



Illustration by Jeff Kale for The Partner Channel

# Human Factor MARKETING

## Three Vital Elements for Technology Marketing Success

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Over the years, I've found that many people running small and midsize businesses struggle with the concept of marketing. They'll ask: "What is really needed beyond effective selling? And if I do any marketing beyond selling, how do I determine a return on that marketing investment?"

In the business-to-business (B2B) world in particular, there is a lot of confusion about what kind of marketing is needed and *how much* marketing to do. And because there is so much potentially involved in this big ball of string called marketing, many folks finally throw up their hands and exclaim, "Just help me understand what I need to do to build my business."

Well, that should always be your rock-bottom starting point, because anything you spend one professional hour doing or 10 business dollars on that doesn't drive your business forward in some way is a waste of time and money. You knew that already. Take heart. This article addresses the three most important foundation stones of marketing needed for a solid platform on which to build marketing and selling success.

### Where Do We Start?

First, here's where *not* to start. Don't start with a list of all the concerns, activities, and

challenges that fall under the marketing label. That won't help you plan and prioritize; it will just drive you crazy.

Start with a model that is familiar to us all, one that will be easy to apply to create a resilient foundation for effective marketing. It's the model of **friendship**. *Stay with me here – this isn't going to get all touchy-feely*. Let's remember that business, at its base, is about people and relationships. Never try to escape that. So, while we're not going to get into group hugs, we are going to talk about the friendship model, which will provide a well-understood system of ideas to help ensure your marketing model is well-founded and effective.

This model presents a base on which you can address all the activities under the label of marketing that are important to your business. We will not be dealing, however, with specifics about how to do demand generation or Web site strategy or telesales, for example – all very important activities for moving your business forward – but we will give you a grand design for running a complete, high-impact business marketing program, a design that will help you sort out what's missing from your current marketing model. Without this integrated model, believe me, you're just operating a sterile, fractionalized, under-performing machine – it's possible, but it's ugly.

Let's examine the relationships between three key "human factors" in the friendship model and their application to a marketing model. The first one is likely the best understood, but it still requires some solid thinking and planning to enact it well in your business.

### HUMAN FACTOR 1:

#### ***Be Yourself and Be Real!***

If you examine the traits people value in friends, they often say that their friends are consistent, genuine, and that they can count on them for no dire surprises. Friends aren't false, they're authentic – they offer WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get). Moreover, if you think about what is different about them from the acquaintances you haven't developed friendships with, you'll find that it is usually about common interests and compatible styles. And the fact that you like to hang together. What impact can this have on your marketing philosophy?

### HUMAN MARKETING FACTOR 1:

#### ***Ensure Your Company Persona is Real: Fully-Formed, Genuine, Unique, and Consistent***

Unforgettable organizations project brand characteristics and personalities that reflect

the kind of friend (company) they want to be. And, just as important, the kind of friends (customers) they want to attract. Compare the experiences you have with Apple (www.apple.com) or Starbucks (www.starbucks.com). They clearly present what they offer as businesses/friends, they are consistent and genuine, they don't change personas, and they don't deliver unwelcome or confusing surprises. If they do, they lose friends in a hurry.

Even if your business is modest in size, you can create and express a clear, unique, and effective brand without investing a fortune. Where does that expression come from? A great source is the business leader, the person who sets the overall tone, policies, and direction. As an exercise, create a table for your business like the one below with "brand values" and "brand characteristics." Values tend to derive from traits such as integrity; any friend or business should live by these, thus they don't typically offer as much opportunity for differentiation (unless you are competing in a market where key elements of integrity are lacking, which is a whole different story). Characteristics, on the other hand, carve out what makes you unique and appealing to some and less interesting to others. (Like it or not, you can't be all things to all people.)

Brand Values	Brand Characteristics
Honesty	Area of Focus
Sincerity	Competitive Strengths
Reliability	Key Products/Services
Availability	Price/Value

A business brand "structure" can be outlined and mapped based on these values and characteristics and should be the underpinning of every point of contact with your prospects, customers, employees, industry, and community. Don't think that a designer is going to create this. You are. He/she can only help capture visually and stylistically what you intend to express through media. And copywriters capture the spoken themes.

### HUMAN FACTOR 2:

#### **Find Friends Where They're Looking for Friends Like You**

It's not at all surprising: it's more productive to find friend "candidates" if you're smack in the middle of where they're looking for people like you to connect to. The options are almost limitless, based on your mutual interests – clubs, fraternities/sororities, churches, charities, schools, and class-

es, to name a few. It's much more targeted and likely to succeed than running a classified ad: "Friend wanted – into anthropology and bowling."

## Most customers today are in control of finding vendors when they need them...

### HUMAN MARKETING FACTOR 2:

#### **Prospecting? Put Your Company Where Prospects Are Looking for Vendors Like You**

This is a huge point about awareness and demand generation in today's marketing environment. Customers are searching for and finding vendors today *on their own terms and when they need them*. Fewer are being found by prospecting vendors through traditional demand generation.

It's no surprise that technology buyers are using Web searches more than ever to identify possible products and solutions for their needs. Early in their search process, they tend to steer clear of vendor sites and look to respected third party sites to sort through possibilities first, moving to vendor sites later, once they've narrowed their options.

If you want to be found in this process, you may want to ally with key, relevant third party sites through sponsorships and advertising. This will put you squarely in front of your prospects while they search for the solutions and services you offer.

How does this apply to regional or specialized resellers who themselves rely on the offerings of vendors like Microsoft? Obviously, these resellers look for smaller "spaces" to play, to ensure they are present and prominent where prospects might be found searching – spaces like local and regional business and industry groups and communities, trade events, and even Web sites.

This cannot be emphasized enough. Prospects are in control today: in control of searching, pre-qualifying, and narrowing their vendor options prior to ever making a direct contact with one. If you are not in their line of sight, watch your cost of customer acquisition continue to climb over time.

Does this mean that outbound demand generation (direct mail, for example) is dying? Not at all, but the days of buying almost any list, mailing against it, and hearing the cash register ring are over. The impact and value of such tactics have declined measurably. So, whenever you employ direct mail, you must work hard to ensure that your lists are targetable and your offers are highly matched to the recipients' interests. Again, one way to do this is to have a sponsorship presence in subscriber mailings from selected third party sources that prospects also turn to on the Web.

### HUMAN FACTOR 3:

#### **Building Relationships: To Have a Friend, You've Got to Be a Friend**

Friendships don't just happen. They start, as noted above, based on common interests and compatible styles. To become real, solid friendships, however, those interests and styles must be activated through mutual experiences. You talk and share ideas. You invite friends over. You go places together. You slowly build a relationship, based on trust, personal interest, and investment in the friendship itself. To keep a friendship growing, you give something of yourself, and you appreciate getting something back. But you don't typically ask for more from a friendship than you've invested in it yourself, and you never ask for it too early in the relationship. "Hi, Bill. I'm Bob. I see we're both single and interested in anthropology and bowling. Want to cut your living expenses and share an apartment?" Uh-oh!

### HUMAN MARKETING FACTOR 3:

#### **Build Business Relationships, Any Kind of Relationships!**

Remember my point above? Most customers today are in control of finding vendors when they need them; they are typically not being found by vendors. When you ask these customers all the ways they are finding new vendors, they tell you they are in control of the search through the Web, colleagues, and even competitors. But notwithstanding the pervasive use of the Web today, most customers will still tell you they purchased their most recent product or solution from a vendor they already knew.

It's been true from the beginning of commerce. People prefer to buy from someone they know and trust. It's one of the best-known maxims of the reseller world; nothing new here. But many vendor businesses don't examine the deep implications of this age-old principle, yet they set about to build a strong

marketing practice around it. That's what the concept of relationship marketing is all about. And as long as it is carefully designed and properly managed, it can drive incredible long-term business impact for you.

Find out what your customers and prospects value from you – in addition to your core products and services – and put together a plan to deliver it regularly and cost-effectively. Is it technology insights and updates? This is where the old-fashioned but powerful newsletter and today's blogs and RSS feeds can make a difference. Is it the professional expertise of your team? Depending on the scope of your business, schedule periodic live customer events or run Live Meeting webinars. Certainly build in calls to action in all of these tools, but don't make them blatant sales presentations. In these instances, give your customers and prospects more value than you ask for – at that time. Build up your account. You're investing in the relationship and, done correctly and consistently, your customers and prospects will return the favor.

How well does it pay? One sales analysis I conducted for a technology vendor a few years ago proved definitively the business value of investing in the customer relation-

ship. It found that customers that had engaged in the relationship offerings of this company – newsletters, webinars, live events, and special customer tools on the vendor's Web site – typically spent 60 percent more per year with this vendor than a like group of customers who were not engaged with these offerings. Sixty percent more! Does this mean that newsletters and events directly drive that delta business difference? No, it doesn't. But it does speak loudly to the point that customers tend to buy more from people they know and trust rather than with those they don't.

There are a number of other Human Marketing Factors we can explore in the future that can further strengthen your marketing model. Overall, remember that sound marketing philosophy is rooted in effective human relations, and that employing a "friendship model" can answer an array of questions about how to go-to-market in ways that will create strong, lasting, and profitable connections with your customers.

#### **What Can You Do Today with This Information?**

**Examine Your Company Persona.** List

the values and characteristics that you consistently present in your marketing and sales "experiences." Are they complete, clear, of value to your customers, and differentiated from your competition? If not, identify key elements that are missing and work on a process to round out your company brand for your next sales campaign.

**Evaluate Your Investment in Marketing Communications.** Are you investing in a presence in the experiences and places where your customers are looking for companies like yours? If you are doing direct marketing, are you emphasizing targeted contact tools to ensure you are addressing prospects you can serve well with offers that are relevant and important to them?

**Assess Your Customer Relationship Strategy, if You Have One.** Appraise the worth of what you've done for your customers lately from their point of view. Are you regularly investing in your customers with experiences of value to them, while not expecting anything in immediate return? If not, consider some cost-effective, regular events and communications that would help them more effectively use technology in their businesses. 🌐

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