A TechTarget Research Brief

The Digital Convergence of Content, Communities and Social Media
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The socialization of the IT buyer's journey

How and where does the IT decision maker make decisions in a global digital world?

The web is rapidly evolving and with it, so is the IT buyer’s journey. The buy cycle is now a multisensory, multichannel, and multimedia experience. B2B IT audiences now expect the opportunity to self-define their web interactions and buy cycle experience across a broad spectrum of sources. For IT vendors, this means interacting with your audience wherever they are. You must be available and ready to engage wherever your audience wishes to interact with your brand and consume your information, products or services.

Our new study, The Digital Convergence of Content, Communities and Social Media, shares insights on how IT buyers use the following resources as part of their multichannel research and buy cycle:

- Online IT publications
- Vendor websites and communities
- Independent online IT social communities
- Mainstream social media sites

The results indicate a surprising new trend—the dramatic rise of the IT social community as a key resource in the IT decision-making process. In fact, we saw a 70% jump from our TechTarget 2011 Media Consumption Report in the use of IT social communities during the consideration stage. Participants also indicated a higher than expected openness to engaging with banner advertising when it is predominantly educational and content-centric.

Our goal is to share the most impactful research data we discovered with others in the technology marketing community to help us all improve the way we market, communicate and engage with IT. We also tried to frame the data with actionable perspectives and insights. While subjective, we hope that our suggestions will help you more meaningfully leverage this information in your own IT marketing initiatives.

About the study

Participation in The Global Digital Convergence of Content, Communities and Social Media truly spanned the globe with more than 3,097 respondents from 103 countries. We believe this study is the first of its kind to look at how content, communities and social media individually and correspondingly influence the IT decision-making process and buy cycle—and across such a broad spectrum of geographies and business demographics. With 31% small business, 26% midsize, and 40% enterprise, the study also received participation that is well-balanced across the B2B continuum.

To receive the full report data, contact The Market Research Team.
Global study demographics

3,097 global respondents as part of an opt-in IT Research Panel study conducted in Q2 2012.

Snapshot of study sample

IT buyer company size
- Small: 31%
- Midsize: 29%
- Large: 40%

IT buyer roles
- IT staff: 42%
- IT management: 13%
- Senior IT management: 9%

Nearly half of respondents work in IT management or staff function
- IT management or staff: 48%
- IT consultant or service provider management or staff: 29%
- Business management or staff: 14%
- IT vendor management or staff: 9%
The multichannel IT buyer

Online IT publications are still the number one source for research with 64% of respondents indicating the use of online IT publications for “researching IT products and services for my organization.” Unexpectedly, IT social communities (e.g., ITKnowledgeExchange.com) came in second with 55% of study participants indicating the use of this channel. This is an important discovery that we believe is new and—to date—unrecognized or under-recognized by technology vendors and IT marketers.

Of course, with 48% of respondents relying on tech vendors’ own communities as part of the research process, investment in your own online properties remains crucial. (See Six Strategies for Creating a Successful Online IT Community for how to nail this piece of your multichannel marketing mix.)

Additionally, even though other social media sites trend lower for research activities at 23%, activity via major social streams has reached a new threshold in terms of buy cycle influence that now requires marketers to invest in a social brand presence and related technology marketing activities.

The new IT buyer’s journey

IT buyers are now using multiple online channels to research technology products and solutions.
The rise of online IT social communities

IT social communities have suddenly and unexpectedly emerged as a key pillar of the IT research and decision-making process. The graphic below crystallizes the revelation that IT social communities are the dark horse (or new secret weapon?) in an IT vendor’s multichannel marketing strategy.

With 45% of study participants consulting with independent online IT social communities in all stages of the buy cycle, 41% when identifying a problem (awareness stage), 54% when researching multiple vendors/solutions (consideration stage), and 28% when compiling their short list (decision stage), the numbers are compelling to say the least.

Note also that the consideration percentage of 54% is a 70% increase from what IT buyers indicated in the 2011 Media Consumption Report. In approximately one year’s time, the IT audience as a whole has significantly shifted where they focus their research and decision-making activities. Insights and social engagements with peers, experts and vendors within a community context have become a relied-upon resource for IT buyers in every stage of the buy cycle.

The rising influence of IT social communities

IT social communities are critical to every stage of the IT buyer’s research and decision-making process.

What does this mean for you?

IT buyers most receptive in IT social community context

Regardless of where a particular campaign you’re running fits into the buy cycle, your audience is more likely to be receptive if it interacts with your brand within an IT social community.

Carve out some marketing spend for IT social communities

If your social media marketing budget is currently focused only on major social networks, you may want to consider seeking extra spend for online IT social communities or re-allocating your social marketing dollars to include online communities to bolster the ROI and overall effectiveness of your social campaigns.
Social expectations of the online IT buyer

Multichannel IT buyers have strong expectations for how they can engage and interact with technology vendors within the context of online IT publications, vendor sites and communities, independent IT social communities and major social networks.

For example, 65% of IT buyers will first seek answers to questions or solutions to problems via independent online IT social communities. Fifty-five percent will seek out the expertise of online IT publications, while 53% will take a direct route to the vendor. Thirty-one percent will use mainstream social streams to find answers.

Let’s take a look at another case in point. While it isn’t surprising that the majority of IT buyers first look to independent social communities to interact with independent subject matter experts, it is surprising that almost 40% are also expecting to be able to connect with vendor experts in independent communities.

This has implications at multiple levels of marketing—brand awareness, reputation management, customer service, lead generation and nurturing, up-selling and cross-selling opportunities to existing customers. All roads must now lead to multichannel engagement.

Vendor expert presence in IT social communities

50% of IT buyers expect access to independent experts within independent social communities. Surprisingly, almost 40% also expect access to vendor experts.

What does this mean for you?

You need to be where your IT buyers are

The key takeaway here is that IT buyers look to independent IT social communities and IT publications to solve IT problems more often than visiting the vendor directly. That means you need to be monitoring and responding to the prospects and customers who are making inquiries about your products and services via those digital media channels, not just your own.

IT buyers expect customer service via social media

While 31% may seem like a small number for social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Google+, it’s a significant enough number that you should be investing in social media monitoring tools if you haven’t already. IT buyers, like just about everyone else, now expect customer service through social networks.
IT buyers are highly engaged

Not only are IT buyers researching products and services within social communities and social networks, they’re heavily contributing in those arenas. Ninety-five percent of IT buyers are visiting online IT social communities and a more-than-expected 55% are actually contributing on a regular basis.

The news gets better. Social IT buyers appear to be mostly agnostic about whether the content they’re sharing is from a vendor or independent source—with 60% indicating that they don’t care whether the content they share comes from a vendor or peer, as long as it’s good.

Just make sure you’re tailoring your content marketing efforts. IT buyers have a clear hierarchy of content types that they care about and are willing to share. Technical and research-oriented content like white papers, case studies, and tutorials predictably lead the pack with 60–65% interest. However, respondents surprised us with the 43% interest indicated for expert blogs.

Polls, quizzes, podcasts, and contests are least likely to be shared by IT buyers with their peer groups and social networks.

Activity in IT social communities is soaring

IT buyers are significantly participating and contributing within IT social communities—and thereby influencing the perceptions and purchasing decisions of their peers.

Types of content IT professionals are most likely to “share” with peers and social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Type</th>
<th>Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White papers, case studies or research</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical tips or tutorials</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News or feature articles</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT downloads or demos</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert blogs</td>
<td>43%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What does this mean for you?

**Turn IT buyers into your brand builders**

IT buyers are extremely active and engaged in IT social communities and on social networks. Take advantage of this trend by having an active presence yourself and providing quality content that can turn your target audience into brand builders and lead generators that promote your content for you.

**Create the right kind of content and collateral**

Understand that types of content that IT buyers are most interested in and adjust your content marketing strategy accordingly. If you produce 10 digital assets per month, make them count by focusing on the content types that are going to resonate most with an IT audience. IT buyers are predominantly interested in content that informs and educates.

Participated

95%

Contributed

55%
Social advertising behaviors of IT buyers

The opportunities go beyond social and viral engagement. IT buyers are even clicking on advertisements in social communities and on social media sites—at a higher than expected rate—22% indicated that they frequently or periodically click on ads on Facebook and LinkedIn, 18% have clicked on ads on blogs, 17% have clicked on ads on online IT social communities, and 16% have clicked on ads on Google+.

There is an advertising caveat here, however—content alignment. Study participants indicated the highest interest in technical tips, tutorials, white papers and case studies. There is another important insight: IT buyers appear to have different expectations/interests in content types based on the websites they’re visiting.

When asked about content types they’d like to see in ads on “IT publications and communities,” blogs are 5th in level of interest. However, when asked in the context of “communities and social sites,” blogs jump to the 2nd spot. Also, news is 3rd for IT publications but doesn’t even make the list in the wholly social context. Videos and webcasts show the same level of interest in both, with 13% and 11% “very receptive,” respectively.

Customize your advertising content for social
IT buyers generally want more engagement-oriented content in ads seen within a social context.

Social ad CTRs

Heat map of content types IT pros want to see in social advertisements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social ad CTRs</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google+</td>
<td>16%</td>
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</table>

What does this mean for you?

Content-centric ads create better click-through rates
Content is still king and that’s not going to change any time soon. But the kind of content you present to IT buyers should be tailored to the context in which they’re going to consume it. Study data indicate that IT buyers are more interested in social and community content types (e.g., blogs) when visiting online IT social communities or social networks, but more interested in traditional research materials when visiting online IT publications. Adjust your banner advertising content accordingly.
Key takeaways

Embracing digital convergence

Be where your IT buyers are
The evolution of the web has IT buyers re-triangulating their online interactions and product research to include multiple sources and streams. Buyers are self-defining their online experiences and their buying journeys. “Pull” or inbound marketing has overtaken “push” marketing because of this dynamic. You now have to be where your buyer is and interact within the context they expect from you in that space.

Content is still king
But remember, while social communities and networks have dramatically changed online marketing, content is still king. Develop a compelling content marketing strategy to turn IT buyers into your brand builders and increase the effectiveness of all your marketing efforts. Focus on delivering relevant information and content in an interesting and insightful way. That’s the goal and that’ll get you the deals you’re looking for.

Rethink your marketing spend
We suggest allocating your marketing spend, strategy and operational efforts accordingly with IT buyers use of each channel. Match your marketing dollars and efforts to IT buyers’ relative presence and activity across all online channels—and refine your multichannel marketing plans to cross-leverage and integrate those opportunities.

Think holistically for higher ROI
If your marketing operations are still fairly siloed, you must first circle back and revisit all your marketing initiatives from a holistic perspective. Brand, lead generation, social media marketing, email marketing, events, websites, landing pages, SEO, PPC…they are all spokes on a large wheel with your company’s reputation and revenue at the center.

Add communities to your social marketing priorities
If you have a specific budget for social media marketing (versus brand, events or lead generation, for example) remember that online IT social communities won out in our research as the number one social outlet/channel for IT buyers conducting research on IT products and services. As you’re planning your social marketing strategy and spend, take this into consideration. Facebook and Twitter are the buzz of the digital marketing world, but are they where you will see the best results as an IT marketer? Follow the data.
Contact Us

We did not include every question and response from our study in this report because it would have made it impractically long. For the purposes of this report, we have focused on the most important takeaways. However, we are happy to share the full report data.

For more information about this study and to receive a copy of the full report data, please contact the The Market Research Team.

About TechTarget

TechTarget (NASDAQ: TTGT) is the online intersection of serious technology buyers, targeted technical content and technology providers worldwide. Our media, powered by TechTarget’s Activity Intelligence™ platform, intelligently redefines how technology providers engage with IT buyers based on their active projects, specific technical priorities and business needs. With more than 100 technology specific websites and highly active online IT communities, we provide technology marketers with innovative digital media solutions that deliver unmatched reach via custom advertising, branding, lead generation, social media marketing, and community engagement. TechTarget is based in Boston and has locations in Atlanta, Beijing, Cincinnati, London, Mumbai, San Francisco, Singapore, and Sydney.

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