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How to Turn Prospects Into Brand Champions –Online



Digital transformation is forcing companies to change their business models, rethink their budgets, and adapt to the new digital-first market reality. What's interesting is that it's not companies driving the change: it's their customers.

Mastering the digital marketplace

When's the last time a prospect called your sales team directly for information? Can't remember, right? That's because potential customers are doing their pre-purchase research online—in very public, many-to-many conversations.

In this digital public space, prospects educate themselves, share pain points, read expert reviews, sort out available features, and compare prices. Customers and experts willingly share how products met (or did not meet) their expectations, and dish on the quality of services and support.

Many prospects will experience your brand for the first time in this virtual no-man's land where vendors duke it out for multichannel digital dominance. Never in the history of commerce have companies been so exposed in blazing offset against competitors. Companies that ignore this public sharing of expertise have little say in how people experience and perceive their brand. They may be bypassed altogether.

Because of this, your customer experience is now a major pillar of your marketing, alongside brand and growth. This has fundamentally changed the way marketing and sales must structure their organizations, their outreach, their products, and their strategies if they want to survive.

So how can you connect, engage, and create long-term relationships with prospects in this digital marketplace? The right mix of personalization and content can help you better understand your customers, tailor interactions, and build trust. Read on to discover four essential strategies that modern mid-market and enterprise companies can use to build lasting brand value with customers online.

1. Create a customer-first brand

Now that your customer experience is a pillar of your marketing, your success relies on your ability to create positive engagement experiences for customers. Companies that excel at customer experience in fact generate three times more stock return than CX laggards¹. And if you're not a customer-first brand at your very core, people will start to notice.

So how do you get there? You'll need to better understand customer needs and perceptions, and position yourself to respond quickly.



UNDERSTAND CUSTOMER NEEDS

First off, it's time to redefine your brand values through the eyes of your customers. It can be tough to get to the truth of what your company is all about. But take a good hard look.

Do your values reflect your customers' needs? Would your customers agree that's what you should stand for? Do you truly understand what your customers need from you? How well do you help people research and learn about your field in general, and your products in particular? Have you established yourself as a trusted source of information? Surveys and post-purchase feedback can help answer these questions and keep your finger on the pulse.

TAKE AN HONEST LOOK AT CUSTOMER SENTIMENT

The dissonance between company perception and customer reality is well documented. Ask executives how they think customers perceive their brand, their customer experience, or any other aspect of their offering, and they will consistently rate it higher than customers do themselves. A recent study² found that "while 75% of organizations believe themselves to be customer-centric, only 30% of consumers agreed—that's a 35% gap."

These painful statistics highlight the gap between how customers feel about you and how you think they feel.

To tune this dissonance, build out your organizational listening architecture: leverage social listening tools and sales/account management calls to capture real-time feedback and sentiment from the front lines. Mine customer emails and online service chats for fresh needs and insights. Most companies are still playing catch-up to understand customer sentiment, so you'll be ahead of the game.

CREATE A RESPONSIVE BRAND

There is no question that the "experience economy" has forever changed marketing. For mid-market and enterprise businesses, competitive advantage comes from creating an arc between customer needs and your offering, tracking success all along the way.

A recent Salesforce study³ highlighted that over 70% of customers think companies should be able to understand their needs and make it easier for them to buy through the appropriate offers. Customers are in control of the buying process, and expect to be able to access the information they need to make decisions to improve their business and life.

This need creates the perfect opportunity to reach out. Sharing information and expertise builds trust, strengthens relationships, and keeps you top of mind.

¹ "2019 Customer Experience ROI Study." Watermark Consulting, 2019.

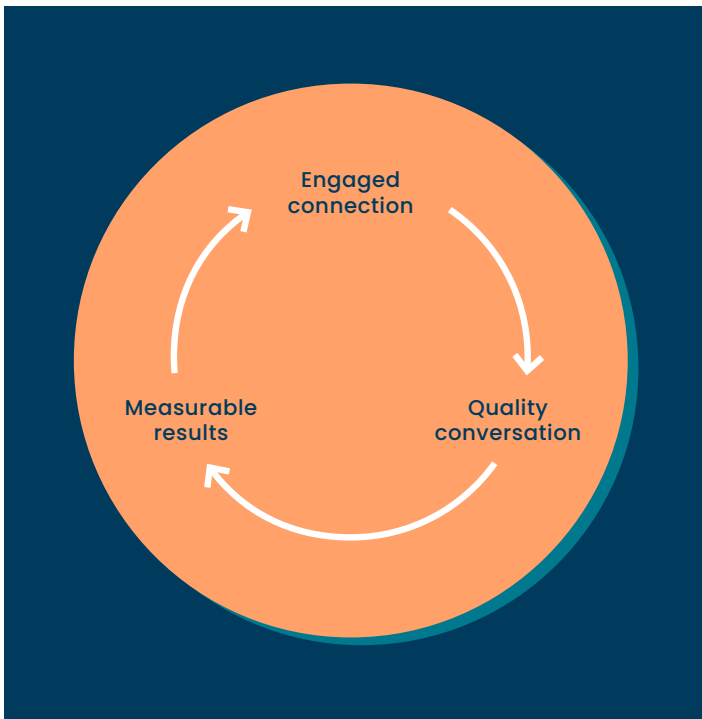
² "The Disconnected Customer: What digital customer experience leaders teach us about reconnecting with customers." Capgemini, 2017.

³ "Customer expectations hit all-time highs." Salesforce research.

2. Deliver useful and consistent content

Successful content marketing requires focus on specific audiences, whether you divide by industry, role, persona, or stage of the buying cycle. By keeping your target personas in mind, and planning your strategy and messages around what you know about them, you'll be able to create profitable long-term relationships.

In a digital-first economy, where brand value is integrated with customer experience, you'll need to establish strong connections with buyers in the marketplace. Engaged connection leads to quality conversation, which leads to measurable results, which can spur on further connections. To spark this virtuous cycle and demonstrate your customer-first approach, you'll need content.



Unfortunately, up to 70% of that carefully crafted content is never used.⁴ A big reason for this sad reality is the absence of a content strategy. For all the energy and cost that goes into content creation, you have to make sure it delivers what your audiences need, when they need it. This is where a content strategy—tightly linked to business goals—comes in.

BUILD A CONTENT STRATEGY

Strong content strategies begin with the end in mind. Start with a vision of a happy customer (or better yet, an enthusiastic brand advocate) and work backward from there.

Your business likely solves specific problems for specific roles. These are your audience personas. Great content strategies focus on a manageable number of personas to establish who you're talking to, what their pain points are, and how you respond to their challenges. Content goals for each stage of the engagement funnel will move from awareness through engagement and education.

AUDIT WHAT YOU HAVE

To reinvent your content strategy, start with a simple messaging audit. Sort what you already have by audience persona and buying cycle phase, and audit your messaging accordingly. A matrix format will help:

	Persona 1	Persona 2	Persona 3
Top of funnel Awareness Positive Sentiment	Social media messaging	Sponsored content	LinkedIn article
Middle of funnel Engagement Conversation	White paper	Website traffic	Webinar
Bottom of funnel Transaction Experience	Demo	Third-party or partner leads	Trial

Take a second look at any content that seems to be falling flat (low click traffic, time on page, and follow-up). Are you matching message to persona; format to need? Can you repurpose any longer foundational content like white papers into shorter chunks for earlier in the funnel?

Audit your messaging against your content strategy and personas. You'll want to tell your audiences why your amazing products and services stand out. But don't get caught up in the "speeds and feeds" approach to content. Make sure to spend your precious reader attention connecting with them, empathizing with their problems, and showing them how your exceptional products and services can make their lives better.

By sharpening and maximizing your content in this way, you're already taking a step towards better connecting with your audiences and building stronger relationships.



TARGET, MEASURE, IMPROVE

The importance of understanding what content businesses are connecting with cannot be overstated. Leverage the marketing management tools you have at your disposal: tools like Marketo, Salesforce, or the analytics built into your content management, email, or SEO tools. Study open rates, click-through rates, shares, and other important behaviors. Time on page analytics can show you what's hot, and what leaves them cold. Consider whether content is pitched to the right audience. Make sure you're looking at the right metrics, not just vanity metrics like page views and downloads, to show you're engaging your audience.

Using the insight you gain from the quantitative results mentioned above, as well as qualitative feedback from online comments, sales conversations and even focus groups, you can start to shape your content to better connect with your audiences.

What are the hottest topics? What is the most successful article style? What are the most popular titles and subject lines?

Another powerful content strategy is repurposing what you've already created. Measure to find your most popular blog posts, white papers, videos. Can you update them to reflect news or changes? Can you upcycle a popular series into a "Top 5 Best" listicle, or a newsletter with links back to each post? Make an attractive infographic from stats or stories? Repost evergreen content to social media?

The more you know about how your audiences are connecting with content, the better you will become at engaging them with new or repurposed content that fuels conversations and strengthens relationships.

3. Drive personalization through empathy

The best brands recognize that it's all about their customers. The more you understand your customers, their needs, and how they experience your brand, the more you can leverage the power of personalization. Sending personalized messages, making targeted offers that reflect their previous searches and purchases, and other audience-specific interactions show prospects and customers that you understand their needs and interests.

Recent research on 1,000 consumers aged 18-64 shows that **80% of are more likely to do business with a company when offered a personalized experience.**

A full 90% find personalization appealing.⁵

Technology and tools that gather data across the full spectrum of customer experiences and drive personalization can help brands become – perhaps ironically – more empathetic.

ENGAGE IN TWO-WAY DIALOGUE WITH CUSTOMERS

Yes, customers are self-educating online. But when they reach out for a two-way dialogue – true relational communications – it's an important gesture that cannot be missed. This one-on-one interaction builds trust and creates opportunity. It's critical to build the internal capacity to engage in the right dialogue with customers, at the right time, carried out in the right way, when they ask for help.

BECOME A TRUSTED, RESPONSIVE VOICE

Listening to customer issues and responding in a timely and empathetic way creates trust. Providing educational content that does not push your products creates trust. Being transparent about how you communicate and respond to their actions creates trust. Imagine how you would want to be treated by a vendor, and act appropriately.

LEVERAGE THIRD-PARTY VALIDATION

The best companies acknowledge that prospects have ample ability to educate themselves in the multichannel universe. Seeking unbiased opinions from third-party sources is standard. It's important to align with third-party research in your field and ensure you at least figure in their surveys. When your services and products are excellent and your customer service irreproachable, you will stand out in competitive comparisons and gain more credibility with your audiences.



4. Embrace full-funnel outcome marketing

Maybe you've created an empathetic customer-first brand, and your content and personalized outreach benefits buyers. To enable the whole strategy-to-execution arc, you must now bring to life your engagement funnel, from early stages all the way through to purchase, support and partnership. How do you do this?

SHIFT TO OUTCOME MARKETING

Outcome marketing is a fresh way of approaching marketing that bypasses short-term results (such as clicks and likes) to instead focus on big-picture goals.

Start with the profitable behavior you want to see. This should go beyond making a sale. Will your customer use and swear by your product, and share that feeling with everyone who will listen? And beyond product: Does your audience respect your brand? Do they know why your organization exists? There's a great deal of power in a brand advocate who embodies and re-expresses your "why".⁶

That's a lofty endgame. But work backward from there. When you focus everything you do on creating engaged champions, it can benefit both your customers and your business.

Some companies have shifted their marketing reward model to drive the right internal behavior for outcome marketing. Some companies are seeing good results with the marketing return-on-investment (MROI) model,⁷ while others swear by the approach of rewarding marketing for high-quality leads that turn into customers.



MARKET TO THE FULL FUNNEL

Outcome marketing requires powering all three stages of the funnel to move prospects from neophyte to customer all the way to champion.

Top-of-funnel tactics can be hard to tie to outcomes, but are critical to feeding your funnel. You may need to convince leadership these activities are worthwhile, driving large numbers of leads, brand awareness, and positive brand sentiment.

Mid-funnel engagement tactics like white papers, data sheets, and webinars help you qualify leads and provide a healthy stream of interested customers into the more relational, one-on-one low-funnel tactics (like trials, self-evaluations, phone calls, and meetings) that fuel sales.

LEARN FROM FAILURE

When important campaigns don't drive expected outcomes, it's an opportunity to investigate what made the campaign important. Time to get honest and transparent with yourselves.

Unpack the goals: Were they actually about the customer, or some internal objective? How did you validate the idea to go forward? Did an unwanted product drive the 'important' campaign? Companies can lose their way launching products that are not borne out by customer needs and therefore fail to drive marketing outcomes.

Use your marketing technology to discover early stage truths, do rapid testing, watch for signs of failure, and pivot in real time. This agile operational model lets you either bail early and start afresh or inject new life into flagging efforts: boosting marketing outcomes and ROI on the fly.

Meaningful connections drive success

These four strategies—focus on your customers, offer honest and useful content, personalize the customer experience, and reach customers where they are in the funnel—can really help you shift your marketing outcomes.

Mastering them can take time. As you go, it's important to continue to revisit your core mission – your “why.” After all, connecting with buyers is about reaching out, person-to-person, with knowledge, advice and solutions that make their lives better. When you keep that ultimate goal in mind, your day-to-day activities will fall naturally into place. Ultimately, your interaction with customers does not in fact end with the creation of brand advocates, but instead becomes a continuous cycle of meaningful engagement and fulfillment.

