

TALK HUMAN TO ME



WELCOME TO THE
“NEW NORMAL”
FOR B2B STORYTELLING

ALLISON+
PARTNERS

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In the marketing world, it's commonly said brands must innovate or die. If that wasn't true before, it certainly is now.

As COVID-19 spread around the world and forced economies to lock down, it became clear only businesses able to quickly adapt to and reflect our changing reality would avoid being left behind. As businesses have been forced to evolve their processes, team communications and organisational structures on a practical level, they have also had to honestly question their contributions to society and how they can help customers through an unsettling time. They have had to make decisions about suppliers and distribution based on the heart, as well as the head.

ONCE UPON A TIME, B2B BUSINESSES COULD BUILD THEIR BRANDS AND GENERATE LEADS BY SIMPLY CREATING A LOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR WHY THEIR PRODUCTS WERE THE RIGHT SOLUTIONS FOR A PROBLEM. WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED, END OF CONVERSATION.

For decades, this approach has been effective, but marketers now recognise an evolution is needed. Many of the world's most iconic consumer brands have built huge, loyal followings based on emotive, empowering language. "Just Do It." "Think Different." "Because You're Worth It." As empathy, trust and care become increasingly vital brand currencies, more B2B brands follow suit and look to talk more "human".



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TALKING HUMAN?

Our definition is:

"Brand storytelling that uses and appeals to human emotion and empathy, as opposed to purely focusing on the practical application of the product or service".

It views B2B marketing as a conversation between humans on both an emotional and rational level, not as between two faceless businesses. It recognises people buy from people and puts this concept at the heart of brand messaging.

To explore this journey and how effectively B2B marketers currently speak human, Allison+Partners surveyed 400 B2B marketing decision makers in Europe (200 in the UK and 200 in Germany) to examine how this shift is evolving. On the pages that follow, we offer insights on how your brand can humanise its communications and share implications for marketers on how to move forward.

THE STATE OF PLAY



As it turns out, there's a big appetite across B2B brands to evolve to human storytelling. The marketers we surveyed recognised it as far more than just the trendy new way to do marketing; it's vital for business success. Amongst our decision makers, 58% believe humanising their brand will lead to higher sales, while 55% would expect to see more engaged customers and 55% expect increased customer retention.

Yet for the majority, it is a work in progress with numerous barriers. We found that 97% of respondents believe it's important to humanise their brand, yet only 26% say they have managed to do so already. Another 65% say that while they see the importance of talking human, talking human or are considering it for their brand, they have either struggled to do it or don't know where to start.

The most common challenges marketers have when humanising their brand:



47% **UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF DIFFERENT CUSTOMER AUDIENCES**

45% **CREATING CONTENT IN THE RIGHT TONE OR LANGUAGE**

44% **DEVELOPING NEW MESSAGING FOR THIS CHANGE**

These challenges have never been more relevant than in 2020. Every customer has been affected differently by this year's events. Striking the right tone to suit multiple experiences and views while balancing severity and optimism, is an evolving challenge.

B2B brands know their goal here, but struggle to find the right path forward.

“Never has it been more important for organisations to “humanise” their brands. It’s not ‘stuff’ that’s important, it’s people, human connections, how we feel, food, social lives, security, home, mental and physical health. Any good marketer will be listening very hard to tap into what motivates its customers during this time of extreme change and uncertainty.”

“An obstacle is being able to truly mean it. Really good marketers won’t start work on humanising the brand unless they know that the organisation can back it in a genuine, tangible way. If you can’t market from an honest place, it will be seen very quickly and cause future damage.”

JO RICHARDSON

Director of Corporate Communications,
Pegasystems

WANT TO TALK HUMAN?

START BY TALKING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE



The first step? B2B businesses need to put their customers at the centre of their efforts. What motivates them? What concerns them?

Almost half (45%) of B2B marketing decision makers have not conducted primary research focused on their customers' needs and challenges in the last 12 months.

IT'S PERHAPS NO WONDER THEN THAT 35% SAY THEY STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR CUSTOMERS' JOURNEY FROM AWARENESS THROUGH TO PURCHASE.

Many marketers look at how to improve conversation and engagement through the sales funnel. But if you haven't pinpointed the key drivers and barriers to adoption for your audience, how can you speak to these in a meaningful way? Brands need to have a conversation with their customers, and a conversation is pretty one-sided if you don't listen to the other participant.

Meanwhile, more than a third (36%) of marketers say it's important to tailor communications to specific stakeholders, showing how their products and services might relate to their role. However, more than half (57%) have not yet created personas or audience segments for targeted campaigns, whether from primary or secondary research. Marketers know they need to tailor their messages, but they haven't mapped out who to tailor them for and what their key needs are at each stage in the purchase funnel.

There's a clear disconnect between what marketers know they need (in terms of data) to be able to connect with customers' needs and emotions and what they feel they're able to get their hands on.

While cost is often considered a prohibitive factor when it comes to primary research, it's worth considering other avenues to connect with your customers and their challenges.

Polling customers on social channels or using Google Polls can provide more up-to-the-minute insights. If you want something quick yet more substantial, Pulse surveys can help you understand the temperature of your audience and how their motivations, perceptions or concerns change over time. Even insights from as little as six months ago will have been affected by recent events, so taking advantage of these tools is crucial when it comes to shaping your messaging and tone. The customer voice should trump the marketing voice every time.

There's also plenty of secondary research that brands should tap into. Sources, such as Statista or Informa, can quickly provide the latest facts and figures on your industry and the wider consumer trends your customers will likely have an eye on.

As we all spend more time online, now is the perfect opportunity to directly ask your customers what they want to hear from you. The data is available, you just need to know where to look.

"Humanising the brand is critical to modern marketing. We're investing a lot to develop customised content with the right message to the right people."

"Of course, to be as impactful as possible we must invest time in listening to our customers and understanding their behaviour to be credible and establish a trusting relationship."

MONICA BERNABEI

Head of Cloud & Software Marketing, Europe, Tech Data

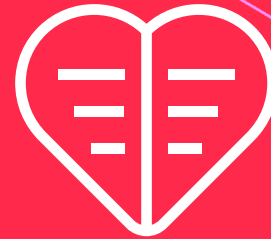
IS THERE A LOGICAL WAY TO **CREATE EMOTION?**



When setting apart a human business from a faceless one, our decision-makers understand emotional arguments are just as important as logical ones when it comes to purchase.

IN OUR SURVEY, 42% OF B2B BRANDS SAID HAVING MORE EMOTIONAL MESSAGING EMBEDDED IN THE BRAND STORY IS VITAL FOR HUMANISING THEIR BRAND.

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However, emotional storytelling can be a challenge to master if you don't understand your customers' current motivating behaviours.

Outside of marketing, look to the famous 'lost wallet' experiment run by Professor Richard Wiseman. The experiment featured a wallet left on the street to discover if people were more likely to return the wallet if it featured a picture of the owner. The results were conclusive – people are more likely to return the wallet if they see a real human face attached to it.

Putting a face to your brand is the equivalent of the photo in the wallet; it is vital. LinkedIn recently reported that the most successful brands are those who use video on their platform and feature people at all levels in interviews and panels.

Using real employee and executive stories is a simple way to inject human storytelling into content and bring your company's ethos to life. If the voices of your company are vibrant, talkative, engaging and, most importantly, visible, customers have people to share commonalities and pain points with.



'I don't necessarily believe in the B2B versus B2C approach. B2B creative doesn't need to play to the well-worn visual tropes of the corporate world—we're all human beings with emotions, after all.'

RIK MORAN

Creative Director, Dow Jones

IT'S TIME TO TALK

49%

SAY SOCIAL MEDIA
MARKETING IS THE MOST
IMPORTANT TOUCHPOINT
FOR DRIVING LEAD
GENERATION



The shift towards human storytelling is further reflected in the channels our B2B marketers prioritise to build their brands and generate leads. Social media marketing is no longer just a tool for reaching consumers; it came out on top in our survey as the most important tool for driving brand awareness and lead generation amongst B2B business leaders.

That's right, social media marketing is now seen as a more important tool than SEO, display advertising or content marketing.

When looking at which platforms are considered more important now than five years ago for lead generation, marketers cited social media marketing (86% thought more important now than in 2015), SEO (81%) and content marketing (73%). These all reflect the importance of conversation, whether literal conversation through social media or adapting written style to more accurately answer search queries conversationally through SEO.

Meanwhile, email marketing is considered on the decline for lead generation: 51% say email marketing is either much less or slightly less important than it was five years ago. GDPR regulations have certainly made their mark, and many databases are a shadow of their former selves. Marketers have taken advantage of conversational content and social media marketing touchpoints, such as videos, webinars and polls, as they offer much more opportunity than email to spark two-way dialogue and discussion.

Humans endorsing products and services for other humans is a continuing trend: word-of-mouth influences 91% of B2B purchases. Here we have a key factor in decision-making that brands ignore at their peril. Reaching key opinion leaders and turning them into advocates both on- and offline has become an ever more valuable B2B tactic.

Our research found 71% of decision makers say influencer marketing is more important than it was five years ago for brand building.



This is a crucial area for human communication to come into play. But brands must proceed carefully, as an inauthentic, commercially motivated partnership with an influencer can backfire. As key criteria, your company voice must marry up with that of your influencers' to be able to connect with your product or service on a human level. When it comes to influencer identification, it is important to employ a set of standards, such as scoring parameters.

For example, our Influencer Impact scoring methodology uses a $[\text{Reach} + \text{Authenticity}] \times \text{Power}$ equation to identify the influencers who will have the most impact for a campaign. Importantly, in the B2B space it's not just a numbers game, but it is about the authentic engagement and influence they have with your existing and potential customers.

So, what does all this mean for your next marketing plan? Importantly, content and tone of voice need to evolve. Professionals swiping through news sites or LinkedIn on their lunch hour or as the last thing before bed are in a very different mindset from when they check their work emails at a desk. B2B brands must understand this and think about how different messages will resonate based on the touchpoint.

HOW TO START TALKING HUMAN



IMPLICATIONS
FOR MARKETERS



WHAT STEPS CAN YOU AND YOUR BUSINESS TAKE?

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Understand your audience and craft authentic messages that will resonate. Fortunately, there are more ways than ever for businesses to communicate with their audiences online, such as polls, social media, webinars and online panels. Make sure you are clear on your target audience and take the time to map their pain points and needs at each stage of the buying cycle. This is crucial to be able to develop content that strikes the right emotional and rational tone. Keep your data and insights updated to make better-informed content and messaging decisions.

2. INVEST IN THE STORY

Invest in the story. Switching from 'tech and spec' to emotional connection takes work. One of the top challenges our respondents faced when marketing their brands was communicating differentiation from competitors (40%), so finding the 'white space' in your market is vital. Take the time to run storytelling workshops with key team members from across the business to ensure the brand story is built from the ground up. Introduce a diverse group with different backgrounds, skill sets and roles to ensure the end result is a creative narrative that resonates widely and evokes the emotion you aim for.

3. ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to content won't wash. While your overarching brand story and messaging must often need to work across different target audiences, your content pieces shouldn't be a 'catch-all'. The story that will spark emotion in a C-suite decision maker will tie into what keeps them up at night: saving their business money and driving growth. Whereas a head of IT's emotional triggers will be linked to ease of roll out, adoption and the happiness and efficiency of teams. Spend time on content strategy and channel planning to ensure the best return on investment.

4. FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Find the right people to inject humanity into your brand. For your spokespeople, think less about their CV and more about their stories - the things people wouldn't expect. How has a chance human connection made them see things differently, or how did an unplanned meeting lead them down a whole new career path? Great teamwork is often based on the nuggets of information you share in small talk when making your morning coffee. To be an extension of the team for your customers, this is a valuable first step.

5. CLOSE THE LOOP WITH DATA

Close the loop with data. Take quick Pulse surveys regularly and when major events take place to see what your audience thinks. Hedge small bets with paid campaigns to test different visuals and storylines to see what works and optimise it. Test your messaging and content with people from other teams. Or even better, hunt for friends of friends or family members who fit within your target persona group. Dedicated measurement and analytics are vital to understand your customers, how to create content on a more human level and evolve it as time goes on.

CONCLUSION

B2B marketing has never been more complex and interesting. The line between B2B and B2C communications is increasingly blurred as we all likewise blur the lines between our professional and personal lives.

Meanwhile, the way people view and interact with the world around them changes more quickly than ever before. The way your audiences view you and your industry are probably not the same as they were 12 months ago. They definitely won't be the same in another 12 months' time.

SPEAKING HUMAN IS AN IMPORTANT STEP TO THE TRANSITION. GET IT RIGHT, AND YOU'LL STAND OUT IN THE MARKET AND BE A BRAND YOUR CUSTOMERS DON'T JUST NEED TO USE, BUT ONE THEY ARE PASSIONATE ADVOCATES FOR AND PROUD TO BE ALIGNED WITH.

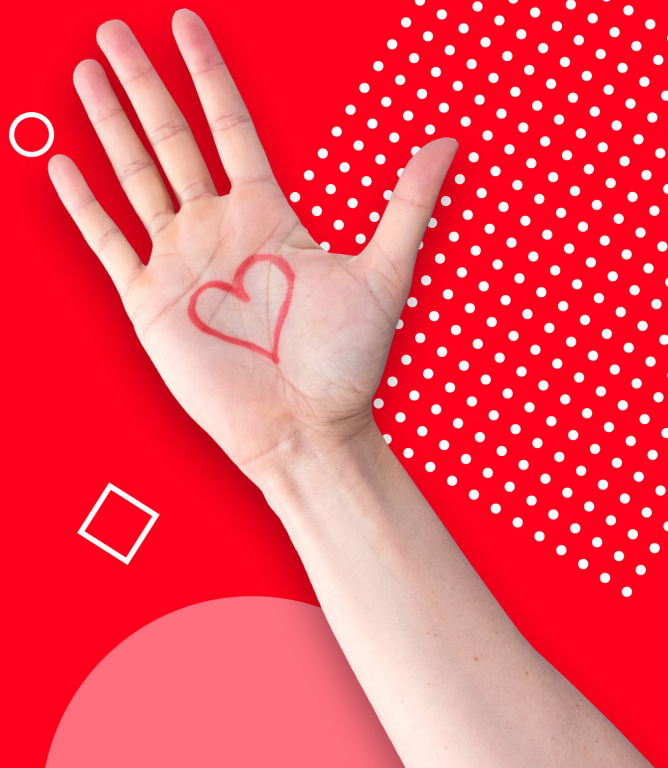


STUDY METHODOLOGY

Allison+Partners' survey was conducted in collaboration with Censuswide, a British research and polling company. Data was collected from 400 CMOs working in B2B companies with a revenue of \$50M+ in the UK and Germany (February 2020).

REFERENCES

- + [whos-doing-it-well](#)
- + [word-of-mouth](#)



IF YOU'D LIKE TO
TALK TO US ABOUT
TALKING “HUMAN”,
WE'D LOVE TO HEAR
FROM YOU.

Whether it's research and strategy to find your brand's "white space", storytelling and messaging development, content creation, channel planning or measurement and analytics, we're here to help.

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