to a recent PriceWaterhouse Cooper Global Survey, 73% of CEOs indicated concern about the availability of key skills. HR professionals have become increasingly focused on employer branding, employee engagement and talent acquisition strategies, as competition for top talent intensifies. Global talent leaders have indicated employer branding as a top 2017 priority, and they are increasingly partnering with branding firms for assistance.

Brand and HR collaboration makes sense, as many HR objectives align with brand-centric strategies. Instead of positioning a company's products and services, the focus is on positioning the company and its core attributes, values and attractiveness as a destination for top talent. As such, 2017 will see a trend towards more branding firms getting involved with employer branding and recruitment activities, and HR initiatives will appear in many B2B marketing plans and budgets.

2.

Client-Centricity

We continue to live in the age of the empowered customer. B2C organizations figured this out long ago, and B2B firms are starting to get the picture: a customer-centric approach to doing business wins. B2B buyers are increasingly influenced by their consumer experiences and have come to expect similar experiences in their professional lives.

According to Walker Information's "Customers 2020," by the year 2020 customer experience will overtake price and product as the key brand differentiator. This has huge implications, not just for how firms market and sell, but also how they deliver their services and products, as well as how they nurture existing client relationships. Unfortunately, only 23% of B2B marketers have a customer-centric-vs. a channel- or product-centric-organizational structure. In 2017, we expect to see a growing number of B2B marketers adopt more customer-centric strategies, and the right internal infrastructure to support them.

3.

Account-Based Marketing

Account-based marketing (ABM) emerged as a hot B2B marketing topic last year, and will likely get more attention in 2017. For B2B firms with long, complex sales cycles that often involve many stakeholders and are typically high-value in nature, ABM represents a more effective way to generate new business. While demand generation focuses on targeting specific personas or client types, ABM is hyper-focused on targeting specific contacts at specific companies with which a firm wants to do business or is already engaged. It's been described as fishing with a spear, as opposed to a net.

Research from Demandbase found that when firms leveraged ABM, it resulted in a 285% higher close rate for targeted enterprise accounts, and a 166% higher close rate for mid-market accounts. At the heart of an ABM strategy is close collaboration and alignment with a firm's branding and business development efforts. As marketing ROI and sales alignment have become primary B2B corporate initiatives, the ABM approach to brand engagement will gain ground in 2017.

4.

Video. Video. Video.

In 2017, look for B2B firms using video to double their efforts, and others on the sidelines to earnestly get in the game. When done well, video generates ROI. Period. A recent HubSpot study pointed to video as the most thoroughly consumed content format. Four times as many consumers prefer video content over text, and 59% of senior executives agree that if content is available in both text and video format, they will prefer to watch the video.

As of late, the most common video format used by B2B marketers has been the short-form segment featuring brand videos, client testimonials, behind-the-scenes tours, and info sessions. In 2017, expect to see a move away from the one-off format to more of an episode format with the creation of series, shows, recurring live events, and ongoing product demonstrations.

5.

Native (a.k.a. Contextual) Advertising

There will continue to be a shift towards increased reliance on paid methods of search amplification, and native advertising represents one of those methods. Native advertising is best described as a form of paid media where the ad, post or article blends into the context of the (native) content surroundings. And it can be a highly effective means of generating exposure, routinely outperforming other formats of digital paid search.

For many B2B firms, sponsored posts on LinkedIn represent an initial entre into native advertising, but there are many native advertising opportunities available to B2B marketers, including Forbes BrandVoice, Business Insider, Sharethrough and BuzzFeed, as well as a growing number of industry-specific publications. While many larger organizations already hav experimented and succeeded with native advertising, in 2017 look for increasing adoption by small-to-mid B2B marketers.

6.

Finally Serious about Social

Compared to B2C brands, B2B brands have been very slow to adopt social media as a serious channel for brand exposure and engagement. However, a recent study from the Direct Marketing Association indicates that B2B social media investment will grow from 10% to 24% of marketing budgets over the next 5 years. According to eMarketer, overall paid social media advertising will increase from \$24 billion in 2015 to \$36 billion in 2017.

As B2B brands increasingly and fully embrace content marketing, social media will gain ground as an essential channel for effective content distribution. Expect to see B2B brands further embrace social media in 2017 as a more serious vehicle for building brand awareness and engagement among increasingly socially-minded B2B buying audiences.

7.

B2B e-Commerce Grows

B2B brands are starting to generate significant sales through e-commerce efforts, and there is significant room for growth. Forrester claims that B2B companies currently sell about \$780 trillion of products or services online, which is predicted to rise to \$1.13 trillion by 2020, a 45% growth.

Forrester is also predicting that 56% of B2B buyers will make at least half of their purchases online. B2B buyers are now taking a digital first approach to not only researching purchases, but to whenever possible, completing the transaction online. This is a trend that B2B brands cannot ignore. Expect to see B2B organizations of all sizes put a toe in the e-commerce water, if not going all in, throughout 2017 and beyond.

8.

Influencer Marketing Gains Traction

B2B brands are switching on to Influencer Marketing as a way to create advocacy and build audiences. As social platforms rise, so do the opportunities to leverage advocates within these networks and increase peer validation and influence, leading to greater brand recognition.

Influencers are now less being defined by the size of their followings, and more by their relevance for the target audience. This enhanced context will fuel the growth of Influencer Marketing in 2017 as new channels, and key influencers, emerge.

9.

Data Drives the Client Experience

Hand in hand with the B2B focus on client experience is the increasing importance of data. According to the Econsultancy / Adobe B2B Digital Trends 2016-17 report, 97% of B2B Marketers feel that optimizing the customer journey across multiple touch points is very important.

Marketing will play a more central role in this regard with research from Dun & Bradstreet highlighting that 75% of global CMOs and senior marketing executives believe that Marketing will be responsible for the end-to-end customer experience over the next 3 to 5 years.

However, the majority still see that they lack the resources and infrastructure to effectively make sense of the data required to achieve this. This will lead to a refining of customer data management and analysis practices around the customer life cycle, doubling down on customer insight and intimacy. Combining data across the digital footprint of the buyer will paint a clearer picture of how, when and why they are likely to buy, which will inform a more aligned go-to-market strategy.

10.

Exploring AR & VR

2016 has seen the emergence of Virtual Reality (VR) as a mainstream technology. It is predicted that there will be upwards to 24 million VR and Augmented Reality (AR) headsets in circulation by 2018.

Users are ready to embrace VR/AR in mass, with a number of leading technology companies, including the likes of Google, Facebook, Apple and Samsung, all focusing on this new wave of devices, applications, and content. 2017 will see this extend to B2B, where the opportunity for the application of this technology is considerable. B2B marketers will look to leverage VR/AR as a medium for storytelling and engagement by transporting their audiences to new times and places, providing access that was previously unachievable or unimagined.



Are you ready to Take your Business Brand to the Next Level?

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