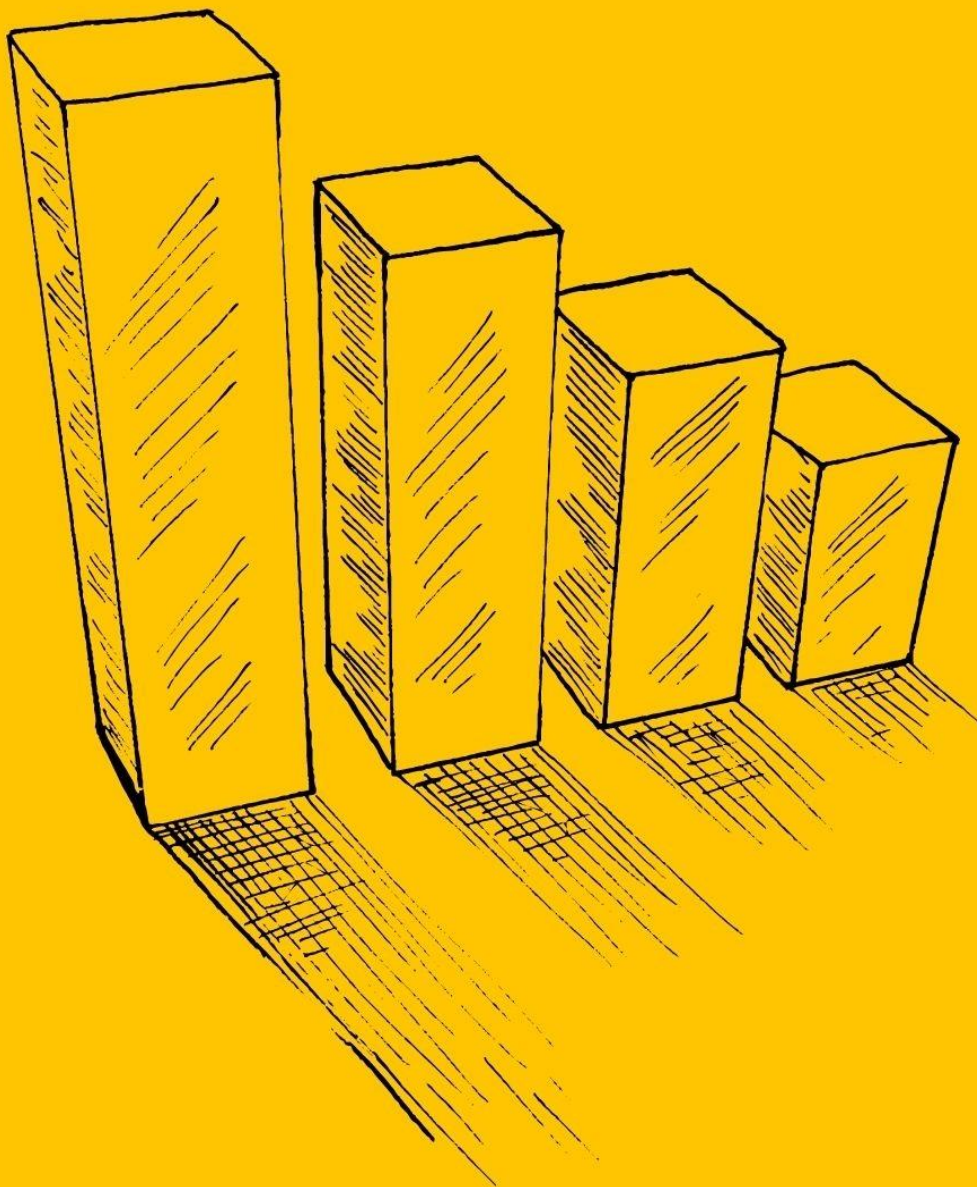


Content Strategy

For Manufacturing & Technology Businesses



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What's the primary purpose of a B2B manufacturers blog? Is it traffic? Or better still sales leads? If those are your goals and you follow the standard blogging advice I suggest you will be disappointed.

Let's assume you run a small to medium-sized B2B manufacturing operation. Your marketing people have been pushing hard for your commitment to invest in a blog. You recognise blogging is not free and there are significant costs involved. You have a decision to make.

The worst fluff content you can find on the subject will tell you 'build it and they will come' - what nonsense. If we make a list of the (supposed) benefits of a manufacturers blog and rank them in (alleged) priority order we get:

- Increased traffic to the business website.
- More visibility in the marketplace.
- More sales leads.
- Improved competitive position.
- Increased credibility.
- Keep existing customers engaged.

I argue that list is upside down. It will be a real struggle to achieve the top three organically unless your business happens to be the dominant force in the marketplace.

Some of the better quality advice on blogging in B2B markets suggests you identify your ideal customer and their information needs. Then you publish educational content that satisfies those needs and push it into the channels that your prospect engages with the most. It all makes sense....but.

The Benefits Of A B2B Manufacturers Blog

Let's assume you have a relatively new website built on solid technical foundations. You write an insightful blog post. It takes a stand on an important issue relevant to your industry. You include original research and graphics. The post runs to over 3,000 words.

You make sure the post remains on topic and relevant to your keywords and their synonyms. You work hard on your structure and headings. You include relevant images and write powerful headings and meta descriptions. You link out to relevant and credible sources. In short, you follow all the (alleged) blogging best practices.

You publish the post and leave it for a week or two to allow it to index and percolate through the search results. You run google analytics to view the impact on your organic results (negligible). You look at landing and exit pages (nothing). You know it's a little early to expect anything but you look at incoming links (struck out again).

You run many relevant queries and view the SERPS. There is lots of content on the first few pages that are nowhere near as relevant or expansive as yours. You run multiple relevant queries and you are consistently outranked. Why? What happened?

The problem is twofold. First, you failed to promote your content but much more important your new website has no authority. You can publish the best, relevant, in-depth, researched content but if your website has no authority you are unlikely to rank. What gives a website authority (as perceived by the search engines)? Many things, but the most important is relevant backlinks.

So, the problem then is promotion? If you had followed the (alleged) blog promotion best practices. If you had reached out to those you linked to then you would have received a (small) number of links. Wrong again I am afraid. The purpose of your post was customer/prospect interaction, not link generation. There is a difference (see below).

Let's look back at our list of alleged advantages of blogging. Has our blogging activity had any impact on visibility, traffic or sales leads? No, it has not.

You could point out that it's no surprise. You may suggest after publishing several quality blog posts you will start to see results. If posts are customer/prospect focused rather than link focused I disagree.

All - I will repeat - all - the advice! you may read on SEO is guesswork. Sometimes it is based on experience but at best it is educated guesswork.

Most blog posts chase the so-called 'long tail' keywords. This is because it is so difficult to secure a high rank in the SERPS on high traffic keywords in highly competitive markets. The conventional wisdom is if a high ranking keyword drives 100 website visits per week then ten long-tail keyword chasing posts each driving 10 website visits per week will deliver the same result.

The problem is it doesn't work that way. Experience shows whatever you try you will see some blog posts perform well and some will have zero impact. You don't need ten blog posts targeting long-tail keywords you need substantially more and that is a lot of work.

Now let's assume your website has built up some authority over time. Now your blog content has a better chance to rank but remember this:

- You will always be outranked by the big brands and the major news outlets.
- If your market is highly competitive and/or your competitors were first to spot the opportunity and have a strong web presence you will find it difficult to rank for many of the queries you may wish to chase.
- Blog content is generally informational, not transactional.

That said you may be able to secure a satisfactory amount of website traffic. So what conversion rate can you expect? It depends on what you count as a conversion. It depends on the purpose of each blog post and the method you use to keep visitors engaged and moving through your site.

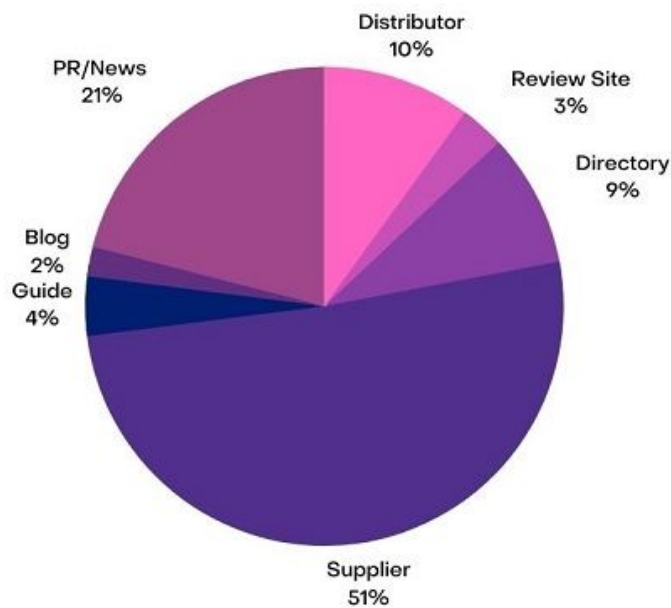
As a rough guide, my own rule of thumb is on a small, B2B manufacturers blog between 1 and 2% of organic visitors should take some form of positive action. That action could be as basic as signing up for a download. It is not a lead.

Remember at the other end of every organic traffic link there is a real person. What were they looking for? Depending on the type of blog post (especially how to and answer types) they may take what they need and leave. Will they bookmark? Will they remember to come back? A very small percentage yes, but most probably not. Most answers and how-to posts are too simplistic and short for that.

One extreme example can be found at - <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2020/11/lack-cluster-blog-lead-generation-content-engine/>

A Review Of The Search Engine Results Pages (SERPS)

I tried to put myself in the position of a buyer of industrial items and came up with ten random queries*. I then analysed the page1 search results on Google and this is what I found.



Google has presented a range of results that best match the query. The majority are suppliers as the queries have predominantly transactional intent. News and PR sites are next and again it could be argued that matches the intent. It is interesting to note the small percentage of blog posts.

Accepted the above is a far from scientific process based on a small and very rough sample but it illustrates a point. Remember this, Google purpose is to return a selection of results in response to a query, not necessarily the best results.

Search Engine Optimisation

Google intends to deliver a few best answers rather than provide many pages of great possibilities. They provide a mass use tool for the average surfer who wants to search and go rather than a research tool - Eric Ward from Ultimate guide to link building.

Google does not care about ranking your web page correctly. This is not their objective. Their systems are designed around providing the best SET of results to users for a given search query. - Eric Enge From a forum discussion with Michael Martinez.

Obviously, a post can have a primary and multiple secondary goals.

Blogs tend to be informational, not transactional. There are other key pages on your site where conversions happen - often referred to as money pages. The problem with money pages is they tend to be relatively short and to the point.

Their purpose is to encourage a prospect to take action. The keywords and phrases they use are, for obvious reasons, the same keywords and phrases competitors use. Therefore, they are by definition highly competitive.

There is a fundamental issue with how Google operates, the ranking of brands and perceived reliable news sources discussed above. If your business is not the largest or most dominant force in your industry it will be difficult to get your sales pages to rank without help.

It is difficult to build links to sales pages (why would anyone link to those pages!). Without a blog, it will be difficult to raise the authority of your site. This explains a large number of listicles, review posts, expert interview snippet posts and infographic type posts on the web. Their primary purpose is not to generate traffic (although it is a nice added extra), it is not to inform or educate, it is to generate links.

PART 2

The Real Purpose Of A Manufacturers Blog

Returning to the (alleged) benefits of blogging listed above it's time to flip the list. The prime focus should be:

As discussed at length above without authority your blog post will not rank on the search engines when a prospect types in a relevant search phrase. If it does not rank it will attract little traffic.

Backlinks are a key component of authority (as perceived by the search engines). It is possible to argue all day long about exactly how important backlinks are in the authority mix. It is probable some backlinks are more important than others but ultimately backlinks matter.

There are many ways to build backlinks. For businesses in B2B markets their partners and suppliers are often an easy win but to consistently generate links requires content. A blog is one of the many potential sources of content available.

There are many types of blog post, the most common are:

- Answering questions.
- How to.
- News items.
- Listicles.
- Infographics.
- Case study.
- Thought leadership.
- Resource lists.
- Reviews.
- Expert interview snippets.

Listicles are articles that are written in a list-based format. The most common form of listicle is a short list of 10-20 items that are based on a specific theme. - Backlinko

If we assume our target is prospects and our aim is more traffic and/or leads. If we take the blog posts outlined above and categorise each by its primary goal then:

- The purpose of listicles, expert interview snippets, reviews and infographics is links.
- How to, answer posts, resource list posts and news posts are targeted at traffic.
- The prime purpose of case studies and thought leadership posts is credibility.

- Keep existing customers engaged.
- Improve credibility with existing customers.
- Improve competitive position.

There is a balance to be struck but I maintain content marketing should focus on existing customers. With the main new customer acquisition tactic paid advertising. More on that below.

Of course. securing new customers is important. Existing customers may not deliver the required business growth. Some will leave for a variety of reasons. But if content marketing is to be successful there must be a clear focus on a prime objective.

It may be your view that paid advertising will either be too expensive or fail to deliver the required number of new customers. There is that risk but in many B2B markets, the customer base tends to remain relatively stable. If your churn is high that's something to investigate first.

The Importance Of Thought Leadership

Let's imagine you and your competitors decide to take the same existing customer focussed approach. Then what will make one business stand out from the rest? It is the business that publishes consistent thought leadership content that wins. Assuming they can deliver that content to customers.

What is thought leadership content? It is content that addresses where markets are heading and the challenges that presents. As the name suggests it is based on a firm understanding of the market, research or innovative thinking.

Thought leadership content will bring customers back to read more. With that content comes credibility and an improved competitive position.

A thought leader is “an original and inspired thinker who takes principled stands, and as a result introduces the element of tension that draws others to them.” - Russ Klein - CEO AMA

What Are You Trying To Achieve?

What is the key problem you are trying to overcome? What are the main issues holding you back in your existing customers? Are you perceived as a 'me to' type supplier? Are your competitors perceived to be better at 'X' or 'Y.' Is that perception justified?

What are our competitors doing? What are their strengths and how can you neutralise them?

What are your advantages and what makes you stand out as a credible supplier? How can you build on that foundation?

Identify who (what groups) you are trying to reach and why. What is the message you are trying to deliver? How can you help your customers overcome the challenges they face?

With target groups and messages in place identify how customers make purchasing decisions. Who is involved in those decisions and what is their influence. What are their needs? How can you make an impact? Your sales and customer service teams should provide much of the information you need.

Take a step back - What is the goal. What obstacles to progress do you need to remove? This process is not easy and it takes time and effort. Sometimes it involves facing some brutal truths but it is an essential first step. Miss it, or fail to give it the attention it deserves and everything that follows WILL fail.

Once you know what you are trying to achieve break it down into time-limited objectives. Only then can you get to strategy. The how we are going to do it and how content fits into that process. The content strategy must be in place before moving on to the content plan.

Remember to clearly differentiate goals from objectives.

Look carefully at the returns you can expect from an existing customer-focused content marketing process. Can you expect customer retention rates to increase and by how much? Is it going to increase your referrals and what is that worth? What can you afford to spend? Who is going to do the work and who will manage it? These are all important questions to ask.

The Content Plan

With the target audience identified and a firm understanding of the challenges to be overcome it is time to move on to the content plan. What are the objectives you are trying to achieve and what type of content is best to achieve those objectives? Who is going to produce those key pieces of content and in what order? Remember, no one person or department can do it alone.

With the key pieces of content dealt with it is time to move on to secondary content. Working with sales, customer support and anyone else who works with customers identify:

- Where are the customer pain points.
- What are common objections?
- How can we help them use our product or services?
- What are common questions?
- What smoothes the purchasing decisions.

How can you help existing customers understand the potential problems with technology/products? Think through what can go wrong and try to preempt the day it happens. Help customers understand the shortcuts lower price competitors take and the potential implications.

At all times try to think through what is the best content format. Is it text, or video? Would it be best to cover an issue in a webinar that customers can either attend or download later? Are there any speaking opportunities at conferences or exhibitions?

Assemble this content into a plan covering what will be delivered and when. It may seem like an overwhelming task but a significant amount of content may already exist. Many companies in B2B markets create a mass of content for internal consumption.

Market research reports, product qualification reports, internal sales training guides, responses to customer complaints, reports on product failures and more. Obviously, some information will be confidential but much can be repurposed.

The plan should identify what we do and in what order, who is responsible for what? What is the desired outcome of each piece of content and how are they interlinked? How does content fit in with other marketing activities such as exhibitions and events?

When there is a plan its purpose and desired outcomes must be communicated internally. Unflinching management support is vital.

Every plan needs flexibility. Think through what could come out of the blue to knock it off track and, in general terms, how will you react.

Content Delivery

Content delivery is the point where most content marketing processes founder. Where do prospects look for (and consume) content? After all the effort involved in creating content, how do we get it in front of prospects?

You may say customers find content in the search results pages. That may be true but they could be searching for the online version of their favourite publication. If your content is not there they will not read it. The target is not Google, it is the online publication.

With existing customers, it is easier. At least you have crossed the awareness hurdle. Ideally, customers should use your site as a resource. It should be the first place they look for answers. But to get to that position takes a lot of time and a lot of content. It takes time to build trust.

One major advantage of an existing customer focus is you should have their contact details (including email). You can at least deliver content to them. The issue then becomes is it the right content and at the right time. This is where sales and marketing need to work together to personalise the experience.

It is important to remember there are more options than online and email. There are offline opportunities including print and events. There are speaking opportunities. For the right type of business digital PR can be a powerful credibility building tool.

In general, using social media to (organically) deliver content to existing customers is a waste of time and effort. It may work for some businesses but they are the exception. However, paid social media promotion is a different story. More on that below.

Using Content To Capture Prospects

Even if significant business growth is not a target it is a mistake to forget new customers. Working the same way with the same customers can isolate suppliers from market trends. A proportion of existing customers will leave. It is inevitable.

As new customers are in the same market as existing customers it is natural to assume they will search out the same content. To a point that is true but new customers will be at a different point in the buying cycle and will have different needs.

Sales and customer service can help with understanding prospects information needs. Market research can also help to uncover insights into what could be of interest. Ultimately it is more difficult to uncover prospects needs than existing customers.

With content identified it must slot into the content plan (see above). Producing content has a cost, not just in the marketing department but across the whole organisation. New customer content will increase that cost significantly.

Facebook defines Organic reach as how many people you can reach for free by posting to your page.

It is estimated roughly 1 in 20 fans see a Facebook page organic posts.

Worse still if your content is to be found online it needs to rank and (as discussed above) that means you need links. To generate links you even more content; link generating content. The content load may become too great and something has to give. That may force you down the paid route.

If all the issues with authority and traffic outlined above are addressed prospects may find your content via an online search. However, unlike existing customers, if prospects do land on your online pages or blog content the chances of them returning are low. It takes time to build a relationship and credibility. Most B2B markets are not click/buy, it takes time to make a sale.

In B2B markets is a single visit to a website likely to stimulate a prospect to get in touch? Perhaps a very small percentage but more likely you will need to raise your credibility first and that needs your prospect to land on more content of interest over time. That content could be in other online channels or it may be offline for example at events.

Again, the difficulty is in delivering content to prospects. Search is not the only channel available. In most cases, email addresses will not be available to interface with prospects directly (more on that below) but there are other channels. These may include direct mail, events and exhibitions.

Assessing Budgets Paid vs SEO

The alternative is to find a way to build a relationship with a prospect over time. You offer something of value. The purchase price for someone interested in that item is their email address. You now have the details of someone who has at least some basic interest in what you offer.

The item of value is information. It must be unique and offer something of real benefit to the prospect. These items (assets) will take a significant amount of time and effort to create. It must be different from the content created for customers as you cannot gate that content.

The prospect is interested enough to take the time to establish if you can solve their problem. They have enough interest to risk giving out their email address. We all live in a world populated by spammers and tend to be wary of giving out our address.

You have a very early stage, potential prospect. Provided you treat that prospect with the utmost respect. You try to understand what will progress them as an individual to the point of sale then you have a way forward. If Google and the rest of the search engines were wiped out by some cataclysmic event tomorrow you still have a way forward.

The problem is this - It's that pesky traffic issue discussed above. Little traffic to your blog equals few downloads and prospect email addresses. Except there is a potential way around the issue. You can pay for the prospects email address.

What if you accept you need to go the paid content promotion route. Do you exchange part (or all) of your SEO costs for advertising costs? That is exactly what Google wants you to do but there is a need to be pragmatic here. You could pay to promote your guide.

The paid route has another potential advantage. Your business is no longer at risk of a Google algorithm change destroying your customer acquisition process.

Advertising is not free (obviously) but neither is SEO. Before making decisions between the two (or some combination) you need to evaluate what a new customer is worth. What is their lifetime value?

From this comes the maximum you can afford to pay to acquire a customer given your existing cost of sales. That part is straightforward but from there it becomes much more complex.

You can establish the cost of an SEO person or team (in house or agency). There are many tools to deliver statistics on visits to your digital assets, clicks and (to a point) conversions. The problem is a conversion is not a lead.

eMarketer estimated that Google's net U.S. digital ad revenue was \$39.58 billion in 2020.

An initial conversion must be nurtured to the point of sale. In B2B markets with long and complex sales cycles tracking the sale back to confirm (with confidence) that it was instigated by the SEO team is tricky.

If we take existing customers out of the assessment and focus only on prospects it could be claimed SEO has benefits other than generating conversions. For example, increased visibility in the marketplace and increased credibility. Click based advertising does not deliver this benefit.

Again, calculating the cost of digital advertising is simple. It is the advertising manager cost plus the cost of the media (or click). The difference with advertising is its impact is immediate.

If starting a blog or content marketing campaign today it will take six months minimum before you start to see any benefit. If you see any benefit. The potential issues with SEO are discussed at length above but that does not mean we should not work on SEO for the long term.

If social media exposure is a target then across all platforms organic reach is awful. Paid could be a way to reach existing customers (priority) and possibly prospects. In B2B markets LinkedIn should be the first channel to investigate. That said, don't discount Facebook or Twitter (or Pinterest if your product has visual appeal). YouTube can be useful for some B2B businesses and a complete waste of time for others.

Sales and Marketing Working Together

Whatever route you decide to take it is essential sales and marketing work together. Marketing may craft the process and the content but without sales, they are working blind. Sales need marketing to keep existing customers engaged and to smooth the path to sales with new prospects.

Content must be relevant, regardless if aimed at existing or potential customers. If it is not relevant it is useless. This is where external sales, internal sales and customer service staff can have a valuable input.

Only 8% of companies have strong alignment between their sales and marketing departments - Forrester

Once the process is running sales and marketing must work together. Sales act as the senses. Marketing and sales combined to act as the brain. Processing the sensory information and deciding how to react.

Targeting Prospects - Towards ABM

In B2B markets there will be a relatively low number of downloads. Often low enough so they can be manually sorted. Evaluate each contact, where are they from, what is their position, how do they fit into what sales already know. How can they be nurtured as an individual? Should they be nurtured?

This is a manual process. It is not an automation system tracking touchpoints but it is a step towards Account-Based Marketing. A joined up process of identifying target prospects, establishing what content may be of interest and finding the best way to deliver that content. Into that process feeds those who download and have an active interest.

Again, this places an extra load on the content plan. You need to assess where the priorities lie, what resources you can afford and how to allocate those resources.

Simply producing content without a clear idea of the purpose of that content, where it fits in the overall plan and (crucially) a cost vs benefit analysis is a potentially huge waste of resources.

Focus is essential and I suggest that focus should be primarily on existing customers. If resources allow the process can be developed from there. Deciding on the split between SEO costs vs paid advertising costs is crucial.

Account Based Marketing - 'Treating individual accounts as markets in their own right.' - ITSMA

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