Five Useful Principles to Advance Your B2B E-Commerce Communication *During (And Beyond) a Crisis*

Liferay

Are You Communicating Effectively With Your B2B Buyers?

In today's constantly changing market, B2B marketers in Manufacturing and Distribution find themselves tasked with executing effective, engaging customer communication strategies for their buyers. B2B sellers around the world have discovered just how quickly a crisis can change everything - and with those changes come new challenges in answering critical, time-sensitive customer questions.

Engaging with customers across their entire experience has long been the responsibility of digital marketers, and in B2B selling that has meant sharing accurate information on order statuses, shipment notifications, invoice updates, available stock quantities, and more. Now, on top of these needs, marketers need a communication strategy that will keep customers' trust and alleviate their concerns.

What digital marketers supporting B2B commerce need today is a plan to identify critical information in the midst of change and communicate it effectively to their customers. They must equip themselves to update critical information at a moment's notice while maintaining a trustworthy, consistent communication experience for their customers.

To understand how to communicate quickly and effectively with your B2B buyers during times of crisis, we can learn a lot from a recent trend: Agile methodology and its application in Marketing.

Your Agile Marketing Primer

The Agile project management methodology has received a lot of buzz for the productivity gains it has brought to software development in the past decade. More recently, marketing teams have applied Agile principles to content marketing, with thought leaders such as the Content Marketing Institute championing its benefits.

At a high level, here are the principles that marketers can take from Agile methodology to improve their e-commerce initiatives:

VISIBILITY

Document and communicate internally the extent of content and activities that Marketing has in its pipeline for its B2B buyers. Even within your team, the number of projects will probably be surprisingly high. Bringing visibility to this scope will help you decide which projects deserve priority.

EXPERIMENTATION

Agile promotes the benefits of experimenting with different ideas in a measurable way. As long as experiments are small enough to have little risk if they fail, plus short-term enough to quickly measure their success, they can provide fast validation of which ideas are worth investing in.

ITERATION

Once experimentation proves ideas, iteration helps you expand on and improve those ideas. Like your initial experiments, each iteration should be short-term and small in scope so that you can reverse it if it doesn't add new value.

COLLABORATIVE

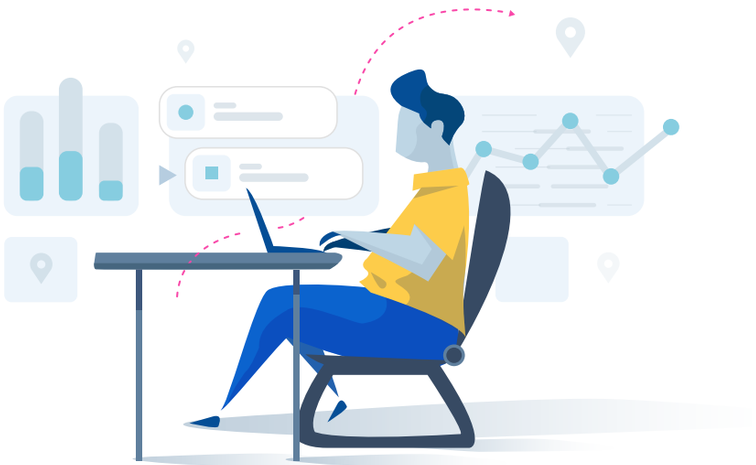
When you're experimenting with new ideas or ways to improve, adding perspectives from different practices can enrich the process. Agile methodology achieves this with daily 10 - 15 minute stand-up meetings where cross-functional team members share what they're working on for the day. The trick is to stay focused on iterative experimentation, rather than letting discussions of different ideas slow down your team.

EFFICIENCY

Finally, what Agile methodology claims to achieve with these principles is efficiency. Agile teams focus on productivity driven by simplicity and focus, ultimately maximizing the amount of work they don't have to do by more quickly identifying the right priorities.

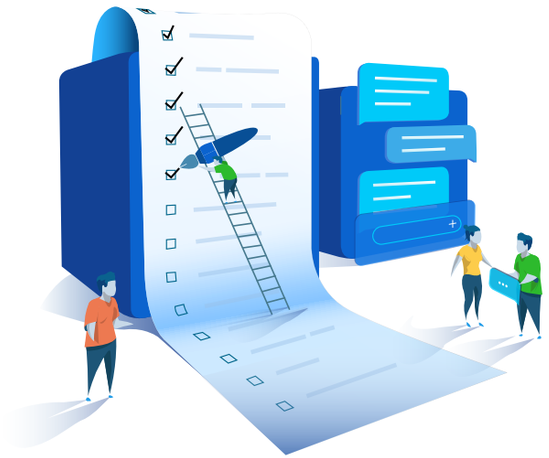
How to Prepare

Equipped with deeper knowledge on Agile principles, you can now borrow from them to build your communication strategy during a crisis.



Focus

Communicate



Prioritize

Stay Focused

In any crisis, different units within an organization will rush to make recommendations based on their own perspective of the situation. If you're out of stock on a high demand product, your support team may want to remove it from the site, while your sales team might want to take backorders. If you've suddenly become aware of a critical product quality issue, your CEO may want to quickly recall it while your product team may want to provide instructions on how to fix it. These conflicts can leave your Marketing team with too many ideas that ultimately compete with one another for resources.

By staying focused on **experimentation**, you can better identify which of these ideas can be tested quickly and let those results determine your investments, rather than betting on who has the most convincing argument. In most crisis situations, the information that you need to communicate to your customers can change at a moment's notice. Instead of putting hours of work into something that could be irrelevant tomorrow, work quickly and within a small enough scope to reduce risk for your company.

Communicate Internally

Research from CoSchedule shows that marketers who document their goals as well as their execution processes are 5x more likely to report success. Strategy planning can't be something you only think about or discuss; by committing to **visibility** of your work, you increase your likelihood of success.

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This includes making your work visible to teams outside of Marketing. Agile promotes the idea of **collaboration** through cross-functional teams, though that often means different functions of software development.

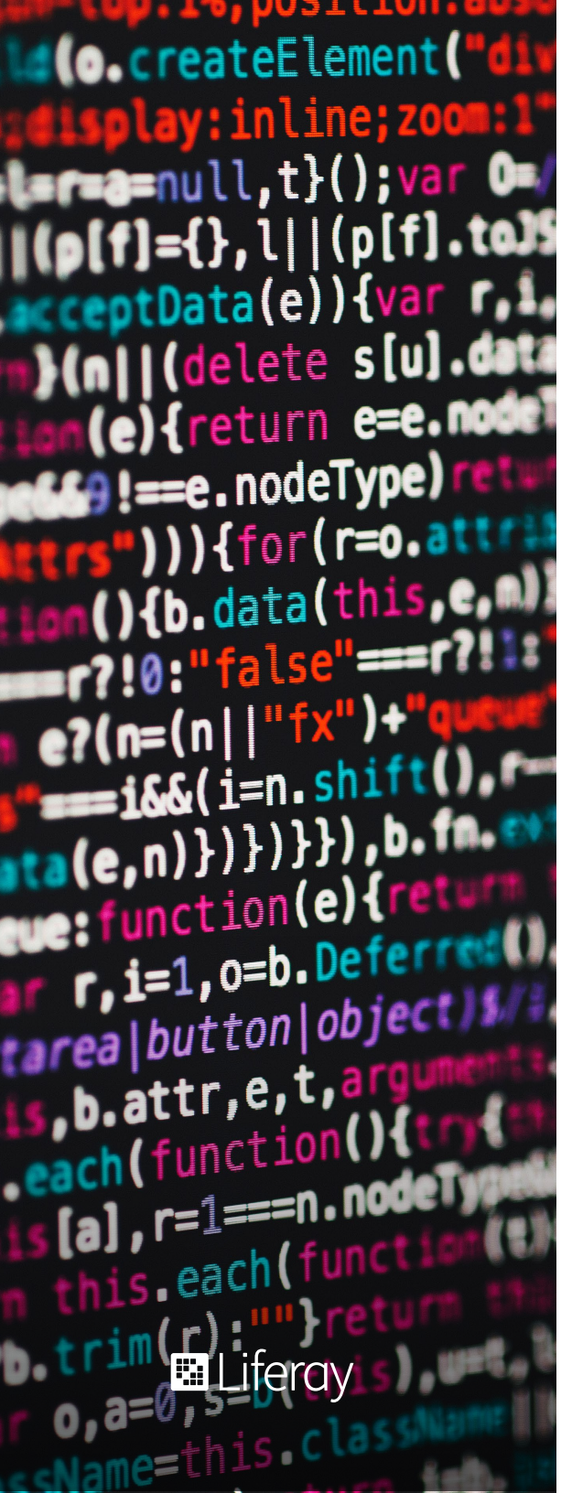
In this case, you can achieve the same benefits with a short, daily meeting that includes stakeholders from other customer-facing teams such as customer support, sales, and IT infrastructure. Highlight what new information Marketing will send out that day and where teams can find internal content to help them address new questions. Also, give these teams the opportunity to raise new ideas or concerns that Marketing may not be aware of yet.

As the rate of new information slows down, this can be replaced by a weekly email briefing instead. However, setting the expectation that your internal teams must check every day to see whether information has changed is critical to agility when the situation is constantly changing.

Prioritize Relevance

A key value of **iteration** is having a well-designed method to define and measure success for each idea you test. This same concept applies to each communication you send out. By clearly defining what information you want customers to take from it and deciding how you'll measure that - for instance, in a decrease in number of calls about a particular issue - you can better validate which methods are working and what type of communication your customers find most valuable.

With this in mind, your team can quickly prioritize the channels and content types that are most effective, giving them the freedom to focus on fast content creation. It also helps you identify whether any of your communications are getting lost in the noise, so that you can try pushing them on a different channel or in a new format for better reach. This process is a key benefit of Agile processes and contributes greatly to the goal of **efficiency** through focused productivity.



Integrating Content and Commerce

Once your communication strategy is in place, you'll still be faced with the need to create and publish content quickly. Often, B2B digital marketers have struggled to update content on digital commerce sites independently of IT, and have even resorted to creating a separate marketing site altogether to give themselves more control. However, if your B2B buyers are coming to the commerce site first to find information, having disparate sites will negatively impact the reach of your critical content.

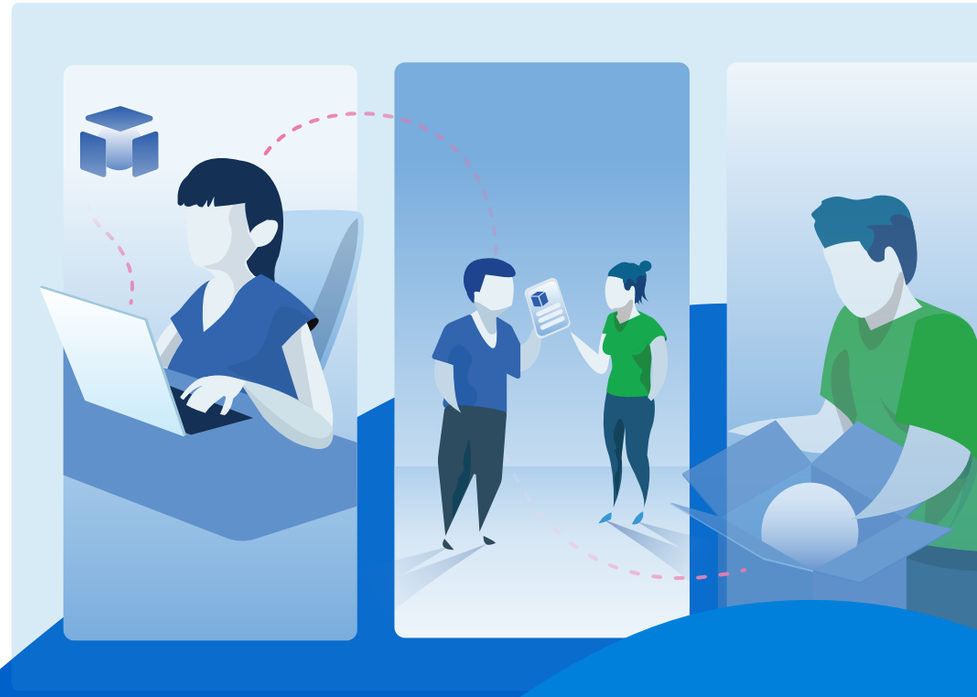
The recent trend of integrating modern content management with traditional commerce functionality has gained traction in B2B precisely because of digital marketers' need for better customer communication tools within digital commerce, including content creation, approvals, publishing, measurement, and audience targeting. By bringing these capabilities into a digital commerce platform, marketers are able to increase the discoverability of critical content within the context of buyers' purchasing journey.

In B2B digital commerce, effective communication is always critical because of the depth and complexity of product information that many buyers need in order to make informed purchasing decisions for their companies. Times of crisis usually increase the urgency to find updated, accurate, and easily accessible information for buyers across Manufacturing and Distribution.

Managing separate marketing sites and buying portals is no longer going to cut it. As B2B buyers rapidly shift to online buying in 2020, they will form habits and expectations that will persist beyond the current crisis. As things normalize, B2B sellers and digital marketers will do well to take the proven results of their communication strategy and turn it into a long-term initiative for integrating customer communication within the digital commerce channel, capitalizing on these new behaviors as well as preparing themselves for any future crises.

Conclusion

A crisis can hit at anytime and business needs can change quickly. Marketers must be prepared to effectively communicate critical information to their buyers during these times. To keep your strategy flexible, focus on the principles of effective communication and gather feedback from all internal teams to understand what changes need to be communicated and respond proactively. Establishing a clear and effective communication strategy will help build trust with your buyers when it is needed most.



Moving Forward

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