

Digital Body Language

Reading and Responding to Online Digital Buying Behaviors



The game has changed. Your next customer will research and evaluate your products through web sites and online networks long before your salespeople get involved. Just as consumers now search and buy online, B2B purchasing in an online world has transformed into an interactive process driven by the customer, not the vendor. In fact, a call to your salesperson may be the last step in the buyer's journey, significantly limiting their influence and expertise that has long driven the buying discussion.

Yet there is an emerging vanguard of innovative companies that have learned how to decode the online behavior of their prospects early on in the buying process to gain competitive advantage and win more business. This online behavior—web site visits, downloads, email responses, and more—is what we call **Digital Body Language**. Its cues can identify buyers and reveals their intentions to salespeople.

Executive Summary

Compare reading buyer's Digital Body Language to the traditional B2B transaction, a function dominated by sales and rooted in face-to-face interactions. The best sales professionals were highly adept at reading buyer body language and buying signals revealed during in-person meetings, such as business luncheons, boardroom presentations, and product demos. Nuances of facial expressions, eye contact, raised eyebrows, head nods or crossed arms, could tell savvy sales professionals much about a prospect's buying disposition. He or she could then address objections early to improve the odds of closing a deal.

These skills and measures are no longer enough to provide value-based interactions. Because the buying cycle for B2B products and services has moved online, the evolution of the web is enabling easy access to competitive product information and peer feedback. This has transformed how companies and individuals research and evaluate prospective solution providers. With the buyer in the driver's seat, salespeople get less face time with clients.

Buyers are more educated and have greater leverage in the negotiation process. To succeed in this environment, fast-moving businesses are adapting their marketing and sales processes to the Digital Body Language of their prospects.

Digital Body Language is the online equivalent of the facial expressions revealed around the negotiating table. It is comprised of web site visits, content downloads, keyword searches, and email responses. In many ways, online buyer behavior provides the most accurate picture of prospect interest and intent. By analyzing the timing, frequency, and clickstream data of web site visits, marketers can zero in on the buyer's pains, concerns, and motivations.

The caveat with Digital Body Language is that it is generally invisible to sales. By the time the average salesperson is aware of the electronic dialogue that has taken place between company and prospect, it is often too late to influence the buying process, scope of engagement, or combat competitive threats.

To maximize the value of their respective roles, sales and marketing professionals realize how important it is to present a united front by aligning their communications and engagements with prospective buyers.

This alignment is also supporting internal efficiency and success, impacting the bottom line. Organizations that make a concerted effort to address these changes in the buying process consistently increase lead conversion rates, shorten sales cycles, and improve win rates. Conversely, those businesses that cannot track, analyze, and communicate the online behavior of their prospects will find themselves increasingly disadvantaged in a competitive marketplace.

It can be challenging for B2B marketers to identify and meaningfully understand customer motivations, because oftentimes multiple decision-makers—and a relatively small number of target accounts—characterize the typical B2B purchase. Digital Body Language is the online equivalent of the facial expressions revealed during negotiating discussions.

How To Manage The New Buying Process

Before an organization can adjust its marketing and sales process to manage and measure Digital Body Language, it must first understand how the buying process has changed. The accessibility and speed of the web greatly eases the discovery and consideration processes that buyers go through. This is especially true for typical B2B considered-purchase products and services involving a buying committee or a defined decision-making process, where most of a buyer's research and evaluation moves to the web.

The old protocol of sending a detailed Request for Proposal (RFP) to prospective vendors has in many cases been replaced by downloading and evaluating white papers, case studies, product specs, and pricing sheets. In many cases, vendors and their sales organizations are unaware that they are being evaluated by a buyer, and therefore don't have the same opportunities to cultivate a meaningful role in the decision-making process. In other words, they are losing out where it counts.

This is because they do not have visibility into the buyer's Digital Body Language.

The way buyers have ramped up their usage of the web to enhance their buying process is especially pronounced in the technology sector, where data shows that online search and downloadable content have become the primary research sources for buyers.

“According to the CEB, 57% of a typical purchase decision is made before a customer even talks to a supplier.”

—The End of Solution Sales, 2012

According to the study, the most valuable sources of online content cited by B2B buyers when researching products and services are professional associations and online communities (47%); industry organizations and groups (46%); online trade publications (41%); seminars and workshops (41%); and trade shows (35%).

It's important to note that in-person engagement takes a backseat to many other online interactions. This is largely due to the on-demand nature of online content. Buyers have become accustomed to personalized engagements, on their terms and preferred channels.

"A vast majority (87%) of B2B buyers said online content has either a major or moderate impact on vendor preference and selection, according to the CMO Council."

— Better LeadYield in the Content Marketing Field, 2013

How To Navigate The New Sales Process

With the evolution of buying behavior, it is surprising that the sales process for many companies has remained stagnant. Jim Dickie, president of CSO Insights, a firm dedicated to researching sales effectiveness, said it best in a Harvard Business Review article: "Customers' buying processes have evolved in our world of ubiquitous, instant, global communication, but companies' selling processes have for the most part stayed the same."

Given the rapid migration to an online buying process, salespeople have fewer opportunities to be in front of prospects to pick up on the visual cues and signals that help reveal their key topics of interest or pain points. For example, according to benchmark data by CEB, sales reps today are spending significantly less time performing what are strictly customer-facing sales activities than they were just a few years ago. Data indicates that they spent exactly 15% less time between 2010 and 2012 than they did between 2004 and 2006.

This is reflected in the movement away from the formal RFP, still a common purchasing process where all relevant vendors are given an opportunity to submit bids. In the current climate, many buyers conduct their own anonymous evaluations and typically only talk to a short list of potential vendors before making a decision.

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This poses a much greater risk that a company can be completely left out of the selection process if they are relying solely on relationships and cold calls to connect with prospects at the right time in their buying cycle.

Embrace Your Online Buyers

The good news for B2B marketers and sales organizations is that the online world has not only provided tools for buyers. Online tracking and analytics packages provide intelligence for organizations to better understand and serve customers.

“You are able see what prospects are interested in and then respond by sending them case studies and other information that speaks directly to their needs and areas of interest,” says Jill Konrath, a leading sales strategist and author of the bestselling book *Selling To Big Companies*. “That relevancy is so powerful in today’s business environment and the relevancy quotient just keeps increasing.”

Online behavior provides insights into the buying cycle that had been previously unavailable to the sales team. The prospect information that was once relegated to the salesperson’s “wish list” is now available by tracking their digital behavior. This provides more detailed visibility into the dynamics of an organization’s buying process, down to web site visits and research completed. This knowledge empowers sales to deliver more relevant collateral that demonstrates value and advances them through sales cycle.

Reading And Responding To Digital Body Language

To benefit from Digital Body Language, businesses must make investments in people, process, and technology. Simply switching on a business intelligence tool is not enough. Significant process changes are usually required on the part of both marketing and sales organizations.

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Industry experts recommend taking a phased approach by focusing on the following best practices:

- **Accumulate Digital Body Language** by integrating marketing channels on a single marketing system of record to build comprehensive prospect profiles.
- **Communicate Digital Body Language** to the sales organization and other business stakeholders by integrating the marketing system of record with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) or Sales Force Automation (SFA) systems.
- **Evaluate Digital Body Language** using advanced sales lead scoring systems that compare a prospect’s explicit information against implicit indicators of buying intent.
- **Accelerate the sales process** with real-time sales alerts, notifications of prospect web activity, and marketing responses.

DIGITAL DNA

Buyers each take different paths to purchasing a product or solution. Along the way, their information needs and behaviors change as they progress through the buying cycle.

For example, at the consideration phase a prospect may download a white paper examining relevant industry trends. Further down in the sales funnel, a prospect may be tackling the technical specifications and implementation issues around a particular solution. Advanced marketers adapt their outreach with targeted communications designed to address differing buyer needs at each phase, and to advance prospects to the next stage in the sales funnel.

- **Cultivate the Digital Body Language** of prospects with personalized lead nurturing campaigns that drive them back to the web site.
- **Validate marketing spend** with closed-loop marketing systems that measure marketing's impact on revenue and pipeline.

From Batch and Blast to Targeted Efficiency

Managing lead generation with a batch and blast approach, the Intellectual Property (IP) and Science Business teams at Thomson Reuters were not sending targeted messages, and therefore routed leads to sales based on campaign responsiveness rather than their quality or interest level.

To address their core issues, such as misalignment of sales and marketing; poor segmentation and targeting of prospects; lack of adequate lead scoring process; and lead leakage from sales and marketing funnel, the company collaboratively developed standard lead terminology definitions and process responsibilities, as well as a lead scoring criteria.

Re-engineering lead management has helped the company accelerate its speed of lead conversion, opportunity creation, and closure. Additionally, the team has seen a 23% increase in the number of leads being routed from marketing to sales, a greater proportion of high quality lead handoff, and a 175% increase in revenue attributed to marketing leads.

“The new, shared insight into our lead management funnel provides a clearer picture of the quality and quantity of leads needed to achieve revenue targets, enabling marketing to develop lead generation and nurturing strategies to engage the right prospects, in the right way, at the right time.”

—Mike Thompson, Vice President,
Global Marketing Services Intellectual
Property & Science, Thomson Reuters

Reaping The Rewards Of Comprehensive Digital Body Language Strategies

Companies that adopt these marketing best practices become highly attuned to the Digital Body Language of their prospects. They align their marketing and sales teams around information and intelligence—two of the most important tools for a sales team to succeed. Recognizing that sales instincts and personal relationships are no longer enough to excel in an Internet world, high-performance organizations see that marketing holds the keys to identifying the right influencers and key issues within a buyer’s organization.

The rewards for firms that track customer Digital Body Language include increased sales, faster growth rates, and shorter sales cycles. By being the first responder when prospects begin to research a purchase, companies gain competitive advantage and improve sales effectiveness. By aligning marketing departments more closely with sales and measuring the results of campaigns, these organizations increase the effectiveness of promotional spend.

Conversely, businesses that cannot track and analyze the behavior of top prospects are likely to find themselves at a competitive disadvantage going forward.

Given the rapidly changing environment in the B2B world, the question is not whether a business can afford to invest in digital transformation, but whether it can afford not to make the change. “Information is the price of admission in today’s hyper-competitive market. It is simply too hard to get in the door now without good data on your clients,” Konrath adds.

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