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Conversational Marketing

Rob Leavitt

Three quick examples:

A few weeks ago, a marketer in IBM's mainframe division posted three internal training videos on YouTube. The videos are well-done parodies of typical boring sales training presentations; IBM's marcom guy thought people outside the company would get a kick out of seeing and passing them around.

A week before that, Sun's general counsel, Mike Dillon, became the first chief lawyer in the Fortune 500 to launch his own blog, [the legal thing...](#), joining Sun's CEO in the rarified atmosphere of executive bloggers among the top tech companies.

And a few months before that, Juniper Networks launched [Sound Off!](#), a podcasting initiative driven by user request. Participants in Juniper's online community ask technical or business questions; the Sound Off! team interviews in-house experts for podcast download and subscription.

In one form or other, all three are about conversational marketing, getting past the trap of just sending messages to your presumed audiences and instead fostering actual dialogue about issues your stakeholders care about. As these examples demonstrate, slowly but surely, tech marketers on the B2B side are catching up to its primary arguments that:

1. Markets are conversations.
2. Markets consist of human beings, not demographic sectors.
3. Conversations among human beings sound human. They are conducted in a human voice.

If not yet typical, the three examples above are just a few of many similar initiatives across the industry. A number of large tech and services firms are experimenting with blogs, podcasts, online communities, viral marketing, and the like, and positive results are beginning to emerge. And it's not just online. Tech and services marketers are also putting more energy into face-to-face "human" conversations with customer briefings, small seminars and roundtables, account-based marketing programs, and executive councils and networks.

But it's not ultimately about the tools or programs, although some are certainly more useful than others. It's about mindset and direction.

We know buyers of IT services and solutions want the conversational approach. They continue to rely heavily on discussion with colleagues, professional peers, and other experts to help them consider investment alternatives, and they pay less and less attention to most formal marketing and sales activity from the provider side.

From our side, the question now is whether companies and their marketers can move from interactive experiments (online and offline) to a broader transformation. Can we shift the marketing mindset from packaged promotion to ongoing conversation?

Marketing has always been about promoting stuff. Of course Promotion is only one of the classic Four P's (and there is all sorts of debate about revising those four), but it has usually taken the lion's share of marketers' time, energy, and money. Good promoters certainly listen to the marketplace and rely on regular feedback from customers and others to create more compelling and useful messages and offers. But it's still one-way at heart, and it presumes that the promoter knows best.

Conversational marketing, in contrast, assumes that the best answers emerge from the conversation itself. The aim of marketing is not to convince the customer (or other "targets" or "audiences") that you have all the

answers, but rather to participate in and spark dialogues that collaboratively create answers beyond the ability of any one participant.

As David Maister and Lois Kelly have [suggested](#), "the goals of initiating and deepening relationships are vastly more important than conventional marketing's goals of 'building awareness' and 'generating leads.' And nothing—*nothing*—builds relationships better than regular, meaningful conversations."

Phone: 1-888-ITSMA92 (Outside the U.S. +1-781-862-8500)

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