

Special Report

\$29.50

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?



**By Tom McCauley, P.E.
Copywriter/Consultant
107 Gale Avenue
River Forest, IL 60305
Tel 224-636-7713
tom@thetommcauley.com**

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

Copyright © 2010 – All rights reserved

What do Engineers Respond to in B2B Marketing Materials?

Logic – just the facts? Or, emotion – benefits? Or, a combination of both? To find out read on. But first let's look at the different types of marketing businesses engage in.

Marketing Categories

As you know, there are three major marketing categories:

- Business to Consumer or B2C
- Business to Business or B2B
- Business to Government or B2G

Or, if you consider the government to be a business, there are two categories, B2C and B2B.

B2C Selling/Buying

B2C is what we all experience on TV, while driving on the highway, in magazines and newspapers, junk mail, pop-up pitches and sponsored ads on the internet, and telemarketers. Businesses trying to sell products and services to the consuming public. Generally these are “want” rather than “need” products or services.

We could survive quite well without them. But we want them for various reasons – prestige, fun, self improvement, physical fitness, travel, health, personal appearances or because our partners or kids want them. How do the businesses get us to buy these products or services?

They use various techniques that are reasonably effective since most of these businesses seem to be able to survive and thrive. Since most of these products or services are impulse purchases or emotionally driven purchases, the businesses spend a lot of time telling or showing us the benefits that we will experience by making the purchase. And they finish up by telling us how smart we were to do so. So B2C is impulse, and emotionally driven marketing to irrational consumers.

B2B Selling/Buying

Unlike B2C purchases B2B purchases are “need” type purchases. And common wisdom says that B2B buying is completely different from B2C, particularly, when the product or service is technical and the potential customer is an engineer or scientist. Fact based not emotional. We are asked to picture the steely eyed, caricature engineer with a buzz cut, white socks, black pants and shoes, pen filled pocket protector, calculator in hand reviewing the bids in response to his Specification or Request for Proposal.

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

He looks at the data (just the facts ma'm), not the benefits the engineer or his company will get by purchasing the product, and makes his decision purely on which product best meets his specified needs and he buys that product. Simple and scientific. And now, with the internet he does not even have to leave his desk or meet face-to face with anyone. Efficient and cost effective? No emotion, no indecision. Yes!

So where does this leave you as a marketer? How do you persuade the engineer to consider and buy your product if everything is so coldly systematic? Since the engineer can find the type of product he needs on the internet, download the data from the various vendors into a spreadsheet, compare it with his specified parameters (possibly automatically, if he is a slick programmer), factor in price and shoot off an e-mail to the winning vendor in a matter of minutes, why bother marketing?

This is the way people thought the internet would change the world of B2B product purchasing. And, for commodities, it is often accurate. But, generally, the B2B purchasing process is far more complicated.

In the words of Bob Bly, in his e-book *The Business-to-Business Marketing Handbook*, "I am unaware of any authoritative study on whether business-to-business marketing (and marketing to hybrid markets that exhibit some B2B characteristics) works better when it is reduced to the bare essential facts or written on a personal and emotional level." He goes on to say, "So, the answer to the question, "Are B2B prospects devoid of emotion?" is decidedly "no." On the contrary, and despite what they themselves may say, much of B2B buying is motivated by emotional reasons rather than logical facts."

People are still people and people are notoriously illogical and irrational. To say that there is no emotion in B2B buying behavior is to refute human behavior. However, as Thomas Mann says, "people's behavior makes sense if you think about it in terms of their, goals, needs and motives." Your job as a marketer, then, is to discover what people's goals, needs and motives are in the buying process. Once you know these, you may be able to influence them, given all other factors being equal or at least comparable. But first you need to understand the risks and rewards involved and the mitigation measures the parties involved in the buying process use to minimize risk and maximize reward.

Risk Levels

As stated by Gord Hotchkiss in the book, *The BuyerSphere Project*, the first thing you need to recognize is that risk aversion on the part of the buyer is a key factor in the B2B purchasing decision. As he puts it, "99% of B2B buying is about covering your butt." Hotchkiss' conclusions in this book are based on a three year study of the buying process and interviews with hundreds of B2B buyers.

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

To begin we need to look at the different degrees of risk involved in the purchasing decision. For simplicity let's review the three categories Hotchkiss used in his book, namely,

- Repeat Purchases
- Repeat Modified
- Blank Slate

Repeat Purchases might be items such as pens and paper. Buyers of these products usually use the same source each time unless some vendor can show them a significant advantage for them and their companies for changing. If not purchased online, they will be purchased locally for convenience in delivery. These products are strictly commodities and price or speed of delivery are what's important. The risk is minimal and the buyer is usually someone very low on the company totem pole unless the quantities are enormous.

Repeat Modified purchases are items like fax machines, phones, computers and other things that wear out or become obsolete. These products are bought repeatedly over time but as the vendor, service and technology mix changes, some analysis and product and price comparison are required. The risk is moderate to high for these purchases particularly if the quantities are large. A fairly senior person in the company, such as an office manager, would be responsible for these types of purchases.

Blank Slate purchases are usually one-of-a-kind items with which the company has little or no experience and they are expensive. Examples would be a new building, a new accounting system software package or a new type of manufacturing process. These are the riskiest purchases and usually top management will be involved directly or in the background.

Buying Process – Parties Involved

In each of these categories there are two parties involved; a User and a Buyer. The User is the person that will use the product and may have initiated the purchase. The User may need the product (such as an electric motor) as part of a piece of equipment that the company is marketing or as part of the company's facility (a power transformer) or for a client. Thus, the User will benefit from the purchase of the product. The Buyer is the person that enters the buying process somewhere along the way and negotiates with the vendor and signs off on the purchase order. For low cost, low risk items the User and the Buyer may be the same person.

As the price of the item increase and the risk increases the Buyer becomes the ultimate decision maker with input from the User. Also, as the risk and price increase, the number of Buyers may increase and expand upwards through the organization to the point that, even though there is a purchasing department, the CEO may be the one to make the decision.

Most organizations deliberately place the ultimate buying decision in the hands of the Buyer rather than the User. Users can become infatuated with the technology and the product and may

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

lose objectivity (emotion and irrationality) in the eyes of management. The User will still be called upon by the Buyer to ensure that the products offered by the vendors meet the company's needs but the Buyer will make the final decision.

This means, as the buying process evolves, at some point there will be handoff from the User to the Buyer. This can change the dynamics of the B2B buying process significantly to the surprise of the vendor and possibly the User. A prospect (User) that seemed like a sure thing, now becomes very questionable. To understand how this happens we need to understand the individual and company risk/reward motivators of the User and the Buyer, particularly, the risk mitigation measures they take in the buying process.

User Reward and Risk Mitigation

The User needs to solve a technical problem. The User likes this kind of challenge. That's why he became an engineer or technician. His reward for success is personal satisfaction and looking good to his colleagues in the company and making the company more competitive or cutting edge in the market place.

His risk is that if this product does not perform as he hopes, it will hurt him in the company, perhaps get him fired, and make his company look bad in its industry. To ensure his reward and minimize the risk, the User will often tend to go with the tried and true product from a market leader. The User is not overly concerned with cost so long as it falls within the project budget.

But the User does many other things to mitigate his risk, particularly, if he is not going with a known product from a market leader:

- He uses the company's list of approved vendors. Created to protect the company from incompetent or financially shaky vendors.
- Talks to vendor representatives with whom he has good relationships and trusts (vendor rep gave him some good advice previously that saved him from making a big mistake).
- Talks to colleagues that may have dealt with the selected vendors for the subject product or other products
- Reads trade journal to learn more about the product and possible alternatives
- Frequents internet chat rooms to tap into industry knowledge
- Reviews vendor web sites to compare what each vendor claims as features and benefits
- Reads white papers prepared by the vendors to learn more about the product class and why this vendor believes that his product is the best solution
- Reads case studies to learn how others have successfully used the product to solve their problems.

Buyer Reward and Risk Mitigation

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

The Buyer also tries to maximize his rewards. His rewards are job satisfaction in spending the company's money wisely and moving up in the company because of doing so. His risk is the loss of reputation, and possibly his job, because of buying from a vendor that does not perform or is too expensive. The Buyer will also tend to go with the market leader assuming that the costs are comparable on the principle that "Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM." So what does the buyer do to mitigate his risk?

- He uses the company list of acceptable vendors to limit vendors to those considered by the company to be reliable, high quality and trustworthy vendors
- He has the User write a technical specification describing the required performance of the product.
- He has the User review the proposals submitted by the vendors to check that they do comply with the specification.
- He insists on at least three or more bidders.
- He talks to the vendors
- He performs a financial analysis on the vendors selected by the User to ensure that they are financially sound.
- He reviews their histories to assure that they will continue in business.
- He talks to his colleagues about their experience with the vendors and about the level of service and timeliness of service provided by the leading vendors.
- He does internet searches to find any complaints about the company.
- He reviews their warranties and any experience his company or others have had with the vendor's performance to their warranties.
- He contacts colleagues about the level of service and timeliness of service provided by the leading vendors.
- He reviews the pricing submitted by the vendors and negotiates with them to get the best deal possible for the company.

So both the User and the Buyer take risk mitigation measures to minimize their personal risks and the risks for their company. And because there is personal risk involved there is emotion involved and all of the actions that accompany protecting oneself from exposure to risk. And the very risk mitigation measures that the User and Buyer use may themselves introduce emotionality and irrationality into the buying process. Let's take a look at some of the risk mitigation measures and how they may influence the buying process:

Company list of acceptable vendors for a product. This list is usually based on a combination of technical and business factors. How was it created? It was created by company personnel based on their experiences with the vendors of the product, in many cases, on their subjective opinion of the vendors. This opinion may have been formed based on a good experience with a representative from that vendor, a trusting relationship developed with the vendor or an exceptionally good product. So vendor approval often depends on a number of personal

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

decisions, each involving some degree of intuition and gut instinct or emotionality and irrationality. Once this vendor is placed on the list it may be difficult to remove it.

Colleagues' technical recommendations are definitely subjective and may be based on their opinions of the vendor's product, the technology used, the product performance, etc. (they have a favorite vendor for that product), a good or bad experience they had with a vendor's representative (they weren't invited to the vendor's annual golf roundup, for instance).

Internet search yields results that are subjective. The information is obtained from vendor sites (definitely subjective) or from other sources whose objectivity may be questionable. Engineers who had bad experiences with the vendor vent. Engineers who had good experience with the vendor rave.

Therefore, the risk mitigation measures used by both the User and the Buyer are not devoid of emotion and irrationality.

Marketing to Engineers

The BuyerSphere research on how businesses buy from businesses showed that word of mouth (both vendors and colleagues) and on line research are critical buying influences. What does this tell us about marketing to engineers, technicians or scientists? They like to find vendors through their own research and they use sources that may not be totally objective.

Bob Bly in his article, *Six Things I Know For Sure About Marketing to Engineers*, says, "Engineers want to believe they are not influenced by ad copy and that they make their decisions based on technical facts that are beyond a copywriter's understanding. Let them believe it – as long as they respond to our ads and buy our products." However, he goes on to say, "Engineers respond well to communications (print or web sites) that address them as knowledgeable, technical professionals in search of solutions to engineering problems." In other words, explain "What's In It For Me." (the WIIFM factor).

The advent of the internet as a marketing medium has led a lot of marketers to believe that the human factor is less important in the buying process than it used to be prior to the internet. At that time sales reps called on engineers to establish relationships. They provided the engineers with information about their products and made presentations so that when the engineer was faced with making a decision about a product the sales rep carried, the engineer would select the sales reps product. This process was based on the reciprocity principle or the Golden Rule. When you do something for someone they feel obligated to return the favor. It worked very well and continues to work well on line if used properly.

The Trust Factor

The earlier sales rep engineer-relationship was based on trust (regular meetings to establish familiarity and friendship), expertise and prompt response to inquiries. These factors are still

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

crucial in marketing to engineers. And the companies that still use sales reps may have an advantage since that is becoming rarer as time goes by. People (even engineers) like to deal with people when they are buying something (I'm an engineer, so I should know). For expensive purchases, all companies still use physical sales personnel.

If you do not want to use physical sales reps, what can you do to establish the trust needed to facilitate a purchase? In other words, how can you use print media and the internet to establish a bond of trust with an engineer – perhaps not to the same degree as previously but approaching that? Both off line and online, what sells your product more than anything else is media content – the words. Engineers do not like flashy websites or hyped up copy. They do want to know the features and specification as well as the benefits of your product or service. But you do need to address the WIIFM factor in your article or ad title to get the engineer to read your content.

You need to offer the engineer something of value that will increase his expertise in the product area. Typically, this would be a white paper, special report or a free webinar. But neither the white paper nor the webinar can be teasers. They must provide real value. Otherwise, they will turn the engineer off. Case studies are very powerful because, like testimonials, they are third party validation of your product or service and they also provide the engineer with a reference that he can contact for hands-on information.

Offer the engineer a buyer's guide identifying the steps that he needs to take to make a decision. This could be a stand-alone guide or part of a white paper. This will be of lasting value and can be used by the engineer or shared with colleagues whenever the company needs to purchase your type of product.

Learn to Speak the Natives' Language

You need to speak the engineer's language; use the jargon of the industry. Engineering, like most professions, has its own specialized dictionary. Your use of it tells the engineer that you are one of them or at least understand their culture and language. This will create a bond and start a relationship.

Besides the spoken language engineering has a visual language consisting of graphs, tables, diagrams, engineering drawings, mathematical symbols and equations. Engineers are comfortable with this visual language and understand it. Your use of it tells the engineer that this is serious, reliable information and not just advertising hype and that you understand what he needs to make a decision.

Humanize Your Message

Everybody likes a story – even engineers. Including a story in your marketing materials about some engineer's use of your product to solve his problem is an effective way to involve the user and possibly the Buyer. If, in addition, you include a picture of your engineer or, better still, the

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

User telling the story, it is even more effective. People like to put a face with the words – that’s why it’s called Facebook.

B2B copywriter Ken Norkin, quoted in Bob Bly’s (www.bly.com) e-book, *The Business-to-Business Marketing Handbook*, says, “Because business customers are persons, communications to them should try to connect on a personal level. That means starting out by conveying an understanding of the customer’s situation and, in particular, the problem your product is going to solve. You not only need to present the data but tell your readers what it means to them.”

It’s Not About You

In the words of David Meerman Scott, the author of *New Rules of Marketing and PR*, “No one cares about your product except you.” Most marketing materials, ads and brochures are completely self-serving. What a company wants to say about itself and its products takes precedence over what the customer wants to know to solve his problem. Don’t do that. Address the engineer’s problem and then suggest how your product combined with his professional skills will solve his problem. Now you’re his helper - not some salesman who is just chasing a commission check.

Why You? The WIIFM Factor

Unless you have a very unique product or service, there will be many similar products and services screaming for the engineer’s attention. His biggest WIIFM questions are:

- Why you?
- How can you solve my problem?

You need to identify one or more benefits/features about your product or service that sets you apart from your competitors in the solution of the problem that the product is designed to address. . If all of the benefits/features are similar, because they are required by national standards, you need to explain how your implementation of one of the key benefit/feature is different from the competitor’s and why it is superior. You can’t just be a “me too” vendor and hope to thrive. Also, keep in mind that promises of high quality, good service, fair prices and professional workmanship do not impress engineers. Those things are a given as far as they are concerned.

Follow Up on Inquiry

Unless you are selling a commodity item, your ad directed at the engineer is to solicit an inquiry. Once you have an inquiry you must provide the engineer with an information package that addresses his problem, answers all of his questions and also addresses the commercial aspect of the transactions such as Terms and Conditions, warranties, references both technical and commercial, etc. The engineer will give this commercial information to the Buyer at or before the point the Buyer enters the picture. In this follow-up process you must now continue to sell

B2B Marketing to Engineers – Use Logic or Emotion? Or Both?

the User and start to sell the Buyer by anticipating as many of the Buyer's questions as possible. E-mail is ideal for this.

The Enquiro BuyerSphere Project found that e-mail was by far the preferred communication method of B2B buyers. This is great because, during the follow up phase, it allows you to send the Users and Buyers a lot of information quickly and inexpensively. It also allows you to easily keep in touch with Users and Buyers during the buying process.

Conclusion

B2B marketing is not the same as B2C marketing but they do share some common factors. People are involved in both cases. And people are emotional and irrational. The Users and Buyers are looking for some type of reward and both are taking actions that may or may not be rational to avoid or minimize risk. And the natives like it when you speak their language and use their symbols.

So, your B2B marketing materials need to address the people, their problems and the facts about your product that will help them solve their problem their way and do so in their language using their symbols. It's all about them not you.

References

1. *The Business-to-Business Marketing Handbook*, e-book by Bob Bly (www.bly.com)
2. *The BuyerSphere Project*, e-book by Gord Hotchkiss (www.enquiro.com/b2bresearch)
3. *New Rules of Marketing and PR* by David Meerman Scott, John Wiley & Sons 2007

About the Author

Tom McCauley is a freelance writer specializing in copy for B2B marketing in the electrical power industry. Tom draws on his extensive experience as an electrical power consulting engineer to write copy that speaks the language and uses the symbols of engineers. His website is www.thetommcauley.com

Tel 224-636-7713

Tom@thetommcauley.com

Fax 708-234-7313

Tom McCauley, 107 Gale Avenue, River forest, Illinois 60305