

Predictions for 2012 and Beyond: The End of B2B Sales & Marketing as We Know It?

In the face of two economic downturns in the past decade, B2B buyers are more frugal than ever as a new “age of austerity” promises to keep buyers seeking proof of bottom-line impact and value from every investment. At the same time, B2B buyers are taking advantage of the wealth of information available via the Internet and social media to become more empowered, taking charge of the buying cycle.

Top 5 predictions

These two market drivers will have important implications into 2012 and beyond for B2B sales enablement and marketing strategies and budgets. From our research and best practices work with leading B2B sales and marketing groups, Alinean provides its top 5 predictions for 2012:

1. Internet Fueled Buying Cycles on the Rise – In the B2C space, the Internet has fundamentally changed how books, apparel, electronics, music, cars and other goods are bought and sold. The consumer is now in charge: researching specifications, configuring and customizing solutions, getting peer reviews and advice, comparing prices, and “buying now”. During the B2C Internet revolution many a vendor’s world was turned upside down by failing to recognize and invest in the fundamental shift towards empowering consumers with content and buying tools.

Now, in B2B, we have seen a similar dramatic shift towards prospects taking charge of the buying cycle, using on-line content marketing, resources and tools to drive research, comparisons and purchase decisions. Savvy B2B marketers will recognize the “consumerization” of B2B and in 2012 proactively increase content marketing investments to deliver the right content and interactive decision support tools at the appropriate right step in the buying cycle.

2. The Death of a Salesman? At the same time, as buyers are becoming more empowered, sales professionals are seen by these buyers as less valuable in the decision making process, and as a result are being invited later and later in the buying cycle. The invitation often coming after key decisions have already been made.

In a recent survey by IDC, 24% of buyers indicated that the sales reps are not prepared for presentations at all, 30% indicate that they are somewhat prepared, and only 29% indicate that they are well prepared. An empowered buyer means that the role of sales will dramatically be impacted, requiring sales enablement and marketing to help redefine and drive a new breed of value selling professional.

To prevent complete disintermediation of sales from the prospect’s decision making process, sales professionals must be made relevant and important again to buyers. Sales professionals must be armed with unique knowledge and tools so buyers want and need to engage sales earlier in the buying cycle when important strategies are set, budgets assigned, and solution providers evaluated and selected.

As a common example, an Internet empowered prospect will often self-diagnose their issues, but may not do so completely or accurately. Empowering sales with executive assessment tools so that they can interactively, in a value-add workshop, diagnose prospect's issues more thoroughly and completely, benchmark the issues versus peers and leaders to set priorities and create urgency, and provide a roadmap of potential recommendations. Increased investments in engaging sales content and interactive tools will be required in 2012 to keep sales professionals relevant and valuable to ever more empowered and skeptical buyers.

Many vendors will also need to consider adding "buy it now" options for solutions they would never have thought to have this for in years past. This, to serve a new breed of B2B buyer that completely rejects salesperson involvement and wants to manage the purchase process all on their own.

3. It's Only a Matter of Trust – B2B buyers will rely more and more on your on-line presence to make judgments as to whether they will do business with you, and this presence needs to overcome typical vendor skepticism, convey credibility and gain trust. Buyer survey results from sales and marketing research firm SiriusDecisions indicate that the most trusted sources of marketing content information through the buying lifecycle are industry analysts (cited by 31.4% of respondents), and peers (28.7%), especially early in the lifecycle. The influence of vendors as a trusted source of information lags dramatically, at only 8.1% this year, an increase from 3.1% in 2006, but still much lower on the trust scale than almost all other sources.

Savvy vendors will develop and deliver more content and tools in 2012 to create a "circle of trust" with skeptical buyers, including independent endorsements, peer and analyst reviews, success stories, and validation needed to create trust.

4. Information Overload –even though B2B buyers are relying more on the Internet to fuel purchase decisions, these buyers are being inundated with more marketing messages over more channels than ever before, leading to information overload, confusion, and stalled decision making cycles. According to SiriusDecisions, just looking at e-blasts alone, the typical buyer receives over 20 e-mail marketing messages a week, up 32% over the past 4 years. And this is but one of several traditional and on-line channels that are proactively providing information on a daily basis to prospects.

Better content targeting and personalization is required for 2012 to end "carpet bombing" B2B marketing techniques, evolving to create a dialogue with buyers to guide them through the decision making process and buying lifecycle with personalized one-to-one advice.

5. Fight Frugalnomics – with two economic downturns over the past decade, B2B buyers are focused more than ever on what solutions are available to enable "doing-more-with-less", driving savings and realizing quantifiable bottom-line impact. Now, over 90% of B2B buyers require quantifiable proof of bottom-line impact from any significant purchase, and over 81% expect vendors to create and deliver the financial business case for most proposed purchases. Even with a continued recovery and more financial optimism through 2012, the shift to frugality is fundamental and permanent.

To fight Frugalnomics, savvy marketers will need to make even more investments in 2012 towards content and tools that help buyers assess and quantify the economic impact of implementing the proposed solutions, quantify the cost of "doing nothing", and prove competitive cost advantages and value. Advanced ROI

business case tools and training should be provided to direct and channel sales professionals to help them advance from traditional product / solution selling, to the value selling buyers now demand.

The Bottom-Line

B2B sales and marketing is fundamentally being shaped in 2012 by the Internet empowered buyer, increased skepticism, information overload and Frugalnomics, driving the need for key investments in content marketing, personalization, interactive tools and sales enablement.

The savvy marketing and sales enablement professional will proactively recognize the issues that the frugal and empowered decision maker creates, using 2012 to reshape the strategies and investments to better engage, dialogue and sell to ever more empowered, skeptical, overloaded and frugal buyers.

Alinean value-based sales and marketing tools can be used to help address the buyer challenges of 2012, and fight Frugalnomics:

- To help better connect and engage on-line with frugal buyers, click here for more information on [Alinean Value Marketing](#) solutions
- To help sales engage earlier and more effectively with frugal buyers, click here for information on [Alinean Value Selling](#) solutions.

About Alinean

Alinean, the leading provider of dynamic sales and marketing tools, empowers B2B vendors to better sell to today's economic-focused buyer. Alinean-powered interactive white papers, assessments, ROI calculators and TCO comparison tools create more compelling value-based connections, workshops, presentations and proposals — delivering customized diagnostics, benchmarks, solution recommendations, benefits, investments, ROI, payback and TCO advantage proof points.

Leading B2B firms leveraging Alinean tools include: HP, IBM, Microsoft, EMC, Dell, Intel, IDC/IDG, AT&T, Siemens, Unisys, Thomson Reuters, NetApp, Citrix, Symantec, Novell, Cisco, Oracle, Sybase, and CA.

Learn more: at the Fight Frugalnomics™ Resource Center <http://www.fightfrugalnomics.com>, by visiting <http://www.alinean.com>, or calling 407.382.0005.



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Sources:

SiriusDecisions B-to-B Buyer's Survey 2010, on an online survey of more than 600 b-to-b marketers
IDC Executive Tele Briefing on Sales and Marketing Strategies for 2010