



b2b like you've never seen it before

WHITE PAPER

Digital transformation and B2B customer behaviour: the commercial impact





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Introduction

The words 'digital transformation' have been thrown around a lot over the past few years – and with even more regularity and fervour since the dramatic events of 2020 began to unfold.

The purpose of this white paper is to give you a handle on a specific aspect of digital transformation; namely, how the effects of digital technologies are affecting the commercial performance of your business.

In this white paper, we take a look at digital transformation through the lens of customer behaviour. Digital technologies, combined with the current social and economic climate, are changing the way your customers solve their business problems, and how they discover, perceive, interact with and purchase from your business.

The B2B sector is notoriously slow to respond to market changes, so the impact of these changes is even greater.

- 32% of executives say they aren't able to generate a commercial outcome from social media.
- When B2B buyers are considering a purchase, they spend 27% of that time researching independently online.
- The word 'best' now far outranks 'cheap' in Google searches for the past 15 years in the UK.



What is digital transformation?

Before we begin, it's worth making sure we're all on the same page. Digital transformation has become a nebulous concept, often applied incorrectly.

One of the best definitions is actually freely available on [Wikipedia](#), which we'll use here:

“Digital Transformation (DT or DX) is the adoption of digital technology to transform services or businesses, through replacing non-digital or manual processes with digital processes or replacing older digital technology with newer digital technology.

Digital solutions may enable – in addition to efficiency via automation – new types of innovation and creativity, rather than simply enhancing and supporting traditional methods.”



The key challenge: falling short of customer expectations

Your customers are naturally embracing digital transformation every day. This changes their expectations and behaviour^[1] around how they solve business problems. These changes in expectations are often driven by a B2C experience, where brands compete for attention through innovation.

The gap emerges when we move to B2B and brands [fall short of these expectations](#). The B2B sales experience can be very generic, lack personalisation, and might not feel like a good use of the buyer's time, when compared to the B2C buying experiences they've had.

Stuart Turner, our Chief Growth Officer, shares a great example of this problem:

"I recently opened a personal and a business bank account, and there was a stark and incredibly frustrating difference in the two experiences.

I opened a personal account with an online-only bank. It took five minutes to complete my application and submit my ID. The information was verified, and the account was opened and funded within 48 hours.

By contrast, when I opened the business account, I was forced to go into a branch twice with two other directors – that's time wasted for all three of us. We had to wait around, sign and return paperwork, then wait a week before the account was ready to use.

As a result of those experiences, I'll happily recommend the first bank to loads of people. But I'll never recommend anyone open a business account with the other bank. My decisions about who I bank with in the future – and the potential for those banks to earn referrals – are all driven by my experience."

A [customer's experience goes beyond the sales process](#). And the customer expectations are not static – they evolve. Businesses need an agile approach to help customers along their buying journey. Because the commercial impact of the increasing gap between customer behaviour (based on expectations) and the experience your brand delivers is significant.



1. Key changes to customer behaviour in B2B

There are a number of significant changes to customer behaviour that you need to be aware of to ensure your marketing and sales activity is effective.

75% of the customer journey is self led

Your customers have progressed through research and evaluation before they even consider engaging someone from your business. Thanks to the internet, and specifically social media, the information, expertise and opinions required to inform a decision are all available at the push of a button.

Your customers expect more from your sales people

Today's customers want businesses to know them. They're careful with their time and want crisp, compelling and concise advice. They want [salespeople to be focused on the journey beyond the sale](#) – what's going to happen after they buy. And they're looking for thought leadership and perspective, helping them feel smarter so they can move their buying process forward.

Backlash against data harvesting and advertising

Consumer concern over data harvesting and use for commercial purposes is on the rise. Use of ad blockers continues to grow, with Google and Apple leading the way in automated blocking in their browsers. Yet a lot of businesses have failed to evolve their marketing and sales activity in line with these changes.

GLOBAL AD SPEND IN 2019 (FORECAST)

672.94bn USD

GLOBAL INTERNET AD SPEND IN 2020 (FORECAST)

260.36bn USD

COST OF AD BLOCKING WORLDWIDE IN 2016

41.4bn USD

Source:

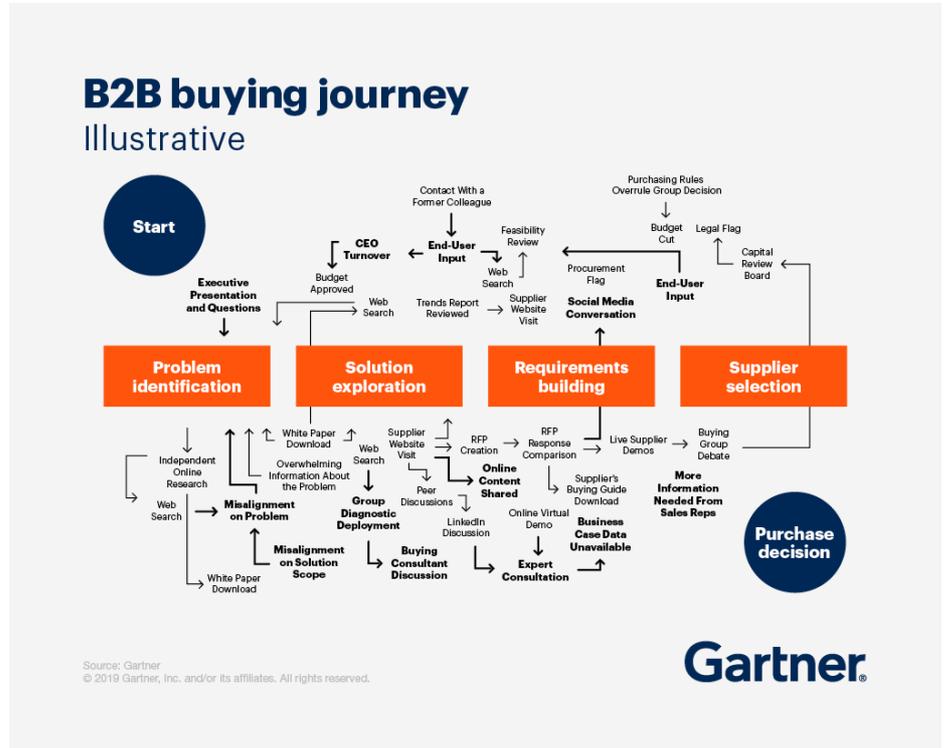
<https://www.statista.com/topics/3201/ad-blocking/>



2. The 'messy middle' of the customer journey

The customer journey is no longer a straight line (if it ever was).

Everyone understands the start and end of the journey, but the middle is a mess. People can move between different stages or mindsets before making a decision, looking for different information, in different formats, at different times.



You need to help your customers achieve a consensus within their buying group which according to Gartner research contains an average of 8 people – and get your brand in front of that group early on in the journey.

That's where social media comes in.



3. The importance of social media for B2B brands

Where do you turn when you need information, an opinion or a recommendation you can trust?

You turn to your network.

Those networks now cross divides like never before, so even just one bad experience can have an impact that expands far beyond your immediate circle, much like the expanding ripples from a stone in a still lake.

Crucially, a large amount of this discussion happens 'behind closed doors' in group chat and messages, rather than in publicly available feeds.

Social media is where people (and brands) connect

The B2B industry still doesn't get how to do social media right. Irritating sales activity is everywhere, coupled with bland marketing messages that just become background noise. To truly make social media work, you have to put people at the forefront and use the medium as it was intended – to build relationships. And because the early stages of the buying process are up to 75% self-driven and online, it presents a powerful opportunity to influence and become part of your customer's decision-making process right from the start.

You can use social media to cut through the messy middle and create meaningful interactions

Where the mess occurs (as Google and Gartner have pointed out) many factors are at play – changing mindsets, different options, evolving requirements and shifting deadlines all affect a journey to a decision. The best thing you can do is speak to and support those challenges throughout the journey, rather than trying to interpose yourself at the very end when the decision is largely made.

To be successful, you've got to be mindful of silos in your business – particularly marketing and sales

Nothing has the potential to annoy customers more than a disjointed experience. And those gaps are never more obvious than when sales and marketing are all saying and doing different things. This is a subject worthy of discussion all on its own, but the important point to note is that those two business functions are always represented on social media, and they typically deliver very different experiences to your prospective customer.



You're already investing in social media – and that means lost time in your business

Finally, it's important to note that this isn't an academic discussion.

Our own research shows it's highly likely that your business already invests significant time into social media, **and** that you are unlikely to be measuring that time accurately.

We've discovered that some businesses are investing up to 750 hours per week in social media - and that time isn't being measured.

As the old saying goes: "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." Imagine what could be achieved if that time was measured effectively, and put to good use.



A significant amount of time is being invested in social media by B2B brands



*Equivalent number of full time employees (FTE) based on total hours invested



Find out more

Discover how your executives could be using social media differently. Download the 2020 Social Media Report [here](#).



Notes

This white paper is based on [proprietary research](#) conducted by the team at The Social Revolution, [New B2B Buying Journey & its Implication for Sales by Gartner](#) and [How people decide what to buy lies in the 'messy middle' of the purchase journey by Google's consumer insights team](#).