

# Leveraging social media: strategies for B2B companies

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## About the EMC Academic Group

The European Marketing Confederation (EMC) is the organisation responsible for the bringing together marketing, sales and communication associations across Europe.

The aim of the EMC is to share best practice as well as promote and develop marketing, sales and communication as a fundamental business process.

The EMC's Academic Group was created to provide practising marketers with access to simple and straightforward academic marketing research, which could be used to enhance their own marketing strategies.

The group is made up of a pan-European network of senior marketing academics and practising marketers, who translate the latest marketing research into practice.

Through their articles, marketers operating at the coalface of the profession can learn about the latest trends and developments affecting their sector.

Each month EMC member associations publish articles summarising the key aspects of each piece of research they have analysed, so that practising marketers can choose to implement changes within their own organisations based on informed research.

We'd like to thank the latest contributor to this edition.



## Marc Logman

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Professor Logman has a PhD in applied economics and extensive experience in executive training. He is also the founder and managing director of Logical Management and has two part-time professor positions at Leuven and Hasselt Universities in Belgium.

He has written many international articles and received an International Award in 2008 from SAVE International for best paper on value engineering. He is also the author of several textbooks about Marketing Planning and Entrepreneurial Marketing.

Example Academic Group article: Getting inside the mind of the marketing managers

### Selected publications:

- (English textbook) Entrepreneurial marketing. A guide for startups and companies with growth ambitions
- (NL. talig boek) Marketing voor ondernemers. Een gids voor starters en bedrijven met groeiambities
- (NL.talig boek) Marketingplan. Een stapsgewijs model met checklists, tools en tips

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## Leveraging social media: strategies for B2B companies



**To date, academic research has largely focused on social media marketing in B2C contexts and has provided insightful evidence about the strategies and impact of such platforms on consumer purchase decisions.**

### **But what about B2B companies?**

Blogs, LinkedIn and other social media platforms such as Pinterest, Twitter, etc. are starting to get the attention of B2B marketing executives as well.

For instance, leading brands utilise B2B blogs for lead generation, thought leadership and as a platform to engage with their followers (employees, industry experts, customers, etc.).

In fact, many larger companies have multiple blogs that span across their capabilities with a variety of writers and editors.

Blogging is now considered so important that brands are building internal newsrooms to keep up with the amount of content they want to write for their audiences (see <http://lrgmarketing.com/blog/10-b2b-blogs-we-like-to-read/>).

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But other platforms, besides blogs, have become successful for B2B companies as well.

Take Maersk Line, for instance. The largest container shipping company in the world, Maersk garnered over 1 million fans on Facebook, 40,000 followers on Twitter, and 22,000 followers on Instagram (Katona and Sarvary, 2014).

They also launched and became active on other social media networks such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Google+ and created a social media home base for Maersk Line called Maersk Line Social, which published articles and stories about the company in a less formal manner.

### **But how did they leverage social media in such a powerful way?**

They were candid and didn't always do positive stories.

For instance, On June 8, 2012, Maersk Line posted on Facebook: "Maersk Norwich Whale Strike", explaining how one of Maersk's ships had inadvertently struck a whale:

"Maersk Line does everything it can to avoid creating a negative impact on the marine environment. Despite these efforts, on Wednesday June 6, we saw images of a 12 meter long whale caught on the bulbous bow of the Maersk Norwich.





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"This image, of a noble and elegant creature accidentally struck down by a Maersk Line vessel deeply affected us all."

The response of its followers was mostly positive, because of the candid nature of the post.

Maersk Line also uses Twitter (mainly tweets and retweets from Maersk employees, photos, and other bits) and posts three to five times per day, on average. Its LinkedIn account is used to share mainly business-related news, and to interact with customers in LinkedIn groups or forums.

When it comes to social media for B2B organisations, research carried out by Siamagka et al. 2015 has found that the most popular social media platform is LinkedIn (67%), but also noted the increasingly important role that blogs and other social media platforms are starting to play when it comes to B2B marketing.

However in interviewing B2B marketing executives, research found that there weren't always enough proactive motives for using social media. Rather, they tended to be reactive 'needs'.

For instance some B2B companies experience social media as more of a necessity because their customers are spending more time on social media and/or their competitors are ahead of the curve in using it when compared with their own organisation.

Indeed, it is often with trial and error that some companies gain experience in what works (generating shares, etc.) on social media and what does not.

Swani et al (2014) also found that unlike B2C companies, B2B companies use more corporate brand names and more links and cues for information search.

What is more, in their research sample, B2B tweets featured a higher percentage of functional appeals, whereas B2C tweets included a higher percentage of emotional appeals. Yet their research also suggested that within the area of B2B tweets there were also more emotional appeals than functional appeals.

The emphasis of corporate brand named social media accounts rather than product accounts and the evolution in using more emotional appeals by B2B companies, have also been mentioned in other studies (Salo (2017).

What is important for a B2B company to understand is that their own employees have professional and civilian user identities on social media, and they represent their employer on work-related platforms.

B2B companies can influence content creation by employees in two ways. Firstly, through direct influence by adding and removing content through corporate user accounts and by 'controlling' content creation by employees. Secondly, through indirect influence by training employees in social media behavior (Huotari et al, 2015).

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Besides internal users (own employees), the analysis of content from external users who influence their social media presence, is important as well.

User-generated content (UGC) refers to all media content created by users to share information and/or opinions with other users, whether it is through comments, videos, posts, reviews etc.

Just like B2C companies, B2B companies should start performing analyses such as sentiment analysis, to quantify the overall positive and negative sentiments expressed online about their B2B brand (Ludwig et al, 2013), and/or analysing the profiles of their online followers.

In that respect, Culotta and Cutler (2016) developed an approach to measure the strength of association between a brand and a specific topic (eg. standing for ecofriendliness) based on follower profiles.

They suggest to look at exemplar communities that are truly associated with the topic of interest to the company, and then to measure the similarity or overlap between followers of these exemplar communities and followers on the company's own social media accounts.



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Following on from this article about the increasingly important role of social media for B2B businesses by EMC Academic Group Professor, Marc Logman, we spoke to him to find out more about why he chose to focus on this subject.

**1. To date, research has provided insightful evidence about B2C social media strategies and its impact on consumer purchase decisions. Can this simply be replicated for the B2B market? If not, why?**

I don't think it's that straightforward. The products and/or buying process are often more complex in B2B that it may not always be that easy to share simple messages on social media, and to create content that would easily go viral.

However, content that is shared is often about emotions. The example in this EMC contribution (cf. supra) about Maersk Line which shows the human face of the company, illustrates that things can go viral quickly in B2B as well, and humanising rather than simply sharing pure "business oriented" stories can help.

It may become part of a company's brand personality and equity, focusing on values such as authenticity and trustworthiness, allowing the company to go beyond its pure objective (rational) value equity.

Another interesting inspiration from B2C is that consumers increasingly tend to follow products/brands or some of their ambassadors (bloggers/vloggers). And from that perspective, things are certainly replicable in the B2B environment.

Connecting with influencers in the industry to spread the B2B company's name and the values, applications etc. that it stands for is important. For instance, launching a discussion group on LinkedIn, and incorporating expert's opinions.

**2. What can B2B organisations learn from the way in which B2C companies have leveraged User Generated Content (UGC)?**

I think the main learning point from B2C here is that opportunities should be well-chosen to give users an incentive to generate content (whether it is a simple comment on something or a more profound initiative such as a discussion platform started by a customer itself).

Content generated by users can come from various sources. For instance, trade shows and events are excellent occasions to launch hashtags and get attendees / other people involved in their conversations / shares etc.

Moreover, industry experts that are speaking at or attending the event can be video recorded and used in online content to invoke further reactions after the event.

Such opportunities can also be used to record customer testimonials, carry out surveys, etc. and share these insights via social media.

I think the key is to link social media events to traditional media initiatives too, such as at a trade event, so that they aren't necessarily viewed as stand alone initiatives.

It is also important to go for multiple possibilities/objectives around which UGC can be created (as in the trade event example) and to make UGC part of an overall customer engagement plan.

USG can also come from your employees, so they should be encouraged to share photos of what it's like to work at your business. In the article above we discuss how B2B companies can influence content creation by employees in this way.

### **3. What is your advice to B2B companies seeking to implement a social media strategy for the first time?**

B2C brands have the advantage that many social media platforms are already actively used on a worldwide basis. In B2B this is less often the case. Until today, LinkedIn has been the most popular B2B social media platform.

Starting with small initiatives, such as launching a LinkedIn discussion group on an interesting topic, or sharing something that shows the more human side of your company, may be a good start. Content should encourage shares or conversations and have as their side-effect, the ability to improve your search engine optimisation.

Another key issue when you start out in social media, is to attract interesting followers (experts, etc.) or to get a good insight into who is actually following you.

In the article above a method/measure is discussed that may be interesting from that perspective.

You can also find a lot of interesting B2B social media guides on the Internet to get started e.g. <https://red-robot.net/b2b-social-media-marketing-2017/>

But don't forget, in the beginning it can be a bit of a trial and error/learning process!!

## Contact us

We hope that you enjoy reading this edition. If you have any questions about the issues raised in this paper, please don't hesitate to contact us.

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