

Is your Website Making Consultative Sales Calls for you?

*Using your Website to build trust, create dialog, and turn your
online relationships into sales leads*



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Executive Summary

When the Web first came into prominence (circa 1995), the only expectation for a Website was that it would provide accurate information about the company that put it up. It was an elaborate electronic brochure, and the prevailing marketing belief was that if enough people came to the site and poked around, the site would help them sell.

Many business to business (B2B) organizations are still laboring under that assumption. They put effort into their search engine marketing (SEM) strategies, spending dollars purchasing keywords and using other tools to help drive traffic. What they don't seem to realize, however, is that we are now living in a Web 2.0 world, where buyers control the purchasing process and are used to interacting with one another as a regular part of their online experience. They don't just want information, they want to be engaged. Getting visitors to the site is no longer enough. If you're not engaging them – building a dialog, listening to their concerns, letting them tell you what they want, and then using what they say to turn those engaged visitors into sales – you may be on a fast track to irrelevance despite all your marketing investments.

You are not alone. Take a quick look around just about any B2B Website and you will see the same story. While the Internet abounds with examples of buyers and sellers of consumer products engaged in meaningful conversations and interactions, the same cannot be said for those businesses that sell to other businesses.

It's as if the changes in the buyer/seller relationship that have occurred over the last 10 years never happened. Many of us have certain expectations of the Web in our personal lives. Yet B2B sellers seem to continue to operate their online marketing efforts under the old rules, using their Websites primarily to disseminate information in an outbound-only direction.

That's a mistake. In this new world of Web 2.0, buyers don't want sellers to talk at them; they want to find meaningful content beyond the usual hype and specs, they want to tell sellers what they think and have the sellers respond, and they want to feel more like a part of the whole process than a "target."

This major shift in control has not only changed the expectations of the buyers; it has also necessitated a change in the way sellers must measure success. Today, measuring traffic is not enough. It's not about how many people came to the site, but rather whether the *right people* came to the site – and whether they were successful in achieving their goals once they arrived.

Put into retail terms, Web traffic is window shoppers – people passing by the store and expressing some idle curiosity at what's inside. These people don't become true shoppers until they step inside the store. They don't become potential buyers until they're examining the merchandise or trying on the clothes. The same is true for Web visitors. They don't become prospects until they start interacting with the site, and don't become leads until they start producing outcomes or requesting more information.

The question is how does the seller encourage visitors to become engaged? The techniques and concepts behind Web 2.0 provide many of the answers. Rather than being inwardly focused, today's B2B Websites need to focus more on the visitors and their needs. Behavioral data from Web analytics tracking tools and attitudinal data, such as intercept surveys and online focus groups, can help. Providing a forum for visitors to interact with one another and then monitoring the responses is another method.

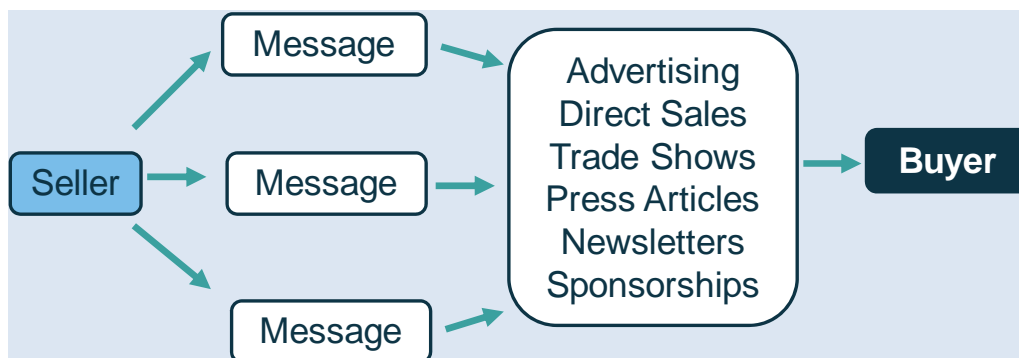
Ultimately, the goal is to make a visit to the site the first sales call – a consultative sales call where interaction between buyer and seller create an outcome that is satisfactory to both. It may not be an immediate sale – in fact, in most B2B instances it will not be – but it will be a positive step forward that helps propel the overall sales process.

This white paper will examine the tectonic shifts currently taking place in the B2B space, and how savvy marketers can take advantage of them to improve both top and bottom line results. It will also provide ideas and data to help those marketers sell upper management on the need to change the organization's approach to the Web, and marketing in general, in order to provide customers and prospects with the experience they're seeking and assure they achieve the outcomes they desire.

Shift in power

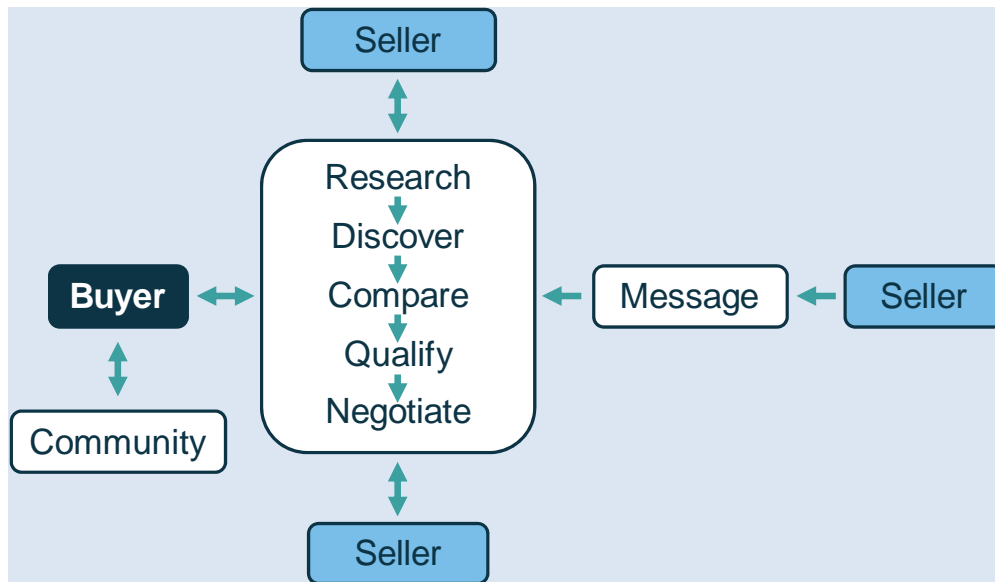
For most of recorded history, the power in the buy/sell equation belonged to the seller. It was the seller who controlled the information, including product specifications, positioning, messaging and pricing (see Fig. 1). To receive any of this information, the buyer would have to request it, and the seller could choose how it was doled out – by mail, by telephone, or in a personal sales call – as well as how much of it went out at any time. Sellers could keep buyers “on the hook” by carefully managing this information dissemination process until it was time to close the sale.

Fig. 1 – Traditional Marketing Model – Seller Initiated and Controlled



The advent of the Web changed that equation, often without the seller realizing what had happened. Suddenly everything the buyer wanted to know was available at the click of a mouse (see Fig. 2), which meant the buyer no longer needed the seller to be involved in the purchasing process until the buyer desired that involvement. As a result, sellers often lost touch with where the buyers were in the decision-making process, especially in the long-term, considered-purchase situations that comprise the bulk of B2B sales.

Fig. 2 – New Emerging Model – Buyer & Seller in Dialogue



This is the reality sellers face today. Buyers come to their Websites, gather information, evaluate specifications, make comparisons to competitive products, and often obtain pricing all without any interaction with the seller whatsoever. They also come looking for content that is meaningful to them – tips, tricks, ideas, etc. The net result is sellers have much less of a sense for who buyers are and where they are in the decision process than they did before. At least if they continue to operate as though the old rules still apply.

Smart sellers have come to realize that they can no longer control buyers. Instead, they must engage buyers by interacting with them in order to build a relationship. Since buyers are no longer patiently waiting, sellers must learn to read and understand buyer behavior on their Websites, using past experiences to determine what stage the buyer is in – and how to lead him/her to closure.

Those who take advantage of this unprecedented access to buyers will find it is actually easier and more cost-efficient to sell to a larger audience, because that audience will tell the sellers which products/services they want and how they want to be sold. It does not come without a significant investment of time and cash, and often in expert resources.

But following that direction should result in a higher close rate with lower per-sale expenditures. The key is determining what that direction is.

Evolution of Measuring Websites

As mentioned previously, the first measurement of Website effectiveness was traffic. It was believed that driving visitors to the site was the only objective. Sites were built to offer “cool” factors to draw visitors, and marketing efforts (such as search engine marketing) were based on supporting this objective.

As measurement grew more sophisticated, the realization set in that traffic alone was not enough. An organization could spend a lot of time, money and energy driving high levels of traffic to its Website. But if it wasn't the *right* traffic, or the traffic didn't stay, the effort was largely wasted.

This realization drove the next step in measurement: visitor path analysis through Web analytics packages. Now rather than just looking at how many visits were occurring on the site (and where they were coming from), organizations began looking at their visitors' behavior while on the site. Where did they go from the landing page? How deeply did they go into the site? Was there a common point where visitors would tend to abandon the site? Knowing the answers to these questions helped organizations to improve their sites and remove barriers. But it was still limited. Knowing what causes visitors to leave is not the same as knowing what compels them to remain, or take a more committed action.

Unbridled Web analytics also led to another problem, that of too much information. Suddenly decision-makers went from having very limited data on Web traffic to a glut of data – so much so that it was impossible to analyze and comprehend it all. This is where key performance indicators (KPIs) were introduced.

KPIs allow organizations to focus on limited aspects of the Website that are most important to driving business value-correlated actions and moving the sales process forward. This is the current state of the art for most organizations.

While there are many types of KPIs that can be measured, the best tend to be ratios, e.g. number of return visitors vs. number of visitors. Assuming the organization understands what it needs to do on the Web to move the needle; these ratios provide a means of measuring whether the KPI is headed in the right direction. Using the previous example, if the total number of visitors is going up while the number of return visitors is going down, it could be a strong indication that something is broken on the Website.

The next phase on the horizon is financial valuation. Essentially what this involves is marketing finally being able to tell the CFO what he/she most wants to know about a given program: what is the ROI? Using a framework for your business to assign a financial valuation to each visitor engagement level allows decision-makers to determine the relative value of each and determine whether to hold the line, increase, decrease or entirely discontinue spending on a given investment causing these visitors to engage. For marketers who have seen budgets slashed or programs abandoned because there was no ROI figure associated with them, financial valuation is the Holy Grail.

Yet there is one more step beyond financial valuation. That step is predictive analytics. While predictive analytics have been in use for many years in general business intelligence settings, it is just beginning to come to the attention of those in charge of online marketing. In fact, a 2008 survey developed for the eMetrics Marketing Optimization Summit revealed that just nine (9) percent of respondents have it on their radars.

The potential, however, is tremendous. Predictive analytics allows trained business analysts to observe patterns of visitor behavior, see which ones led to good outcomes for the customer and the organization, and help readjust the Website to deliver more of those outcomes.

A very simple example of predictive analytics is the listings of other books Amazon.com will provide when you express interest in one particular book. They will show you that customers who purchased the book in which you're interested also purchased these other books.

That is a simple algorithm, however, where the relationships between activities are obvious. What predictive analytics really does is look at unrelated objects or activities and determines the ties between them.

Predictive analytics can do the same for online marketing of B2B products and services. By seeing the hidden relationships between various activities – keywords, visitor paths, downloads, conversions, and other external data sources – and how they tie to positive outcomes, organizations can make adjustments that accelerate the sales cycle and lead to improved closure rates.

Steps for Implementing Measurement Tools

It is obvious that analytics play a large part in driving optimal business results from a Website. As a result, many organizations rush out to purchase an analytics tool so they can gain the benefits. If/when that approach doesn't work, they then rush out to purchase a different analytics tool or decide to not worry about the data.

Quite frankly, that's an approach that can lead to early setbacks and long-term failure of the project. Rather than starting with the tool, organizations would be better served to follow these steps in this order:

- **Establish ownership of the analytics environment.** While technical support is necessary, business owners need to own and drive the project.
- **Develop a process for defining visitor success milestone points.** Remember that today's world of the Web is all about visitors achieving their goals when they visit. Think about what those goals are, and set up measurements to see if they're being achieved. Be sure the process also includes a mechanism for making adjustments if your initial assumptions prove incorrect.
- **Create key performance indicators.** The saying "you can't manage what you can't measure" holds true. Creating KPIs will help you determine if the actions visitors are taking match the actions you want them to take – or whether your site (or portions of it) require a redesign.
- **Obtain tool capabilities.** Having done the prior steps, you now know which tools will be effective for you.

- **Train the users.** Make sure everyone who will be using the tools understands how to use them – both the technical aspects and how to do the analysis.
- **Enhance analyst capabilities.** Data is only as good as the people who are analyzing it. If you don't have the expertise in-house, you may want to bring in an outside business analyst (or team of analysts, depending on the volume of data) who can interpret the data and help you draw the proper conclusions from it. Misinterpretation of data by people untrained in analysis can negate the entire program.
- **Establishing testing disciplines.** Regular testing of messaging, offers, analytical assumptions and data-gathering mechanisms will help assure programs remain on-track.
- **Begin to merge attitudinal data.** Behavioral data, i.e. what a visitor did, is only part of the story. The “who” and the “why” or “why not” are the rest of the story.

Incorporating Attitudinal Data

The phenomenon of parallax can cause two different people viewing the same event to walk away with different interpretations of the facts. For example, the plate umpire at a baseball game may see a checked swing, while the base umpire sees it as not being checked. Both saw the same swing, but their perspectives led to different conclusions.

In the world of Web analytics, the visit is the event – the movement of the hitter. But the visitor's attitude toward the site during the visit is interpretation. That interpretation doesn't show up in a spreadsheet or on a dashboard, but it can be extremely valuable in determining whether the visitor considers the visit to be a success. Here's why attitudinal data is so important.

Suppose a prospect comes to the site and spends 15 minutes clicking on 10 pages. A view of the raw data alone would conclude that the prospect was engaged in the site. Attitudinal data, however, may reveal that the prospect spent so much time on the site and clicked on so many pages because he/she was looking for specific information and had trouble finding it before ultimately abandoning the site in frustration. In truth, the final outcome was an unsatisfactory one for that prospect, which likely means the prospect is a lost lead rather than a hot lead. The organization won't know, however, unless it asks.

There are several techniques that can be used to gather attitudinal data, including:

- Intercept surveys that seek user opinions during the visit
- Online focus groups
- Usability testing
- Social network data, whether it's from a community on the site or seeking out critiques in blogs, outside communities such as Facebook, or other data points

Any of these can help get beyond the raw numbers to add more dimension to the data, and help determine which elements of the Web site create successful events, and which get in the way of the relationship moving forward. The results then become actionable – providing the organization is committed to improving the performance of the site.

Best Practices for Improved Website Performance

But there are a few Best Practices organizations can follow to assure a greater level of success:

1. Orient measurement approaches toward determining how successful the visitor was in his/her mind.
2. Create a culture, process and framework for placing visitor behaviors into a business value or financial context.
3. Gain consensus from the team on business goals for Website investments and contributions along with associated KPIs.
4. Determine baselines for each KPI over a sufficient period of time and create continuous improvement goals against those baselines. Most important is to focus on trends rather than individual data points in time.
5. Appreciate the value of attitudinal data and use a variety of techniques to go straight to the source. Although behavioral (statistical) data can point the way to trouble spots, it usually cannot provide complete answers. Go to the source.
6. Enable the analytics tool you choose to report to your business context specifically. While they are powerful tools, they need an architect and the

- oversight of a qualified analyst if the organization is to derive full value from them.
7. Do as much of this as possible before spending media or Website redesign dollars. A little investment up-front can help avoid major losses and wasted time down the road.

The Web 2.0 Effect

Look again at Fig. 2. There is one other wrinkle in the selling process that is new (more or less) to the world of Web 2.0 – “communities”. Essentially, communities are loosely defined groups of people who share a common interest. These people interact with each other on a variety of topics, possibly including the products or services offered by sellers. They are very much a wild card in the selling process.

The reason is simple: because they are decentralized and amorphous, they cannot be controlled. A user who has a bad experience with a product or service can go into a community, blog or otherwise post about that experience, and quickly negate any other positive messages the seller is trying to convey. Right or wrong, these communities often have tremendous credibility and influence among buyers and potential buyers. Ask any hotel property that scores low in guest ratings.

While they can't be controlled, they can be leveraged. Addressing concerns as they arise, responding to constructive criticism, and generally showing that the organization cares about the opinions of its customers and prospects helps build relationships in the same way that personal sales call did before the Internet – and still continue to do.

Conclusion

The Web may not have changed everything as-predicted, but it definitely changed control over the selling process, moving it from seller to buyer. Engaging is now the new selling.

By determining business goals and tying measurable KPIs to them, organizations can track whether the Website is doing the job they want it to do. The use of Web analytics and attitudinal data, interpreted by a qualified business analyst, (i.e., a “buy-cycle”

analyst), further assures that buyers are deriving the value they seek from the site. Together these tools and techniques can help organizations gain a strategic advantage over the competition, and realize far greater value from all their Web investments.

Still, all of this is relatively uncharted territory. Universities are just beginning to teach this type of comprehensive analysis and program design, and the expertise often does not yet lie in-house. This is where ClearGauge can make a significant contribution to your organization's success.

We have been helping organizations design, optimize, analyze, and improve upon Websites and Web performance since it first became a selling tool. We have the knowledge and expertise to aid you in making your Website more engaging.

Working with ClearGauge will allow you to:

- Better understand and service the needs of your customers and prospects
- Provide value to customers and prospects online in considered purchase environments
- Drive qualified leads efficiently
- Align key metrics and implement measurements to your Website to truly understand its value

Most importantly, we can help you move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 in order to gain a strategic advantage in winning the hearts and minds – and purchase orders – of customers and prospects. In short, ClearGauge can help you from topline to bottom line, online.

If you have questions or would like to speak with one of our professionals please contact timb@cleargauge.com, or 312-423-7633.