THE NEXT GENERATION OF B2B: REACHING THE MILLENNIAL DECISION MAKERS
Digital transformation has changed the rulebook for B2B marketing. Fueled by access to a wealth of information online, buyers now are typically more than 70 percent through their decision-making process before they ever engage a sales rep.

Importantly, this digital transformation is taking place in concert with another tectonic shift in the B2B landscape – the rise of the millennial decision maker. Like the digital evolution, this transition has substantial implications for sales and marketing teams. As with any generational shift, this group of up-and-coming business leaders exhibits traits and habits unique to those before them. It’s vital for any business that wants to survive to understand those characteristics and how to cater to them.
According to Pew Research, millennials – which are commonly categorized as those born between 1981 and 1996 – became the largest generation in the U.S. workforce in 2015, surpassing 53 million workers. The eldest of this group are now entering their upper 30s and increasingly finding themselves in managerial roles.

Despite this, many sales reps still cling to the stereotypical business decision maker as a grizzled veteran with greying hair and a landline telephone. One survey found almost half of marketing and sales teams assume they’re dealing with millennial buyers or influencers less than 20 percent of the time, while one-fifth believe they deal with millennial buyers/influencers only 21-40 percent of the time.

Reality, however, is much different. Millennials are, in fact, involved in 73 percent of B2B purchasing decisions! Fully one-third of the time millennials are the sole decision maker.
Influencing, if not making, decisions

Already the largest portion of the workforce, millennials are expected to account for 44 percent of U.S. workers by 2025. Naturally, they will continue to increase their power and influence in their companies. But it isn’t just a factor of climbing the proverbial ladders. More than any generation before it, millennials exude an entrepreneurial spirit, and according to Payscale, are more than two times as likely as past generations to either start or own a company.

Another business trend is also driving millennial influence on buying decisions – the practice of group decision making. In one study, 59 percent of respondents said they now use formal buying groups or committees to review purchase decisions. Fifty-two percent of them said the number of group members is increasing. This is giving millennials additional opportunity to influence key buying decisions, even when they may not be the final authority.

An investigation by SnapApp and Heinz Marketing found the most common role for millennials in buying committees was that of researcher. This could be because they’re often perceived as the most tech
savvy in the group. It's likely also because of how much millennials tend to research all their purchases, including consumer shopping.

Businesses that don't currently involve millennials in buying decisions may have cause to rethink that strategy. At least one study determined younger teams made business decisions with more positive outcomes. The research found teams with a median age below 35 years met or exceeded expectations about two-thirds of the time. This compared to only 44 percent of the time for teams with a median age over 45.

In other words, the concept of wisdom from experience doesn't always translate to better business decisions, enticing businesses to lean even more heavily on millennial influence, input and decision making.
WHO ARE THEY?

Depictions of this generation now taking over the workforce range from highly motivated and globally concerned activist citizens to entitled whiners living in their parents' basements surrounded by a collection of participation trophies. Reality is any group that size is going to have a wide spectrum of tendencies and traits. And while both descriptions above can apply to some segment of the millennial generation, there are some basic generalizations about the group that can be helpful to understand their buying psyche, and how that is factoring into their decision making and influence at the office.
Digital Natives

Remember print catalogs and Blockbuster Video? Most millennials don’t. A major attribute of this generation is that it was raised on technology, and that technology is core to the fabric of their lives. Most millennials didn’t experience the transition from pre-internet times to today’s digital age. They’re accustomed to device in hand, meaning near-instant communication and anytime access to information. More than 80 percent of them say mobile devices are important when it comes to researching products and services.

Perhaps naturally, these digital natives appear to prefer video content. Merit’s B2B Report | Millennials noted that this group is more likely to turn to video and Facebook. Speaking of Facebook, of course social media is a major component of the millennial set, with 85 percent claiming to use social media to research products or services for their companies.

Data-Driven

Part of being digital natives is that millennials need – and expect – to have all sorts of data readily available for making decisions. As the researchers they are, this
data – whether it’s product specs, user reviews, or anything else – goes into making well-informed decisions as opposed to gut feeling or impulse. Millennials need data insights, but thanks to “always on” lifestyles, they don’t expect to wait for them.

**Strong Moral Compass**

Millennials are generally viewed as being guided by their morals, and statistics appear to back this up. Eighty percent of them surveyed agreed that a company’s social, environmental and philanthropic positions factor into purchasing decisions when considering vendors. Broken down more granular, the youngest of the millennials were even more likely to weigh companies’ social efforts.

**Building Relationships**

The millennial generation values authenticity. As such, they prefer personal, direct relationships with companies and brands. That might seem contradictory to their digital-native tendencies, but when you consider that millennial buyers have already done a majority of the research before making contact, those initial human interactions are about understanding what it would be like working
More than other generations, millennials are interested in convenience and hassle-free experiences, and some

In this regard, millennials are heavily influenced by their consumer buying habits. Consumer brands have learned to go the extra mile to quickly and completely fulfill buyers’ desires, and millennials are carrying those expectations to their businesses. Research from Santa Clara University found this generation reacts favorably to salespeople who evoke trust and compatibility. That diverges from buyers aged 50 and over, who focused more on business benefits and deliverables.

A significant payoff for organizations that manage these relationships well is that millennials show a propensity to advocate and endorse the brands that meet and satisfy their expectations for authenticity and connectedness.

Meet the New Decision Maker; Same (Kind of) as the Old Decision Maker

More than other generations, millennials are interested in convenience and hassle-free experiences, and some
might claim that often makes their expectations too high. But while they may start from different places and take different routes to get there, at the end of the day, millennials aren’t unlike Baby Boomers or Gen Xers in that they want respect, courtesy and a fair deal. They’re still trying to solve the same problems as buyers before them and want to be seen as legitimate professionals.
Given that we now know the influence millennials are having on purchasing decisions (73 percent of the time), we can use the common characteristics of this generation to better market and sell to them. Because millennials conduct so much of their research prior to sales interactions, it’s imperative that the marketing department gets out in front of sales teams with information that entices these younger potential buyers to reach out and engage. Building on what research tells us about millennial buyers, your marketing needs to include the following things.
Digital Presence

It’s likely you already maintain a digital presence, perhaps a significant one. However, given the digital nature of millennials, it’s probably a good idea to start thinking digital-first. You can no longer afford to lag online and rely on your sales teams to close deals. The best salespeople in the business can’t close when they don’t even get opportunities to interact with prospects, and millennials won’t reach out if they can’t find plenty of information about you or from you.

Your website is obviously the foundation of your digital presence. Make sure it’s easily navigable, even from mobile devices, and contains plenty of relevant data. Don’t assume hiding information might induce millennials to contact you in order to get it. Do assume that if a competitor provides information you don’t, they’re in better position to capitalize on the prospect.

Studies reveal that millennial buyers often shift their focus from researching products to researching vendors, meaning they’re looking for partners that are upfront, forthcoming and easy to work with. Once they narrow down vendors, millennials will use digital social
channels like Facebook, LinkedIn and even Glassdoor to investigate other customers’ experiences with the company.

Conduct an assessment of your customer experience from a prospect’s point of view. Do you offer digital touchpoints throughout the buying process? You need a variety of digital collateral designed to answer questions at each upper stage of the purchase funnel, and monitor and maintain your digital presence on social networks.

**Data**

Tied in with your digital presence is a need to use and provide data. Use data analysis to better understand where your customers are finding you and what information they’re seeking and using. In turn, provide them with data-rich resources that offer insight to the questions they most want answered.

**Visual and Video**

Millennials are visual learners and their affinity for video, which was noted previously, carries over into the business world. Merit found that video content
is the most preferred channel for millennials when researching B2B products and services.

Another survey from Animoto found that 80 percent said they watch videos when looking for more information about a potential purchase. Product demos and customer testimonials tend to rate well with millennials.

Bear in mind that millennials prefer authenticity and education, so your video marketing shouldn’t be an unabashed sales pitch. Show your products solving real-world problems. Reveal positive aspects of your company and its people. And, of course, make sure your videos are optimized for mobile devices.

**Brevity**

You’ve probably heard the human attention span is now shorter than that of a goldfish (which is reportedly nine seconds). Whether that’s accurate or not, the fact remains that attention spans are getting shorter and it’s difficult to hold someone’s attention for any length of time.

Probably related to their digital upbringing, millennials personify this trait. As a result, long-winded white papers,
drawn-out webinars and other long-form content are likely to get abandoned or tossed aside altogether.

Millennials like short bursts of information. When you combine this with their affinity for visual information, it reinforces the concept of video marketing to millennials. Case studies are another example of concise content that rates will with this generation. These use cases can be compact and reveal real-world results of your products or services.

**Advocacy**

What did more for online retail than fast shipping? Reviews. More than 90 percent of consumers say online reviews impact their purchasing decisions. Millennials want the same positive consumer shopping experiences when buying for their companies.

Skeptical of the direct sales pitch, millennials heavily weigh the experiences of others when making purchase decisions. As a result, make sure your company tells those success stories. On your website, in social media, though case studies and public relations channels, let happy clients sell for you. Reach out to satisfied customers and work with them to
not only endorse your products or services, but craft compelling stories around them.

Eager to read reviews, millennials are also keen to share their own experiences. Make them happy and the advocacy will feed on itself.

**Every Relationship Needs Communication**

As mentioned, millennials like authentic relationships, and every successful relationship requires communication. Make sure your marketing and sales teams can communicate on millennial terms. That isn’t to say you need the latest slang and jargon in your copy, but be agile in how you communicate with a prospect.

Most millennials hate phone calls, and that includes voice mail. They often prefer email or even text messaging. Communicating on the millennial buyer’s terms makes the process convenient and hassle-free for them. You can close a deal just as easy through email or text message as you can with a phone call.

Be concise in your initial communications and take
Triggering a millennial buyer’s moral compass is a good way to earn business. If you can illustrate how your company supports worthy causes, gives back to the community or takes steps to save the environment, you’ve already earned a gold star from most members of this generation.

Eighty percent of these younger decision makers say an organization’s social and philanthropic endeavors play a key factor in sweetening potential deals. Reveal these efforts in your marketing and let your good deeds provide more than moral return on investment.

Stand for Something

clues on what channels work best for each individual prospect. Have different forms of information ready to provide how the buyer wants it.
For years we heard the refrain that the millennials are coming. Well, they’re here – demonstrated by the fact almost three-quarters of business buying decisions are made or influenced by this generation.

Consider these survey results: 88 percent of all buyers agree that content needs less focus on product specifics and more focus on value that can be brought to a business; three-quarters strongly agree that more data should be used to support claims in content. These are trends that reveal the influence of increased millennial participation in B2B buying.

Businesses looking to survive for the foreseeable future will do themselves a favor by understanding what drives this generation and how it operates, and then using that information to make sure they speak accordingly to tomorrow’s (and already in many cases, today’s) decision makers.

Wrapping Up