



FINDING LEADS IN COVID TIMES

All those qualified leads we used to see at B2B events are still out there. You just need reach and content to smoke them out.

BY Scott Jamieson

As much as we'd gripe about the trade show and conference circuit, we now all realize the pivotal role it played in developing our B2B sales pipelines. At Annex Business Media, we attend industry events, and host our own. Their absence has affected the funnel in our own organization, as our media sales professionals also adapt to the cold world of Zoom and emails. These digital tools have taken us only so far.

So how can you drive new business in COVID times? Social media can help, especially LinkedIn. Yet LinkedIn is an increasingly expensive market, with cost-per-click (CPC) ad rates north of \$5 ranging up to \$15.

Maybe you've noticed that it's also become a busy place in the past few months, and not just for business. With home and work life now blurred, we've all been seeing more political, social

and personal commentary on LinkedIn since March. Regardless of how you view that, it means the space is noisy, and our unpaid business messages are more diluted than ever. Similarly, with unsolicited emails from unknown sources. As a c-suite target, I am inundated and numb.

>Buyers still buying

The good news is that those same buyers we all met at trade shows are still out there, albeit hiding in their dining rooms and basements. Their needs have changed and they are more discerning spenders, but for most, business and the need for solutions goes on.

Given that, there is one key way to engage your next client – with good information. In other words, focused content marketing. But not any content will do. Forget your father's



Whether you're focusing on specific niche sectors or across multiple industries, knowing your audiences' priorities and pain points is critical. Address those, not the features or selling points of your products or services.



TARGET AUDIENCE

“advertorial” or the infomercial content you see on many company websites or in the worst trade rags.

As our 50 B2B editors are discovering through their own web metrics, demand is high but information must be more relevant, reader-centric, and solutions-based than ever. Nobody cares how many bolts your new widget has, or the certification earned at your latest production facility. Ouch. But true.

What problem does your solution solve for the targeted audience? Does that audience even recognize the problem or opportunity? Why should investigating your solution or opportunity be a priority, especially

now? What other options exist, and how do they decide the best one for their business? What is the risk of making this decision, and how does the audience best mitigate that risk? As an added incentive to getting content right, consider [this research](#) that suggests 70% of internet users want to learn about a product through content.

To reach those people, that objective, industry-leading content also needs to be found. SEO is one tool to drive inbound traffic, but it takes time, skills and money. And you still need great content. That content can and should also go out over multiple mediums and channels, from long-form print

to social, video, podcasts, webinars, enews and more. Don't forget most B2B purchases now involve input from myriad team members, some you'd meet at that old trade show, some not. This will include Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, maybe even the odd Gen Z, all using their own preferred information platforms (see [this Magazines Canada research](#) on B2B buying patterns for more detail on why targeting the “team buy” is key).

This is all simple enough for B2B media brands like the 65 we publish at [Annex Business Media](#). They have built up credibility among targeted, omni-channel audiences who are very comfortable with our voice and content expertise. Such media brands have the tech stack to reach them all, all of the time. In contrast, B2B brands, especially the bulk who are small- to medium-sized businesses, have fewer options. But there are options.

>DIY content

One option is to hire seasoned B2B journalists to lead your brand voice. We've certainly lost our share of good business journalists to brand marketing teams. They of course lack the established audience and brand credibility, and in Annex's case, vast resources they enjoyed while working for media brands. We have seen some struggle with this new reality, others have done a decent job building an audience over time. Still, these pros know where to start building and the right tone and approach to establish credibility. They know what B2B audiences need.

But you'll have to invest in new headcount during a recession, knowing that the results will be years down the road. The other danger to the DIY approach to content marketing and lead nurturing is the temptation to hard sell. Content marketing and lead nurturing, whether via a B2B media brand or a



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brand marketing team, is not about selling features. It's about thought leadership. It's about educating prospects to the issues and possible opportunities. It's about sharing best practices. It's about objective content.

In short, it's what good B2B media brands have done for over 100 years. As a result, who your in-house B2B content producer reports to is as important as who you hire. It CANNOT be the sales team; even marketing is dangerous. The B2B journalist's instinct for the right voice and approach will lead you to the right place if you are willing to follow and play the long game. This is why at Annex a good number of our senior management team have editorial backgrounds. It helps protect the golden goose of credible content.

Then there's distribution. All of the best content is of little value without a targeted audience. What is the strategy to develop that reach.

A final challenge will be technical. Do these new content producers have the chops to manage the content marketing and lead nurturing process. Do they have any marketing experience, can they help build out your marketing automation systems, can they manage paid as well as earned social, can they pitch the content to B2B media brands like ours? Do they have web optimization skills to drive inbound traffic and can they convert those to leads? If not, you may be looking more at adding a team than one entrepreneurial editor, or allowing for a long learning curve.

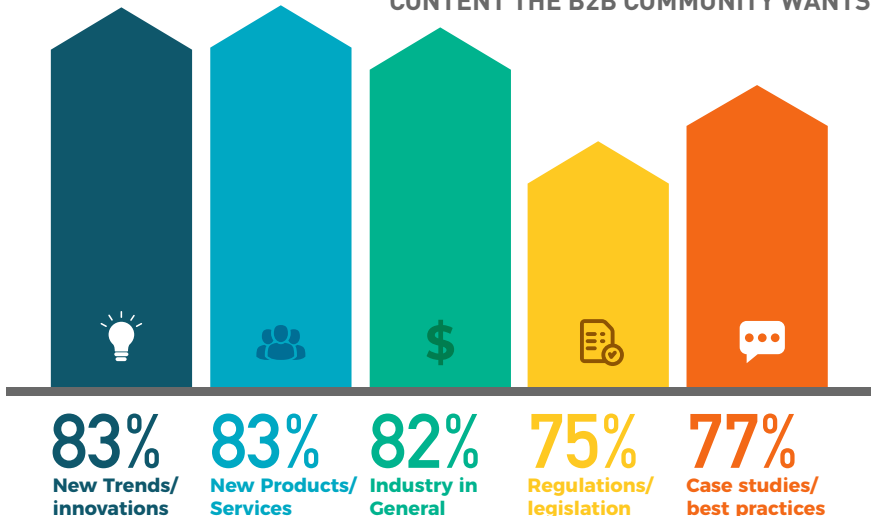
>Agency help

There are of course a reasonable number of ad agencies that specialize in B2B work and who can manage all of the above. That turn-key solution is attractive in many ways, and you are saving a ton of money on cancelled events. Like building an in-house team, it is an investment. They will not have ready-access to the targeted audience or inherent knowledge of the targeted sector. They will lack the credible voice. That all takes time and money to build.

If you go this route, be sure of a few things:

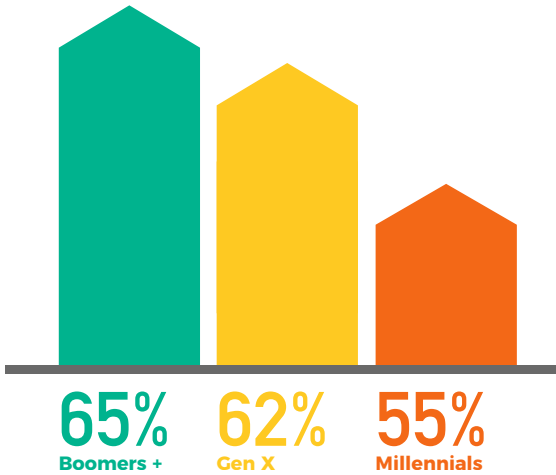
- You are dealing with a B2B focused agency. They can show you a portfolio of work for other B2B players, ideally in your sector and scale.
- They have content producers

CONTENT THE B2B COMMUNITY WANTS



A 2018 survey completed by over 7,000 Canadian B2B buyers and decision makers by RKI Insights and Magazines Canada uncovered valuable insight, like what content they prefer to consume as part of their day job. Best practices, case studies and new trends/innovations were among the top 5.

% OF EACH AGE GROUP INVOLVED IN BUYS OVER \$250K



While live events and customer lists tend to skew to the older crowd, the 2018 B2B survey uncovered that Millennials now play a key role.

with a B2B pedigree. At Annex we have a two-year training grid for a newly-hired writer to follow before they can even think of taking over our smallest brands, including dedicated mentors, monthly editorial meetings, lunch-and-learns, annual training days etc... Even then I get nervous when they assume control over a brand. How will the agency ensure similar quality control around the people responsible for your brand.

- They have good relations with the B2B media in your space. Hiring an agency who has burned too many bridges in your market puts you in a bad spot. That's just life.
- You are on the same page as far as expectations go.

It is likely the media brands in your space can recommend a few good B2B agencies, as well as suggest who to avoid. In our business just under 25% of clients use ad agencies, and far less

than half of those are focused somewhat on B2B work.

>Partnering with media brands

This option has its pros and cons as well. On the con side, it ain't free. It will never be free, at least not at my company. Then again, what of value is? So expect to open your wallet most times you want to reach this audience. That's sort of

how we keep the lights on and continue to invest in our people and tech. Credible media brands will also work with their partners on some great editorial work, which should NEVER cost money if it is being driven by the editorial staff. Still, it's a balance, and must be a win-win.

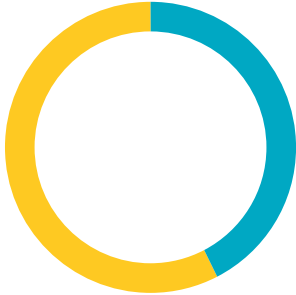
Also, you will have no control over the general content this brand produces or how it is distributed. They'll talk about your solutions if they rank and you're not too miserable to deal with. They will also talk about competitive solutions. That's where the credibility comes in. If you want the audience to take your solutions seriously, there's no way around it.

Finally, most Canadian B2B media brands focus on targeted audiences. That's great if you have well-defined targets. If you want to reach leading sawmillers in Canada, you can't go wrong with a brand like *Canadian Forest Industries*, or its competitor *Logging & Sawmilling Journal*, depending on what

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NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN PURCHASE DECISIONS

(RKI Insights 2018)



55% 3-10+ Decision makers
45% 1 or 2 Decision makers

Well over half of major purchases now involve 3 to 10 influencers, according to the same survey.

channel you're looking for. If you also want to reach pulp mill management, then you have to add *Pulp & Paper Canada*. And so on. There are broader B2B magazines that focus on things like maintenance, HR, safety, or automation across multiple sectors, but by-and-large the strength, and challenge, of B2B media is the narrow targeting.

On the flip side, larger media companies, including Annex, now have the tech to slice and dice lists to reach select audiences across multiple sectors, in print, email and online. You can target C-suite, engineers, general forest industry, manufacturing, public safety, etc. . . ., all by industry sector, geography, even content preferences.

Of course, in buying into these audiences you also get to trade on the trust they have for established B2B media brands in their sectors. In most cases, senior staff in the sectors you are targeting have been reading those trade brands for decades.

You can piggy back on that credibility and slide right into those ready-made distribution channels. Simple, and fast.

On content distribution, you don't have to wait years to build a reasonable reach. Any B2B media brand worth its salt in 2020 should be able to offer ready access to the following channels: CASL-compliant email, social (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to start), print (including hi-vis options), online (including re-targeting built off first-party data), newsletters, video, podcasts, webinars, live events (and now virtual events), research, programmatic with first-party data, roundtables, and themed content. Much of this should be able to be tied to effective lead generation and nurturing.

Many of the larger B2B media brands can now also offer tools like content creation, project management, marketing automation and lead nurturing. They have the creative services to back it all up. Some have created turn-key packages around such services that will provide you with leads of varying value. That means much fewer resources and time need to be available on your side to roll out sophisticated campaigns to drive qualified leads for your sales team. It should mean faster results and

more efficient conversions. Some will even consider performance-based pricing for the right clients, reducing the risk on your side. You only pay for what the program delivers.

In the end though, it all comes down to audience reach, sector knowledge, and credibility. The right media partner should have all three in spades.

>Right for you?

These paths are not mutually-exclusive, and which you take will depend on your scale, resources, time horizon, and target audiences. We have seen clients move back and forth through these options over the years, and we tend to play a role in all three. Today, your COVID solution to the sales prospect challenge may be different than the one you'd have chosen back in August – welcome to the club. Whatever gets you through the night.

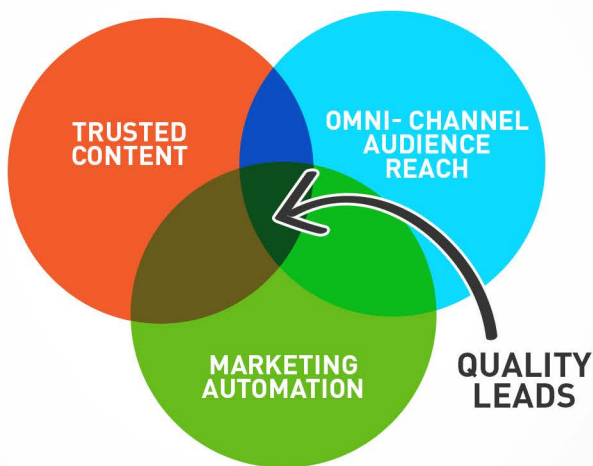
But now, more than ever, you need to re-examine your sales prospecting strategy. If you want to discuss content marketing and lead gen options further, just reach out.

Scott Jamieson is chief operating officer at Annex Business Media, Canada's largest B2B media company and – with roles spanning editorial, ownership, audience development, marketing and events – a lifetime student of all things B2B.



The strength, and challenge, of B2B media brands is focus.

LEAD DRIVER



Combine a reputation for trusted content, an omni-channel reach to qualified audiences in over 65 sectors, and the efficiency of marketing automation, and you have access to the high-quality leads your sales teams need.

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