

The digital buyer: Where are the online, B2B product reviews?.

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Friday, 19 Feb 2016  by James Narus

In this guest post, the second in a series, Procurement Leaders invites James Narus and Michelle Steward from Wake Forest University to share findings from their research into the digital buying process and discuss how online marketplaces are changing the approach to B2B procurement.

One of the well-documented consequences of the digital age is the B2B customer's insistence on conducting detailed research on products and suppliers online prior to purchases. While most readers will readily agree that the use of search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo, and Bing) is the first step in such research, many cannot readily cite other information sources on which today's purchasing managers rely. To learn more about how this new, digital buying process works, we undertook a research project (see [previous post](#)) and uncovered a number of purchasing manager preferences and unmet information needs. In this blog, we will discuss the most frequently mentioned online information "gaps".

Where Are the Online B2B Review Sites?

Above all, purchasing managers would like to see a laptop, tablet, and/or smartphone app developed that would enable them to scan reviews and comments from their peers concerning B2B suppliers and their products and

services on the market. Millennial supply and purchasing managers are accustomed to using a variety of B2C product review and commentary sites. In fact, a study by Accenture found that nearly half of B2B buyers would rather make business purchases on consumer sites because of the greater functionality and information. While there are several online B2B supplier and product directories, they largely present their information in an “agnostic” fashion without user reviews and comments.

Most of the supply and purchasing managers we spoke to told us that their employers, and their legal departments in particular, prohibited them from posting attributable reviews and comments, particularly those that were negative or critical of a given product. Why? Because the legal departments feared that such comments would lead to lawsuits against the employer firm. The purchasing managers also felt that if they attached their names to negative reviews and comments that somehow their careers might suffer.

This is quite the contrast with B2C review sites where consumers routinely “haul off” against suppliers and products they feel are inferior. Interestingly, our research found that if a purchasing manager gets wind of a negative online review for a product close to the point of placing an order, he/she will stop the transaction “dead in its tracks” and seek additional information to confirm or disconfirm the legitimacy of the supplier’s product and service claims.

How Should a B2B Product and Service Review Site Be Configured?

Our research indicates that online, B2B product and service review site creators should follow these configuration rules.

1. **Verify the Authenticity of All Reviews and Reviewers.** B2B supply and purchasing managers want legitimate reviews from their peers at other companies and not the naïve ramblings of a college student paid to write reviews or a sales pitch from a supplier. Thus, B2B review site editors must authenticate all authors and their postings. As is the case with many review sites in B2C markets, editors might evaluate and designate or certify purchasing managers as “verified” reviewers.
2. **Keep Reviewers and Their Company Names Anonymous.** To overcome the hesitance of supply managers to post reviews and comments, B2B review sites should not “name the names” of reviewers and/or their companies. Instead, they might just list reviewer job titles and industries.
3. **Focus on the “User Experience” Rather than Product Features.** There are many online sites that provide explicit details concerning supplier firms and product specifications. Instead, supply and purchasing managers want to know what it is like dealing with a prospective supplier firm and whether or not the product delivers the value as promised.
4. **Configure and Report the Reviews for Both New Trials and Repeat Purchases.** Our respondents told us that they would use peer reviews and comments in two distinct applications. For first-time acquisitions of innovative new products or selection of previously unknown suppliers, purchasing managers would like to draw upon their peers’ experiences upfront when configuring a “choice set” of potential products and suppliers to be evaluated. For repeat purchases, purchasing managers would utilize information from their peers to validate internal evaluation of suppliers and products conducted by their own operations people. Thus, B2B review site editors should present discussion of user experiences to meet the information requirements of both purchasing situations.

The Google/Millward Brown Digital “B2B Path to Purchase Study” in 2014 indicate that 46% of B2B supply and purchasing buyers are now Millennials. Our research indicates that Millennials in particular seek reviews and comments concerning peer experiences with B2B suppliers and their products and services. Clearly, this is a gap in information that technology savvy B2B suppliers need to fill.

Stay tuned for the rest of this series on Procurement Leaders. Find the previous post [here](#).

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