

Beyond the Hype: Applying Social and Behavioral Data to B2B Marketing

Raab

associates, inc.

730 Yale Avenue

Swarthmore, PA 19081

www.raabassociatesinc.com

info@raabassociatesinc.com

Applying Social and Behavioral Data to B2B Marketing

Social and behavioral data provide key information about prospects, often filling the blind spot created when buyers do research without contacting your company directly. This paper describes how social and behavioral data can be gathered and used for effective B2B marketing practices. It then presents a step-by-step actionable methodology for deploying social and behavioral data at your own firm.

Marketing Is Harder Than Ever

Ask any B2B marketer to define her job, and the answer is almost always the same: to generate high quality leads. But while the answer hasn't changed in recent years, the job itself has gotten much harder.

The reasons are well known. Today's buyers do more research for themselves, so they interact with the company less and later in the purchase process. This gives the marketers and sales people fewer opportunities to gather information about buyers and to influence their decisions. And even when buyers do interact, they are more selective about the information they provide and accept.

These changes make relevant messaging critical to success. Relevance requires two resources. The first is a varied pool of content that is aligned closely with your key buyer personas and their buying process, so you have the right message available for each situation. The second is detailed prospect data so you know which message to send when.

Of those two resources, content currently receives most of the attention. It's true that many marketers feel they can't improve their programs until they uncork the bottleneck of content scarcity. But great content isn't enough. Marketers also need great prospect data.

Let's go back to those basic changes in the purchase process. They pose a double challenge where data is concerned.

- marketers need more data to send buyers more relevant messages
- buyers provide less data because they do research without contacting the company

Both challenges relate to the role of the sales person. Before buyers had so much access to information, sales people were often a primary point of contact. A skillful sales person subtly traded data about the company for data about the buyer. Today's sales people have much less interaction with buyers, especially in the early stages of the purchase process. This has left them hungry for information which they can no longer gather for themselves. In effect, the sales force has gone from being a data provider to a data consumer. Satisfying the sales force's new need for information for data is yet another task added to the marketer's list.

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Social and Behavioral Data to the Rescue

Fortunately, marketers have new resources as well. Buyers' self-directed research leaves a trail of clues that marketers can turn into useful information. This data comes from two main sources:

- social networks such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. These are public venues where prospects ask questions, offer answers, and share information about themselves. Some of the information is accessible to anyone; other information requires a relationship between the company and the buyer. Creating that relationship takes some work, but the wealth of data provided from a single opt-in is much greater than a company can gather on its own without many separate interactions.
- behaviors when interacting with company-owned content. This includes Web site visits, responses to display ads, email opens and clicks, searches that land on the company Web site, Webinar attendance, and content downloads. It may also include non-digital behaviors such as telephone conversations and trade show visits if these are captured in an accessible system. Behavior data can be hard to interpret, but, if mined correctly, it will yield detailed insights into a buyer's purchase role, interests, and intentions.

Marketers still have other, more traditional information sources. Internal systems often contain a great deal of information about current customers, who are also prospects for new purchases. Public databases from companies like D&B/Hoovers and Data.com provide massive lists of companies and individuals. But both these sources are best at providing relatively static information such as industry, address, company size, and personal titles. Where they fall short is uncovering critical data about current needs and purchase stages. This is exactly where social and behavioral data excel.

Data Provided by Source Type				
	Internal systems	Public databases	Behavior	Social
industry		x		x
products installed	x	x		x
size /sophistication	x	x	X	x
name / title	x	x		x
company change				x
personal change				x
purchase role			X	x
interests			X	x
purchase timing			X	x
engagement			X	
pain points			X	x

Of course, all social and behavioral data sources are not created equal. The table on the following page lists major elements available from the main social networks and various behavior types.

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As you see, there are big differences in each list. These sources also differ in the types of communications they permit and the rules controlling access to data. Marketers need to study these differences in detail so they can pick the right media for their company needs and for particular projects.

Differences notwithstanding, all social networks do provide access to customer name and to content created as posts or tweets. Behavioral sources also connect individuals with content, although in their case it is usually content consumed. Either way, content is immensely powerful information since it provides insight into attitudes, concerns, pain points, interests and products being considered. This is exactly what marketers and sales people need to know to treat each customer appropriately. In many cases, this information can be extracted from content with relatively simple methods for text analysis, such as keyword searches.

Marketers can also apply more advanced techniques to find patterns in social and behavioral data. This can require advanced analysis and correlation or triangulation. Measures could include how active someone is in a given forum, how frequently they discuss a particular topic, whom else they follow or engage with, what events they attend, how many different vendor names they mention, and how any of these patterns change over time. Such measures give an even deeper understanding of the customer's current situation. They're especially good for flagging hot prospects, urgent problems or short term marketing opportunities, all based on seeing a sudden uptick in activity.

Social and Behavioral Data by Source				
	LinkedIn	Facebook	Twitter	Behavior
name	x	x	x	
posts / tweets	x	x	x	
current position	x			
experience	x			
education	x			
email address	x			
connections	x			
recommendations	x			
discussions	x			
pictures		x		
gender		x		
age range		x		
network		x		
Interests		x		
location			x	
user since			x	
biography			x	
number followers			x	
number tweets			x	
number mentions			x	
company domain				x
ad views and clicks				x
search terms				x
Webinar attendance				x
email opens and clicks				x
Web site visits				x
Web page views				x
content opens				x

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Uses for Social and Behavioral Data

What practical uses have marketers found for this data? Common applications include:

- **segmentation.** Marketers can assign prospects to segments based on their business type and size, their title, and the role they're playing in the buying process (researcher, influencer, decision maker, etc.). But well beyond traditional data and firmographics, social data enables sophisticated segmentation across indicators like level of interest, stage in the buying process, business trends, and business needs. Some of this information comes directly from user profiles in social media or company systems; other attributes are inferred from data analysis, correlation, content consumption, and behaviors. The segments are used to assign each prospect to appropriate tracks or campaigns, to identify the prospects most likely to purchase in the near future, and to estimate long-term customer value.
- **content selection.** Marketers can use customer interests, job titles, comments, and previous content consumption to understand which types of information they are most likely to want and which the company most wants them to see. This can then guide selection of offers presented in email messages, Web site visits (including segmented visitor tracks), display ads, social media programs, and other interactions. These selections may be made dynamically, using rules or predictive models that select different contents for different people within the same promotions. Or, people may be assigned to different campaigns that each send the same contents to every member. This approach also helps support persona-based marketing.
- **results analysis.** Marketers can correlate social and behavioral data with immediate results, such as promotion response or content selection, and final outcomes such as closed deals. This provides insights into which messages are resonating with which personas or customer groups, allowing marketers to fine-tune their programs and improve results over time. Such analysis requires storing the information available about each prospect at the time of each treatment, so any decision rules have the same information available. This can potentially require handling unstructured data. It also requires associating each prospect with final results, which can be difficult when sales are not directly linked to all related individuals.

As these examples suggest, social and behavioral data are only useful if a company has systems to use them.. Key consumers include segmentation engines, campaign managers, content presentation, lead scoring, and customer relationship management. Marketing automation systems, which combine many of these functions, are particularly effective customers for social and behavioral data. We are also seeing the rise of a new category of data management and analysis tools for structured and unstructured data, which Raab Associates calls the [Customer Data Platform](#). (See box on next page.)

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Managing the Data

In addition to systems that consume social and behavioral data, companies also need systems and processes to manage it.

These processes start with the same best practices needed to manage any corporate data. These include:

- identify available data elements, taking care to understand the rules governing their original acquisition and use
- define the accuracy, coverage, and recency required for the intended purpose, which may be different from the original use
- assess the actual data quality by running statistical profiles and verifying selected items through telephone spot checks or other methods
- develop standard categories and values to ensure consistency, and enforce these during data acquisition
- create standard processes to update, standardize, and enhance the data over time
- understand how to best analyze and correlate the data in an actionable way that matches business requirements
- monitor data quality and improve results over time

But social and behavioral data have additional requirements reflecting their unique origins and complexity. You'll also need to:

- build relationships. Data like tweets and blog posts is truly open to anyone who wants to read it. Other data is only available for people with a relationship, such as being a Facebook follower or LinkedIn connection. Building those relationships may require marketing programs that don't meet other immediate goals such as lead generation. Done creatively, these can still support objectives such as long-term brand building. But even if they don't, they are a necessary cost of working in those channels.
- offer choices. Social and behavioral insights are often based on content choices that reveal prospects' interests. Marketers must structure their Web sites, emails, advertisements, social promotions, and other programs to allow such choices – bearing in mind that there can be a trade-off between more choices and higher response. This means that choices should be offered strategically, only when the information gained is worth any loss in response.

Customer Data Platforms

Raab Associates has recently identified a new class of systems that helps marketers make better use of customer information. We define the Customer Data Platform as “a system that builds a consolidated marketing database and makes it available to execution systems”

The CDP enhances customer data with derived values that make it more useful. The most potentially valuable are predictive model scores that show which offers are most likely to be accepted, which content will be most appealing, expected value as a customer, likelihood of making a purchase, probable role in the buying process, and so on. These predictions can be fed to execution systems to help guide customer treatments, both improving results and ensuring consistency.

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- **classify content.** Before marketers can make decisions based on the content created or consumed by customers, they must map the content to standard categories. This mapping shows the needs addressed by the content, the user type or user role it attracts, the stage of the buying cycle it relates to, the attitudes it reveals, and similar information. Without a standard classification scheme, segmentation and decision rules cannot function efficiently. Some classification is done manually, especially for content that the company creates itself. Other classification, such as analysis of social media posts, usually relies on automation. This may range from simple keyword searches to complex, self-adjusting algorithms for text analysis.
- **react quickly.** The good news is that social and behavioral data provides immediate insight into prospect attitudes and interests. But this opportunity requires you to react immediately to take advantage. This most clearly applies to answering questions in social forums, where a competitor or ill-informed user might respond to if you don't. But it also means you have to adjust to changes in behavior patterns and in context, such as news or promotions that might change the significance of a particular behavior. Scoring systems should also reduce the value assigned to some older social and behavioral data, as buyers move into new stages and their past behaviors become less relevant.
- **include interests and influence.** One distinctive feature of social media is they provide measures of an individual's interests as well as influence: followers, reposted messages, group chats, recommendations, and so on. These measures enable marketers to further segment their prospects, to give special attention to the most influential contacts, and too group contacts with similar interests. Decision rules and scoring systems can use interests and influence as inputs.
- **present to Sales.** Social and behavioral data is inherently complex. Automated systems can deal directly with complexity, but human beings need something simple enough to comprehend at a glance. Sales people in particular can benefit from clarifying the insights captured by social and behavioral systems, especially to guide initial conversations. One typical approach is to generate separate scores for likely value (based largely on traditional criteria such as industry and budget) and engagement intensity (based on activity level). Sales people can use these to prioritize prospects, and then drill more deeply into the details of the most promising individuals.

What Next?

So far, we've covered why social and behavioral data is important, how you might use it, and what's needed to manage it effectively. But, if you're not using this data already, where should you begin? Here are three steps:

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- Define how you'll use the data. List the most important blind spots in your current marketing information and identify which could be filled by social and behavioral data. Identify your requirements in terms of accuracy, coverage, and recency. Be specific in defining how you would use the data. What decisions would you make differently if it were available? Which programs would you change? What new content and business processes would you need? What kinds of results can you expect? The goal is to ensure you'll get value before you make a significant investment.
- Explore the data sources. Which sources, if any, can meet your requirements for data type, accuracy, coverage, and recency? What will it cost you to access their data? Remember you may need social marketing programs to gain access to social data, and your internal systems may need enhancement to capture the details you need. Also include the cost of analytics to understand the data and to map content into useable categories. Based on all this information, build a prioritized list of social and behavioral data elements to pursue.
- Deploy your data management processes. Many marketers start with a pilot program that assembles data manually and proves its value. But if that's a success, you'll need more formal processes to manage the data continuously. This will include plans for updates, quality control, and change management as the sources themselves evolve.

The process doesn't end with the third step. You'll want to continually measure the value of your existing social and behavioral data, add new marketing programs to use it better, improve your processing methods, and expand the scope of data you gather. The more experience you get, the more new opportunities you'll uncover.

Summary

Today's B2B marketers face unprecedented challenges but also have unprecedented resources to meet them. Social and behavioral data can provide critical insights into prospects and customers, enabling marketers to segment them effectively and provide each group with appropriate, relevant communications. Although the range of opportunities can be overwhelming, it's possible to start with a small set of elements, provide their value, and then expand incrementally.

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About Raab Associates Inc.

Raab Associates Inc. is a consultancy specializing in marketing technology and analytics. Typical engagements include business needs assessment, technology audits, vendor selection, results analysis, and dashboard development. The company also consults with industry vendors on products and marketing strategy. It publishes the B2B Marketing Automation Vendor Selection Tool (VEST), the industry's most comprehensive independent guide to B2B marketing automation systems.

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