



INSIGHT PAPER

Does including your partners in your digital marketing increase sales?

A 2021 qualitative survey of CIOs, CTOs, CISOs and Tech Buyers



Executive Summary

An increasing number of information technology companies are working to form ecosystems, which engage in partner marketing to target Business to Business (B2B) buyers who are increasingly moving their buying journey online. This insight research aimed to understand how digital partner marketing impacts the buyers' intent to purchase at the different stages of their buying journey, using academic research and in-person qualitative interviews with B2B technology buyers.

The academic research identified the growing importance of joint value propositions, and although it is often challenging to link brands, how this can have a positive impact. It highlighted the key role of digital channels for the B2B buyer. However, the research found that digital content did not cover the role of partner marketing during the B2B buyer journey, nor their likelihood to engage with joint digital messaging. This is a concern, as social media marketing is the largest area of spending for B2B companies.

The research concluded that digital partner marketing does impact a B2B buyer's intent to purchase. B2B buyers want the "whole" ecosystem story through joined-up digital messaging which in turn creates confidence. And conversely, when it is disconnected, it generates increasing doubt. The research also found that B2B digital partner marketing has the most influence at the beginning of the buying journey – because this is where the buyer expects ecosystem best practise insights and case studies through LinkedIn, websites, and analyst reports. Connecting with peers is also critical to them which is an alternate route for partner marketers to influence, as is digital self-service. B2B buyers highlighted disappointment with websites and email marketing. At the later buying stages, they wanted more insight into how the partnership works in practice. Although the B2B buying unit is complex, the technology influencer is king.

These findings address gaps in knowledge and create the foundation of a new partner marketing model. Read on to find out more.

Introduction

Information technology's global spend is forecast to total \$3.8 trillion in 2021 (Gartner, 2020) and is becoming more interconnected with a rising number of companies working together. In a report by McKinsey (2020) discussing ecosystem 2.0, they predict that technology businesses collaborating and working together will only increase. The result is that leading technology businesses are increasingly offering a combined set of IT solutions and services targeting business to business (B2B) buyers. These buyers go through a purchasing process (Kotler, 2008) covering: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. Increasingly, parts of this process are happening online.

92% of B2B purchases now start their buying journey with an internet search, and 62% of B2B buyers say they can now develop vendor selection criteria based solely on digital content (Wizdo, 2019). With the pandemic, this trend has continued to grow, with B2B buyers increasingly conducting independent research online. Gartner research (2020) found B2B buyers only spend 17% of the procurement time meeting with potential suppliers, and when comparing multiple suppliers, the amount of time spent with any one sales rep maybe only up to 6%. Therefore, it is not surprising that sales leaders in the information technology industry, on average, rate digital channels approximately twice as important now (McKinsey 2020).

What challenges are marketers in IT companies finding with this change?

- One is that many **B2B companies struggle with social media marketing**, and it can be hard to connect with business customers, mainly because there is typically a lengthier sales cycle and longer chain of command (Decker, 2021).
- Another challenge is the **partner company's lack of joint marketing engagement through the RACE (Dave Chaffey, Smart Insights) online buying journey**. Systems Integrators (SIs) typically lead the marketing to the B2B buyer. However, often the SIs do not want to include ingredient brands in their digital marketing due to a fear of diluting their own brand. Research showed that 46% of brand searches for an SI and a vendor partner name returned a poor quality SERP – Search Engine Results Page (Coterie, 2021).

- **There's also the lack of quality joint content.** Of all the brand searches covered in the Coterie research (2021), the companies that did have a good result only sent prospects to partner sites (often the homepage) with no context or further information. This stunted content tailored neither for partners nor for prospects. Combined with a lack of conversion features, it limits the opportunity for new sales. 46% of buyers (Coterie, 2021) will leave a website due to the lack of message. The lack of quality joint content should be a concern as 50% of B2B buyers will review, on average, 13 content pieces before deciding on a vendor (Nnaji, 2015) - on average, eight vendor-created pieces and five from third parties (Sterling, 2020).
- Finally, **the complexity of the B2B buying journey is also an issue.** Gartner (2021) found that 77% of B2B technology decision-makers rated their purchase experience highly complex or challenging. This was mainly down to the abundance of high-quality information available to buyers. The typical B2B buying group involves six to ten stakeholders, who review four to five sources, which then need consolidating.

As well as addressing these challenges, there are many reasons for Systems Integrators (SI) to work with ingredient brands. These include higher margins, more stable demand, better cooperation with OEMs, longer relationships, shared cost of development and promotion, shared risk, and as an entry barrier for potential competitors (Aljafari & Brown, 2020). However, the number of ingredient brands is surprisingly low.

It raises the question, in this rapidly changing world, should marketers at SIs embrace partner marketing more? Furthermore, is there a missed opportunity to create synergies and increase the B2B technology buyer's intent to purchase? Does the B2B buyer value their joint messaging? How does it impact the B2B buyer across their buying journey? Do different parts of the decision-making unit have a different perspective?

This insight paper has been written because initial searches highlight limited studies on B2B partner marketing, and more precisely, because there is very little published to date on the impact on the B2B technology buyers' behaviour across the digital buying journey. The research aimed to gain insight that will help B2B marketers understand how digital partner marketing impacts the B2B technology buyers' intent to purchase at the different stages of the buying journey.

Insights

Key takeaways

Does digital partner marketing impact the B2B buyers' intent to purchase?

Using qualitative insights, the research concludes that digital partner marketing does impact the B2B buyers' intent to purchase.

Is Systems Integrator digital marketing more effective *with or without* partner marketing?

System Integrator digital marketing is more effective with partners, as most technology solutions now include an ecosystem of partners. As a result, telling the "whole" story is expected by B2B buyers.

B2B buyers gain confidence from joined-up digital messaging and when it is missing or disconnected, it generates doubt.

Insights

Key takeaways

Where in the B2B tech buying journey should I focus partner marketing?

B2B digital partner marketing is most effective at the Reach stage of the RACE model.

Here the B2B buyer is looking for real world case studies and best practices relevant to their business, about the whole solution, including partners.

This information needs to be available via digital channels, in particular LinkedIn and websites.

B2B buyers are frustrated by the lack of quality in relation to B2B websites and email marketing.

There is an opportunity for B2B partner marketers to maximise digital influence at the later buying stages where the B2B buyer is looking for re-enforcement into how the partnership works in practice – the people, the processes, and the organisations.

Insights

Key takeaways

How does digital partner marketing vary by B2B buyer?

The role of the technology influencer as a recommender is vital and B2B buyers want to understand the component parts of the solution.

Having sight of the partners and their role, gave them confidence it would be a credible solution.

The second key influencer was the B2B buyers' peer group.

Anyone from within the business can be involved, so thinking about the value of the whole solution to the business is critical for B2B partner marketers.

#1. Why are B2B marketers not engaging in partner marketing?

The implications for B2B marketing professionals from this research are significant because, as noted in the introduction, many technology partner companies lack joint marketing engagement through the RACE online buying journey. Systems Integrators (SI) typically lead the marketing to the B2B buyer and generally do not want to include ingredient brands. For example, 46% of brand searches for an SI and a vendor partner name return poor quality SERP (Coterie, 2021). To meet the B2B buyers' needs and grow confidence, it is critical to show a joined-up ecosystem. The result of not doing this creates doubt in the B2B buyer.

So, if B2B buyers expect it, then why are B2B partner marketers not delivering joined up messaging? Is it a lack of understanding about how to conduct partner marketing? Is it the complexity of B2B partner marketing? Is it simpler to ignore the partners and focus on one brand because the B2B marketers have enough to do already? Research by Coterie (2020) and The University of Huddersfield, when interviewing B2B partner marketers, highlighted a skills gap in partner marketing. The research underlines the critical need to develop skills in partner marketing for upcoming B2B marketers.

"The sum is stronger than the individual part. It means that you have got access to certified professionals, that you have got access to a guaranteed level of knowledge and expertise. It all helps build confidence."

B2B Technology Buyer

"It gives you more confidence that what a systems integrator or vendor is doing is real."

B2B Technology Buyer

"There is definitely this disparity in terms of the public face of the partnership. It feels like it's coming far stronger from one than the other. I found that a little bit disconcerting."

B2B Technology Buyer

#2. Partner marketing creates the greatest impact at the start of the buying journey

The insight highlighted that B2B marketers need to focus their combined partner marketing efforts at the Reach phase of the digital B2B buyer journey, making a concerted effort to deliver quality content focused on case studies and best practice. They need to find innovative ways to build trust with the end customer by telling real life joint stories. B2B partner marketers have historically used analysts to tell their stories, and this research would suggest that it is a good thing to continue to do. It is essential that they only deliver high-quality content to the target buyers using email marketing. However, there is the possibility that email marketing has such a bad reputation that the buyers will no longer look at it.

“I think probably more likely in the earlier stages of understanding what people have done before. I think it will probably have less impact in terms of partner marketing towards the latter stages because you have probably decided by that point.”

B2B Technology Buyer

“I think you want updates. General product updates of what is coming further down the line? Yeah, it is interesting, especially if the technology is relevant to what you are trying to do.”

B2B Technology Buyer

#3. Joint digital presence was a major frustration

B2B partner marketers must also address their joint digital presence as this was a major frustration for B2B buyers in this study. According to research by Coterie (2021), nearly half of SI partner pages scored “okay” on user experience, meaning there is room for improvement. Common mistakes also included poor navigation, hidden contact details, sending prospects off to partner sites (often the homepage) with no context or further information, bland content tailored neither for partners nor for prospects, and lack of conversion features.

“They have got a product on their website which is mentioned in four different guises doing six different scenarios. Is that four products, is it six products, is it one product?”

B2B Technology Buyer

“I’m often a little wary about websites because most organisations wouldn’t dream of putting a case study up on their website that wasn’t positive.”

B2B Technology Buyer

#4. A missed opportunity to digitally influence at the bottom of the funnel

At the Act and Convert stages of the RACE model, the research highlights that B2B buyers have started to digitally self-serve but still like to speak to a human. B2B partner marketers need to consider more options for customers to self-serve and book demos themselves. Many of the new up-and-coming vendors offer this kind of functionality. It may be something that the more established, larger Systems Integrators could take on board working with their technology partners.

“The hook for me is that they’ll give me insight. They’re always looking to offer me and tell me things that they think I do not know. They are sort of quite tantalising.”

B2B Technology Buyer

“Getting a demo of the tool, then YouTube can be a quite useful tool to sort of getting somebody to walk you through how it works or use it as a starter for ten on how this service operates or whatever.”

B2B Technology Buyer

#5. Demonstrate “how” you work together

There is also an opportunity to influence the B2B buyer later in the buying journey by demonstrating joint credentials and providing detail into how the people, processes and organisations work together. To date, this is ignored or left to a single joint partner page website to achieve this critical job. It is acknowledged that it would be valuable to extend this survey, to take a sample of B2B decision-makers within the millennial category to determine if their behaviours differed from this sample.

“About how these companies work together. Person-to-person, organisation-to-organisation, versus just how their products complement each other.”

B2B Technology Buyer

“Do not just sell me product and walk away from it. Be incentivised such that it delivers an outcome that has value to me.”

B2B Technology Buyer

#6. The role of the technical influencer

Finally, the B2B buying unit is a broad complex group of stakeholders, including technical, line of business and C-level executives. One influential audience that came from this research was the technical buyer who sits below the senior decision-makers. In the researcher's experience, B2B partner marketers often neglect this group in favour of the C-levels. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent, through this study, that they have a considerable influence. Therefore, there is a significant opportunity for the B2B partner marketers to engage this audience.

"That they start with a solution brief, sort of like a general objective and aim, and you would sort of break that down into technology components and service management components. It may be a technical architect's job, probably potentially alongside an enterprise architect."

B2B Technology Buyer

"It is the sponsor that's looking to do something, and that could be virtually anybody in the organisation from one of the prominent areas such as operations, development, network support."

B2B Technology Buyer

#7. Peer to peer the most trusted source of recommendation

One of the other noteworthy points from the research is that the B2B buyers only trust their peer-to-peer group. They engage with them directly or sometimes through LinkedIn. B2B marketers need to focus on working with these pre-established peer groups or help extend them. Pre-pandemic, B2B buyers would have been able to naturally meet peers and mix at face-to-face events even when it was simply a technology product download. However, now many of these are taking place virtually. This removes the opportunity for the B2B buyer to engage with their peer group. But these groups are hungry for additional insight and value which presents an opportunity for the B2B partner marketer.

"Word of mouth tends to be exceptionally useful when you are in a very niche field. Knowing who the players are, knowing who the vendors are, you are not going to find that on a Gartner Magic Quadrant. You're not going to find it on a Google Search. You're going to find that through asking your peers."

B2B Technology Buyer

"Traditionally, it would have been a phone call or email followed up by a face-to-face meeting, usually. But nowadays, I would say it'd probably more likely be a Zoom call or something like that"

B2B Technology Buyer

Management framework

The following framework is designed to assist B2B partner marketers to conduct digital partner marketing in a best practice manner.

The foundations: B2B Technology Partner Marketing

Pillar 1: Creating confidence

B2B buyers expect technology companies to tell their **ecosystem story**

Explain how your partnership will augment the B2B buyers team

Don't leave solutions **disconnected** it creates **doubt**

Demonstrate that the B2B buyer will have access to **credible solutions/people**.

System integrator digital marketing is more effective when all the partners are included because it creates the foundations of joined up approach which builds confidence.

The execution: The B2B buying process and the role of partner marketing

Pillar 2: Delivering relevance

B2B digital marketing has the greatest impact at the **REACH** stage.

Focus on **Google, LinkedIn, Analysts and websites**

B2B buyers want to speak to humans but equally happy to self serve at the **ACT** stage - use online **Tech Talks** and **Self service** demo's

Digital partner marketing has a role in the **CONVERT** and **ENGAGE** stages. Deliver relevant content that **provides new insight** and reinforcing the **human aspects** of the partnership

Provide **relevant industry case studies** and demonstrate that the partners have **skin in the game**

Focus execution on delivering relevant partner marketing content and stories to the B2B buyer through their preferred digital channels.

The engagement: The role of social media marketing in the B2B Partner marketing buying process

Pillar 3: Extend to the Influencers

Help B2B buyers connect with their **trusted peer group**

Focus the **C-levels on the value to their business**

Word of mouth is critical. Emulate in person connections using electronic means – **eWOM**

Technical buyers are the key influencer and want access to subject matter authorities and **educational insight**.

Concentrate engagement at all of the extended influencers, but focus on the technology buyer and the relevant peer group.

Pillar 1: Creating confidence

The foundation for effective B2B partner marketing focuses on creating confidence in the ecosystem. This is achieved by:

- Telling the joined up ecosystem story.
- Explaining how the partnership will augment the B2B buyers' own team.
- Not leaving any areas disconnected as this will create doubt.
- Highlighting what the partnership means in terms of accredited skilled people and credible solutions.

Pillar 2: **Delivering relevance**

The execution focuses on delivering relevant content and stories to the B2B buyer.

- Focus on the Reach stage of the RACE model.
- Focus Go-To-Market plans on:
 - Google search
 - LinkedIn
 - Analysts
 - Website

At the Act stage of the journey, it is advised to:

- Use as many self-service options as possible.
- Deliver technical insights.

At the Convert and Engage stages it is important to:

- Deliver content that tells an individual B2B buyer new insight that they did not know - this will be different for different groups of B2B buyers.
- Allow them to engage with Systems Integrators' human experts at this stage.
- Share relevant joint industry case studies.
- Demonstrate that the ecosystem of partners is committed to the customer.



Pillar 3: **Extend to the influencers**

The engagement phase concentrates on the complex group of influencers. Defining and identifying the relevant peer group for a target B2B buyer and utilising this for B2B partner marketing. It requires:

- The value to be articulated at both a technical and business level, and disseminated using eWOM (electronic word of mouth).
- A greater focus for the technical buyers than other influencers - this can be addressed by connecting with subject matter experts to share educational insights.



