Interview with Tony Uphoff: Digital Marketing for B2B Manufacturing Industry

Most of my clients are from B2B industrial manufacturing. I have many challenges with this industry because my clients' products and services are very specific, niche websites.

I have developed new B2B SEO and PPC strategies in my everyday hands-on experience by managing multiple projects. In addition, there is another challenge that the industry is facing, the adaption to digital transformation.

I decided to talk about B2B with Tony Uphoff, the CEO of Thomas. Thomas is a leading resource for product sourcing and supplier selection. Tony is the video host of the popular, "Thomas Index Report" on industrial

sourcing trends, and he is a regular Forbes.com contributor who writes about the industrial marketplace.

I was curious to know what Tony thinks about the challenges that B2B manufacturing companies are facing when adapting to digital transformation and data-driven culture. I know that my fellow B2B marketers who are dealing with the same challenges will find a lot of value for themselves as well as B2B manufacturer business owners. We also spoke about SEO, KPIs, and lead generation in B2B. Here is my interview with Tony.

Whitepaper

Karina: How do manufacturing and B2B advertising differ from wholesale and B2C advertising?

Tony: There are some key differences, but also some similarities that many people overlook. One difference is that B2B purchasing often involves a longer sales cycle. Buying a piece of capital equipment or choosing a new supplier is not something to be taken lightly. A lot of research and vetting goes into the process as there is a material risk for the buyer, both, personally and professionally.

Another key difference is that B2B buyers aren’t typically completing a one-off purchase. They’re looking to find a supplier they can partner with for the long-term. As for the similarities, a B2B purchase is more personal for the buyer than many people understand. While B2C purchases are often very personal, consumers identify with certain brands that they want to be associated with. But with B2B, purchases are often personal similarly because the buyer that makes the decision on the purchase has a lot on the line.

Karina: Manufacturers have long relied on trade shows and other physical events for marketing and sales. Do you see this trend changing?

Tony: Yes. Many businesses understand that the digital transformation of industrial marketing and sales is here to stay, and they're trending away from traditional methods such as trade shows and word-of-mouth exposure. There are still several well-attended mega-trade shows, as well as smaller ones, hosted every year, but we're seeing that those types of events are typically taking up a smaller percentage of the marketing and sales budgets of the customers we work with.

Karina: Are U.S. manufacturers finding a greater need to make their marketing more data-driven?

Tony: Yes, because the buyer is in control of the sales process in today's industrial world. Today's buyers have unprecedented levels of information at their fingertips. Buyers are as much as 70 percent of the way through their buying process before they engage with a sales rep. This is a massive shift in the way businesses need to reach, engage and sell to industrial buyers thanks to the digital transformation of marketing and sales. Companies that still rely on old-school marketing tactics to try to drive growth and retain customers are going to find it increasingly difficult to stay relevant in today's market.

Karina: How long do you think will it take for B2B to fully adapt to data-driven, analytics, and digital marketing?

Tony: The industry is still in the early stages of the digital

transformation of marketing and sales. While we're seeing a good number of businesses that are aggressively and enthusiastically embracing the transformation, we are also seeing a significant number of businesses that have yet to make a real commitment to a digital strategy. It may be a generational challenge as these incredibly successful industrial and manufacturing businesses were built and grown by Baby Boomers whose expertise is in engineering, product design, and manufacturing. Nearly half of the users of Thomasnet.com are millennial buyers who are helping to accelerate the digital transformation.

Karina: The industrial manufacturer's market is very niche and faces big challenges in content marketing due to specialization and sometimes very low search volume results. How can content marketers take advantage of this?

Tony: For our customers with niche markets, the niche works to their advantage simply because it's in the lower competition of their industry. From an SEO perspective, this makes it easier for them to stand out on result pages. There are a huge number of categories in manufacturing that are not at all niche. However, there's massive competition in areas such as "CNC machining" and "metal stamping". Whether in a highly competitive category or a niche category, we've learned from our customers that the pillar page strategy works well for overarching terms. Then we drive users to niche terms.

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Karina: What is the right approach for digital marketers to run successful digital campaigns for the B2B Industrial manufacturer sector?

Tony: Getting their website in order is the foundation for everything else. Is it responsive? Is it secure? Is it easy to use, comprehensive, and informative? It's also important to implement a program that reaches buyers at every phase of the industrial buying process. Understand that building brand awareness is often just as important as generating leads. In terms of strategy, it's easy to get caught up in all the tactics and solutions, but while the vehicle is important, the most important thing industrial marketers need to keep in mind is that whatever they're putting out there. It needs to resonate with a specific persona that has a specific job to do. ***Marketing and advertising content should be focused on helping your ideal customer(s) solve problems and accomplish important tasks, specific to where that buyer may be in their buying journey.***

Karina: What does the future of publishing look like?

Tony: While it's obvious that much of the publishing world is moving to digital platforms – if they haven't already – a more relevant question is "What does the future of advertising look like?". For years advertisers have relied on display networks, buying data on users and employing programmatic advertising. Not only has this proved to be quite costly and relatively ineffective, but privacy laws such as GDPR are making this approach obsolete. The trend today has publishers moving away from those broad ad-serving networks to the "walled garden"

approach. A “walled garden” approach is one in which they’re creating their own ad networks and selling advertising directly on their online assets. Interestingly, this approach mirrors the ad sales approach that publishers in the print world have used for over a century.

Karina: What KPIs should B2B businesses focus on in marketing?

Tony: Obviously, lead generation in the form of marketing qualified leads and sales qualified leads are a key KPI for digital marketing. But as I mentioned earlier, it’s important to build brand awareness as well. The reason is simple – when your sales team calls a lead that has never heard of your company, just getting that lead to continue the conversation is a challenge. When the lead is aware of your brand before the salesperson calls, that person is more likely to be receptive to the call. Other important KPIs are the cost of acquisition and average order value – and internally, businesses should also focus on RFI/RFQ response time. We’ve surveyed tens of thousands of industrial buyers, and invariably one of their pet peeves is the lack of responsiveness from suppliers to which they’ve requested information. Today, all the great marketing in the world will have little value if you aren’t following up on incoming RFIs and RFQs within a day – and preferably the same day you receive them.

Karina: How is Thomasnet.com using data and analytics to add services that bring new elements of value to their advertisers?

Tony: The first-party data generated by users on Thomasnet.com®, as well as data that is captured by buyers interacting with customer product information generated by our

Thomas Product Data Solutions and our Thomas Marketing Services, gives us incredible insights into in-market buyers of products and services. We're approaching three petabytes of buyer behavior data that helps us understand what buyers are interested in, how their purchase process works and when, where and how they're engaging with content as a part of their buying journey.

Using our free Thomas Webtrax™ platform, our customers (as well as other qualifying industrial companies) can see and use that data to turn anonymous web traffic into leads, and create more targeted, meaningful messaging when targeting those leads. We're also introducing a weekly data feed that businesses can use to determine exactly which buyers are actively in-market within a certain segment or vertical of industry. Our Thomas marketing services team also leverages the buying and sourcing trends from our data to help their customers enhance their organic and paid marketing.

Key takeaways from the interview

- Clarify the differences and similarities between B2B and B2C
- Discuss the reasons why B2B is trending away from traditional to digital marketing
- Understand how B2B marketing is adapting to digital transformation
- The importance of B2B manufacturers companies to adapt to a data-driven culture
- The challenges of content marketing in niche B2B businesses
- The steps to run successful digital marketing campaigns for B2B businesses
- The KPIs that B2B businesses should focus on

I had a great conversation with Tony where I understood better the transformation of the B2B manufacturer industry. The

industry has evolved from hard copy directories like yellow pages to an entirely data-driven culture (happening now). This is a huge opportunity for marketers to generate leads. Then, it is key to fully understand and overcome the challenges.

Note: This interview has been condensed for publishing purposes.

Karina Tama is a contributor for Forbes, Thrive Global and the El Distrito Newspaper. She can be found on Twitter .

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