



# THE IMPACT OF THE SELF-SERVICE ECONOMY ON B2B MARKETING

# INTRODUCTION

As millennials grow into decision-making roles, the old paradigms of business-to-business sourcing and selling have dramatically changed. Long gone are the days of golf outings, steak dinners and friendly handshakes to “do the deal.” In response to the growth of a “self-service” economy, B2B suppliers are adapting to buying behavior that is driven by consumer shopping habits.

The self-service model is certainly not a new concept. We can trace some of its origin starting in the U.S. in the late 1800s, with the advent of the mail-order catalog, giving consumers access to products they could purchase directly from the manufacturer, without the need for a salesperson or retailer. Hammacher Schlemmer is the earliest still surviving mail-order catalog, first published in New York City in 1881. By 1894, the infamous Sears catalog had grown to 322 pages, featuring everything from sewing machines to bicycles to sporting goods and even automobiles.

Today’s consumers can research and purchase without ever speaking to another human being.

Today, we as consumers can research and purchase cars, toothpaste, furniture, Super Bowl tickets, healthcare insurance — the list goes on and on — without ever speaking to another human being. Seventy percent of business customers believe technology will primarily replace human

interaction between themselves and their vendors’ salespeople in the next 10 years.<sup>1</sup> It seems like anything we want is within arm’s reach on the internet. This mentality has quietly crept into the B2B marketplace, where users are sourcing business products and services with the same self-service approach.

B2B buyers have always needed trust, confidence, and validation in the pre-purchase process but, increasingly, they are finding those things online.<sup>2</sup> We know that 89% of B2B researchers use the internet during the B2B research process and that they are reportedly 57% through the purchase process before they begin speaking to a salesperson.<sup>3</sup> Our expectations from the consumer purchase process, particularly in the digital sphere, are beginning to dictate the way that business buyers research and make decisions. We call this consumerization of business buying the “self-service” model and it speaks to the growing importance of digital in B2B sales.

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<sup>1</sup> “Global Research Shows Mobile and Social Technologies Complicate B2B Sales Processes; Business Buyers Mimicking Consumer Shoppers,” AvanaDe <<http://www.avanade.com/en-us/press-releases/global-research-shows-mobile-and-social-technologies-complicate-b2b-sales-processes-page>>

<sup>2</sup> “The ROI of Branding,” Branding Magazine <[www.branding-magazine.com/2015/09/25/how-b2b-cmos-can-make-the-business-case-for-branding/](http://www.branding-magazine.com/2015/09/25/how-b2b-cmos-can-make-the-business-case-for-branding/)>

<sup>3</sup> “The Changing Face of B2B Marketing,” Think With Google <<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/the-changing-face-b2b-marketing.html>>



# THE REASON BEHIND THE SHIFT TO SELF-SERVICE SALES

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## A NEW MODEL

### How B2C is Affecting B2B Marketing

B2B buying behavior has changed radically as customer-directed journeys replace the traditional sales funnel. The digital revolution has transformed the consumer purchasing journey from a predictable path (into storefronts or with a salesperson) into a more “circular pattern of touch points” (website, social media, and brand advocates).<sup>10</sup> Following suit, B2B selling has become less linear as business customers call upon their consumer experiences during the process of research, evaluation, and selection.

This new model begs the question: **How should B2B companies position themselves for success in the new self-service universe?** Their job is to become a digital concierge by providing personalized content for prospects throughout the buyer’s journey, guiding them toward the discovery of delightful experiences, while presenting options and alternatives along the way. In this white paper, we will discuss tactical ways to do that, but let us first focus on why and how buyer demand is trending towards this new direction.

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<sup>10</sup> “Do You Really Understand How Your Business Customers Buy?” McKinsey <[www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy)>



## THE BUYERS HAVE CHANGED

Over the past two years, there has been a dramatic shift in the B2B researcher demographic. Many more influencers are now involved in the purchasing process, and they don't look the way you might traditionally picture C-suite decision-makers. They are younger, more digitally-savvy, and they hold more diverse positions within the company.

Nearly half of all B2B researchers are millennials. Back in 2012, there was a pretty even mix across age groups. In 2014, however, 18- to 34-year-olds accounted for almost half of all researchers, an increase of 70%.<sup>4</sup> As digital natives who have grown up online, millennial-aged buyers expect that they will be able to find the information they need when they need it and without having to talk to a salesperson in the process.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, more people within the organization are playing pivotal roles in sizing up offerings, making the path to closing sales much more complicated. Research from Google shows that, while 64% of the C-suite have final sign off, so do almost a quarter (24%) of the non-C-suite. Even more revealing is the fact that the latter group has the most influence: 81% of non-C-suite employees have a say in purchase decisions. These statistics highlight how critical it has become to cater your sales and marketing tactics to this new wave of B2B buyers.

<sup>4</sup> "The Changing Face of B2B Marketing," Think With Google <<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/articles/the-changing-face-b2b-marketing.html>>

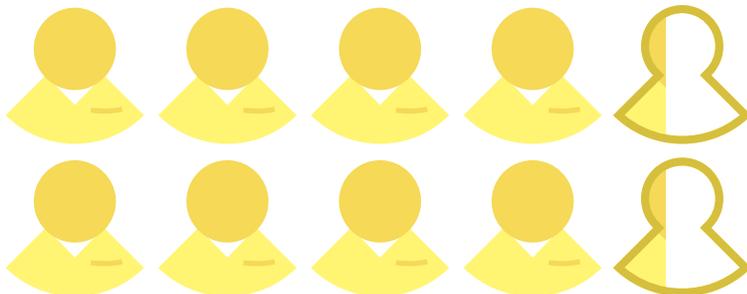
<sup>5</sup> "Customer Experience is the Key to B2B Success," Marketing Land [marketingland.com/customer-experience-key-b2b-success-152742](http://marketingland.com/customer-experience-key-b2b-success-152742)

# 50%



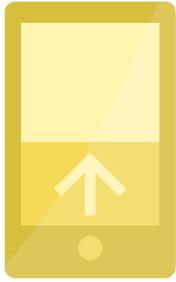
### PERCENTAGE OF MILLENNIAL RESEARCHERS

*Nearly half of all B2B researchers are millennials. That's a 70% increase from 2012. They are unlike any other that have come before in that they are digital natives, and they use the internet and social media as key tools in their research.*



### NON-C-SUITE DECISION MAKERS

*81% of non-C-Suite executives and managers have a say in major purchase decisions.*



## PERCENTAGE OF MOBILE RESEARCHERS

42% of researchers use a mobile device during the B2B purchase process.

## THEIR EXPECTATIONS HAVE CHANGED.

The new B2B buyer brings along new expectations as well. Research shows that expectations shaped by B2C interactions are rapidly making their way into B2B decision-making.<sup>7</sup> Let's look at Hilton's digital floor plan initiative as an example.

Hilton has mapped their hotels using digital floor plans, allowing guests to reserve specific rooms, unlocked via digital keys on their smart phones, negating the need to see or interface with a single Hilton person when staying in a Hilton hotel.<sup>8</sup> Their success with this technology reveals a fundamental truth about buyer expectations: they are demanding convenient, easy-to-use streamlined processes that don't require a middle man. They want self-service sales.

Business buyers, shaped by their experience as consumers, look to B2B organizations to know and cater to their specific needs — both online and off. As modern business buyers demand rich digital experiences when making work-related purchases, B2B companies must respond with convenient and sophisticated consumer-inspired buying experiences.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CHANNELS HAVE CHANGED.

Enabling these expectations are the unprecedented number of communication channels that are now at our disposal. These days, buyers are much more likely to find you in a Google search than on the golf course. The increased opportunity for connection is reflected in higher expectations among business buyers and a more fluid sales process. B2B decision-makers are researching purchase decisions using Google, referencing your website, and checking to see what others are saying about you.

About 71% of buyers start with a generic query first. That means that they're looking for a solution to their problem, rather than for your business specifically. Based on data from Google's Customer Journey tool, we know that generic paid search factors strongly in the beginning part of the business path to purchase. Additionally, business buyers have moved to mobile. As of May 2015, more people are using their mobile devices to search for things online than using their desktop computers — your prospective customers included.

<sup>7</sup> "Omni-Channel Experience is Critical to Fueling B2B Customer Engagement," Accenture <<https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/omni-channel-experience-is-critical-to-fueling-b2b-customer-engagement-finds-accenture-and-sap-hybris-study.htm>>

<sup>8</sup> "Hilton Revolutionizes Hotel Experience with Digital Check-In, Room Selection and Customization, and Check-Out across 650,000-Plus Rooms at More Than 4,000 Properties Worldwide," Hilton Worldwide <<http://news.hiltonworldwide.com/index.cfm/news/hilton-revolutionizes-hotel-experience-with-digital-checkin-room-selection-and-customization-and-checkout-across-650000plus-rooms-at-more-than-4000-properties-worldwide>>

<sup>9</sup> "Building the B2B Omni-channel Commerce Platform of the Future," Accenture <<https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insight-building-b2b-omni-channel-commerce-platform-future.aspx>>



# ADJUSTING YOUR STRATEGY FOR THE NEW BUSINESS BUYER

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## EMBRACING THE NEW BUYER JOURNEY

The Importance of Your Brand's Digital Fingerprint

All of these changes — consumer experiences, interactive new channels, and buyer expectations — have ushered in a new level of information and transparency available to customers, reducing or eliminating the need for human interaction throughout the sales process. Instead, they are learning everything they need to know about you through your brand's digital fingerprints.

This paradigm shift holds tremendous opportunity for organizations that are willing to embrace the new buyer journey, reallocate budgets toward branding and content initiatives, and foster collaboration between sales and marketing. To be ready to meet customers at different points on their journeys, B2B business must leverage digital tools to reach and convert new buyers.<sup>10</sup> So how can you create a highly-personalized “human” experience online?

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<sup>10</sup> “Do You Really Understand How Your Business Customers Buy?” McKinsey <[www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy)>



## KNOW YOUR BUYER

What keeps your buyer up at night? The thing that confuses many of our technology clients is how to speak to their buyers, who often aren't "technology people." Our clients have built products to solve problems for users, not necessarily to help buyers make a decision. **The Pragmatic Marketing framework reminds us that we build for users, but we market to buyers.** This is where building your buyer persona becomes invaluable to the marketing process.

Many people don't naturally associate B2B with emotion even though, like with B2C, there is an actual person (with actual human preferences) making the buying decision. You need the ability to put yourself in the buyer's shoes in order to be successful. In this case, that means a full understanding of the problems that your buyer is facing so that you can present your solution to them in terms they understand. To do that, you have to understand the buyer persona incredibly well so that you make sure to address their concerns in design and messaging.

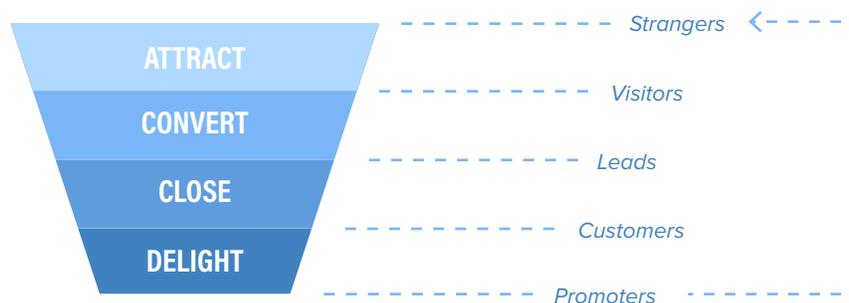
## SOLVE, DON'T SELL

**Tell a story that speaks to your audience's pain points, not your product's features.** A study by Kentico Software found that 74 percent of the general public trusts content from companies that educate them on a topic, but when those same companies include a product-focused message in their content, credibility drops by 29 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Tech companies are notorious for leading into the market discussion by asserting the virtues of their technology. They are proud of it and think everyone wants to know about what they have done under the hood. However, the truth is, the customer is just looking for a solution to their problem. They don't necessarily care how the solution works, but how the solution works for them.

While there will come a phase where information about product features is necessary, in the beginning phases of the buyer's journey (at the top of the funnel), content and other marketing messages should be targeted toward the benefits you provide as opposed to the features.

## THE INBOUND MARKETING SALES FUNNEL



<sup>11</sup> "Why Brands Need to Branch Out From Product Focused Content," Contently <<https://contently.com/strategist/2015/11/30/why-brands-need-to-branch-out-from-product-focused-content/>>

## BUILD TRUST

Various studies show that an initial brand impression on a website only takes between 6 and 10 seconds to be processed. This is a critical time period to build initial trust. B2B researchers are trying to solve a problem. Are you current and relevant? How do you look? Do you speak their language — the language of benefits, not features? Do you “get” them? Just as we gather these impressions from initial person-to-person interactions, this digital impression should be treated exactly the same.

Good design will do this: it strengthens brands, instills initial trust and confidence, and begs further exploration.

If you pass this initial trust test, the buyer will feel confident in moving deeper into qualified trust. They are in the right place to get the information they need. Be ready to give it to them. Engage them with blog content and articles. Give them an opportunity to further a dialogue via email newsletter or gated case study or white paper. At this point they are not ready for a webinar or to fill out a “Contact Us” form. Nurture them into deeper levels of engagement slowly and surely.



## MAKE A PERSONAL CONNECTION

Despite what appears to be an impersonal buyer’s journey, people ultimately like doing business with people. Blog posts, emails, and other content should be authored and come from a real person. Though Google has discontinued authorship in blog posts as part of their ranking algorithm, it’s still a good practice to humanize the content-consumption experience.<sup>12</sup>

“About Us” pages on websites, featuring photographs of key personnel allow B2B sellers an opportunity to digitally introduce themselves to the self-service buyer. Including other cultural nuances of your company such as mission statements, values, and cultural norms allows visitors to understand what’s important to you as a company, and as humans in a business world. These pages can truly matter.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Goodbye Google Authorship,” Search Engine Land <[searchengineland.com/goodbye-google-authorship-201975](http://searchengineland.com/goodbye-google-authorship-201975)>

<sup>13</sup> “Why Bother Making Beautiful Team Pages?” Subtraction <[www.subtraction.com/2016/02/25/why-bother-making-beautiful-team-pages](http://www.subtraction.com/2016/02/25/why-bother-making-beautiful-team-pages)>

*Although the processes have become digital, the content should still have a human touch.*

## MEET THE BUYERS WHERE THEY ARE

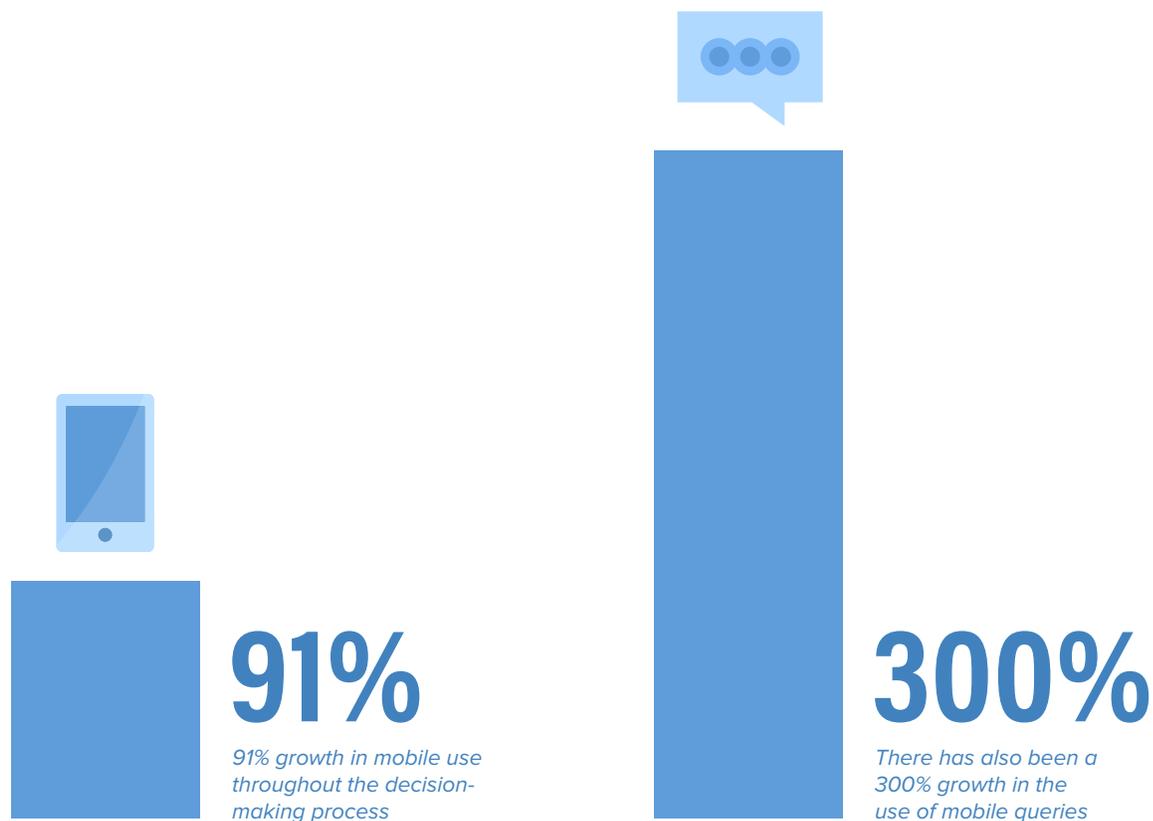
According to the Google/Millward Brown Digital's B2B Path to Purchase Study, **42% of researchers use a mobile device during the B2B purchasing process.** They're not just using mobile in the initial stages of research, either. Over the past two years, there has been **91% growth in use throughout the decision-making process and a 300% growth in mobile queries.** B2B buyers are using their phones to check prices, read product descriptions, compare features and connect to retailers.

Statistics on engagement also tell us that mobile communications have the highest response rates of any digital marketing tactics. Whether you're

sending them an email or they're browsing your website, chances are good that it's happening on a smart device.

How are you catering your marketing to that reality?

With buyers spending this much time on their smartphones, it's vital that you provide them with a seamless user experience by optimizing your mobile marketing strategy.





# THE DAWN OF THE DIGITAL CONCIERGE

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## A NEW RANGE OF INTERACTIONS

Being Proactive About Meeting Your Prospects in the Digital Age

As you can see, there will be a wide range of digital interactions between you and your buyer throughout their journey from awareness to decision. This will include one-sided touches, such as the times when the buyer encounters your brand on social media or through your website, as well as two-side interactions, such as email conversations in which the salesperson has more control to offer targeted information.<sup>14</sup> Because prospective customers may engage many resources on their path to purchase, including your website, collateral, social, and sales people, companies need to align marketing and sales to preemptively meet the prospect's need by becoming a digital concierge.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "The New New Buyer's Journey: People Needing People," Yesler <[yesler.com/blog/new-new-buyers-journey-people-needing-people](http://yesler.com/blog/new-new-buyers-journey-people-needing-people)>

<sup>15</sup> "Content Marketing Matrix for B2B Tech Companies," Golden Spiral Marketing <[www.goldenspiralmarketing.com/blog/2015/11/04/content-marketing-matrix-for-b2b-tech-companies-infographic.1752350](http://www.goldenspiralmarketing.com/blog/2015/11/04/content-marketing-matrix-for-b2b-tech-companies-infographic.1752350)>



## IT ALL STARTS WITH CONTENT

With the rise of the “self-service” model, your sales team might not have any influence over the buyer’s decision until it’s too late — however, your marketing has tremendous influence. That’s why it’s vital that your marketing strategy and lead generation efforts are focused on priming buyers during their self-education process, so that when they reach out to your salesperson, they are already interested in what you have to offer.

There’s no question that a prospect who has discovered your offering themselves during their initial research phase will be more likely to convert into a customer. But how do you capture their interest and communicate your brand promise before you even meet them? It all starts with content. Since customers today research their options so early in the sales cycle, content marketing takes on the education role that used to belong to sales.

Strong content puts you in the room with a prospect before you even meet them. White papers, industry-based emails, case studies, blog posts, webinars, infographics, videos, podcasts — whatever its form,

Great content is absolutely essential for ushering target audiences into the sales funnel and promoting lead generation.

It places you within conversations that facilitate introductions to the brand and positions you as an expert on the subject matter.

Content marketing tactics such as nurturing campaigns (see ours below, for example) and video series create a digital dialogue whereby you create ongoing touches to your buyers. Think about relationship building in your own life: if you want to move an acquaintance into deeper friendship, you have to pursue an ongoing, persistent dialogue with them. You can replicate that in your marketing strategy through content marketing. Content marketing’s role in sales is to help push potential customers through the sales funnel.

When creating content marketing assets, it is helpful to think about how content can help answer customers’ questions and concerns along each step in the customer journey, from the top of the sales funnel to the moments right before the close. Self-service is about giving your customers tools that make their job (researching, analyzing, and — ultimately — purchasing) easier. If they can do their job easier on your site than on your competitors’, then you will win their business.

### THE SHAPE OF B2B MARKETING

*Want to learn more about nurture campaigns?  
View ours as an example at: [http://www.  
goldenspiralmarketing.com/shape-of-b2b/](http://www.goldenspiralmarketing.com/shape-of-b2b/)*



## THE SHAPE OF B2B MARKETING

# CONCLUSION

Our assertion here—that B2B companies should be taking cues from the B2C buyers’ journey, and that a market-focused approach to meeting buyers’ needs—has its rewards.

In his book **The Market Driven Organization**, George Day saw that organizations that adopted this “externally oriented culture” are 31% more profitable, are faster to market, get a higher price point, and have fewer product launch failures.

“Organizations that develop their B2B commerce channels now and offer a consumer-like experience will be well placed to compete in their markets.”<sup>16</sup>

Embracing the new B2B buying paradigm and aligning marketing and sales to speak to that buyer in meaning ways can have more quantifiable results in sales organizations. The numbers from McKinsey’s research on the subject speak for themselves:

“Our experience with upward of 100 B2B sales organizations suggests that while the change required is significant, so are the benefits: an up to 20 percent increase in customer leads, 10 percent growth in first-time customers, and a speedup of as much as 20 percent in the time that elapses between qualifying a lead and closing a deal.”<sup>17</sup>

Doing business in this self-service model requires more attention and purpose in the strategy phase of your marketing development. Developing your personas, looking at the competitive landscape, and positioning yourself with an empathetic and pragmatic approach to problem solving, are all achievable.

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<sup>16</sup> “Omni-Channel Experience is Critical to Fueling B2B Customer Engagement,” Accenture <<https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/omni-channel-experience-is-critical-to-fueling-b2b-customer-engagement-finds-accenture-and-sap-hybris-study.htm>>

<sup>17</sup> “Do You Really Understand How Your Business Customers Buy?” McKinsey <[www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/do-you-really-understand-how-your-business-customers-buy)>

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