

The Most Powerful Online Tool for Influencing B2B Technology Buyers – and the Big Mistake 90% of Marketing Directors Make When Trying to Use It



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Table of Contents

The Most Powerful Online Tool for Influencing B2B Technology Decision Makers.....	3
How a B2B Software Company Uses Peer Blogs to Drive a 30% Product Trial Conversion Rate.....	3
The Big Mistake 90% of Marketing Directors Make When Engaging Bloggers (and How You Can Avoid It).....	5
Survey Results of 300 B2B Technology Websites — What 7 Out of 10 Marketers Aren't Doing Online But Should Be.....	8
Article Sources.....	12
About the Author.....	12
Free B2B and B2G Marketing Resources.....	13

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The Most Powerful Online Tool for Influencing B2B Technology Decision Makers

With so many online marketing avenues available to B2B technology marketers, it's difficult to know what is truly effective for influencing purchase decision makers on the IT side of a company as well as the corporate side. Websites, e-mail campaigns, search engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising, and webinars are just a few of the dozens of options.

So what is the most powerful online tool for influencing B2B technology decision makers? The answer may surprise you.

According to research from MarketingSherpa¹, it's **industry peer blogs**, cited by 38% of business technology buyers as "very valuable" in the vendor research/industry tracking phase of the sales cycle and by 41% of buyers as "very valuable" in the vendor evaluation phase, when compared to other sources including vendor webinars, websites, and e-mail newsletters.



A KnowledgeStorm² research report found that 53% of B2B technology buyers had already been influenced by blog content at least once when making purchase decisions.

Industry peer blogs differ from a vendor's blog or industry analyst blog because the information and opinions offered are perceived as being from an independent source not influenced by any particular company or organization. Technology purchasers consider these blogs to be similar to word-of-mouth, with the blogger leading the discussions and other peers volunteering information and opinions on the topics.

Examples of popular technology industry peer blogs include [TechCrunch](#) and [Scobleizer](#), but there are a variety of peer blogs discussing various B2B tech niches including [Customer Relationship Management](#), [Enterprise Resource Planning](#), [Service-Oriented Architecture](#), [Business Intelligence](#), and [Software-as-a-Service](#).

How a B2B Software Company Uses Peer Blogs to Drive a 30% Product Trial Conversion Rate

MarketingSherpa¹ profiled a marketing director of a hedge-fund analytical software provider that uses four tactics to drive high quality, targeted traffic to their company website:

1. **Offer bloggers valuable content** – Bloggers want to make their blogs the most interesting and useful sources for their niche. The company offers four types of content that bloggers might find valuable to either link to or place on their blogs:
 - a. *Content Banners* — Instead of advertising banners, streaming data related to hedge funds are offered in a variety of sizes. Bloggers can also customize the banners to show only the types of funds or analysis they specialize in.
 - b. *In-depth Glossary* — Originally created for search engine optimization, the company offers a web page with an extensive glossary of industry terms, including technical information for each term. Bloggers can link to technical terms in the company's glossary without having to build their own.
 - c. *Extensive Stock Profile* — The company website features static, content-rich profile pages for each major hedge fund that bloggers can link to.
 - d. *End-of-day News* — A day-end news feed tool is offered to bloggers to add to their blogs.

The company management team members created accounts on popular business networking services, such as [LinkedIn](#), so potential bloggers and partners can easily connect with them. Each executive includes their profile links in their e-mail signatures and their company blog. The executives limit the number of relationships on the services to fewer than 150 to maintain credibility.

2. **Build personal relationships** — After looking at the company website analytics reports for blogs that send their site traffic, the marketing director writes each blogger a personal e-mail relating to the post they'd made about the firm, and asking if they had any questions.

If the blogger sends a steady stream of traffic that converts well, the marketing director offers the blogger a complimentary software account, no strings attached.

If the blogger has a significant marketplace presence and likes the software, the marketing director makes every effort to meet the bloggers in person, even if it means cross-country travel.

3. **Provide reciprocal links from your own blog** — Bloggers are not blogging for the sole purpose of providing links, they also have their own self-interests to look after, which means providing links to their blog from your own blog. The marketing director created a blog within the company website, and along with relevant, useful posts from top management, the blog includes a list of links to favored bloggers and a daily headline round-up of posts from favored blogs that include links to the posts. The company uses search engine optimization tactics and posts the blog's latest headline on the company website home page to help drive traffic to the blog.
4. **Reward top performers** — In addition to free software, the company tests affiliate marketing – offering top bloggers a commission on traffic they send. The marketing director ensures favored bloggers feel special by sending them company updates and new software releases before anyone else.

After a year spent engaging the blog community, 8.2% of the company's referred website traffic comes from search engines, and 90% comes from blogs. This doesn't represent a drop in total search-generated traffic, but rather the addition from blogs.

A handful of bloggers drive the majority of the traffic, with 65% of total referred traffic (thousands of visitors a day) coming from just five blogs. 32% of visitors come from the content banners and, of these, **30% convert and start a product trial** that can lead to either an enterprise software license or individual license.

27% of referred traffic visits the stock profile pages, and 13% visit the glossary page. As this traffic doesn't arrive at solution-specific content it doesn't convert as well, but offering a variety of content to bloggers has proved its value through building relationships.

The Big Mistake 90% of Marketing Directors Make When Engaging Bloggers (and How You Can Avoid It)

Another great way to use industry peer blogs to influence tech buyers is submitting a public comment on a particularly relevant post that all readers of the blog can view (comment settings are different for every blog, some require blogger approval before comment is public). Most blog systems enable you to enter your name, e-mail address, and website along with your comment,

providing other readers (and the blogger) an opportunity to go to the website you entered. It's a terrific opportunity to increase your credibility with your target audience while driving quality website traffic.

However, according to professional blogger Darren Rowse of the [ProBlogging](#) blog (#27 on [Technorati's list of Top 100 blogs](#)), **many comments left on some blogs are for shameless self-promotion purposes only and aggravate both bloggers and readers, and as many as 9 out of 10 are made by marketing or sales personnel.**

Instead of adding value to the 'conversation' and knowledge exchange, comments that blatantly have no other purpose than advertising only serve to ruin your credibility, brand image, and chances of having bloggers link to your website or blog. Mr. Rowse developed a list of the "Top 10 Blog Comment Sins" and how to avoid them:

1. Excessive use of signatures — When people leave 2-3 (or more) links under their comment. Limit promotional links to one at most.

2. Excessive self linking — The practice of leaving links inside posts is only bothersome if it gets excessive. What annoys others is including a lot of links to yourself in every comment you make, when the links are irrelevant to the topic and/or when you just leave a link without saying anything else. Keep links relevant and in moderation and you'll find people respond to them well.

3. One or two word comments — Some comment leavers seem to have a 'quantity over quality' mentality where they think that the more comments they leave on as many posts as possible the better they'll be (whether for SEO or direct click visitors). Newsflash - it's not. One insightful, intriguing and intelligent comment that is relevant and helpful to readers can achieve far more than many two word comments that ultimately mean nothing. All you'll achieve by leaving loads of useless comments is to annoy bloggers, get yourself listed on comment spam blacklists, and to potentially hurt your reputation.

4. Not reading posts before commenting — You leave a comment without reading the full post and then realize that you've said something stupid, wrong, or poorly thought through. While you might be able to repair the mistake by leaving another comment - it's hard to get a comment removed on blogs - your words remain for years to come to highlight your opinion. Take a

moment before leaving comments to make sure you understand what's being written about. It can also mean reading what others have written too.

5. Flaming and personal attack — While blogging has always been a medium where people don't mind a little vigorous debate - it's also got a history of flaring up into personal attack and flaming from time to time. It's easy to do - you read something that you strongly disagree with and write a comment in the heat of the moment. Your comment is misinterpreted and read by another emotional person who responds - things escalate and get personal. No one really wins in these exchanges - in fact more often than not both people come out of it with slightly tattered egos and reputations. Get a reputation for repeated flaming and you can really hurt your credibility.

6. 'Anonymous' flaming — When someone posts a comment without identifying themselves, often to critique the blogger or another reader. If you feel strongly enough to make a comment about someone, put your name to your statement. Providing critiques is great, but do it in a positive way. Also, many people don't realize that when they leave a comment their IP address is also included with the comment in the back end of the blog. If you've written a non-anonymous comment previously under your real name it is very simple to connect the two together.

7. Always being first to comment — This is tricky, as this can actually be a good tactic on some levels - but can get excessive and become annoying. It's true that the earlier that you comment on a post the more chance that people will come to visit your website. As a result, numerous people compete on popular blogs to be the first to leave a comment. While this can generate some traffic, if you do it on every post and if in your rush to be first you write irrelevant comments you will begin to annoy both the bloggers as well as their readers. Balance is the key if you want to be first - and quality comments count for a lot.

8. Dominating comment threads — This pertains to people who comment multiple times on every post written. Even if the comments are on topic, relevant, and helpful, they can be overwhelming in their quantity. In any given week some people comment on certain blogs 50 to 100 times by responding to everything written and most of the comments from other readers. Other readers may begin to complain that they feel drowned out. When comment threads are dominated by any one person the feeling of community and dialogue can be lost and the person dominating the conversation can be seen in a negative light.

9. Keyword stuffed names instead of personal names — This search engine optimization strategy of using keywords instead of your real name could hurt your own personal brand because it appears to be spam. Most people would rather chat with someone who has a name like James, Sara, or Madhav than someone called ‘Million Dollar Get Rich Quick’ or ‘Free Debt Advice’.

10. Not adding value to the comments — Every comment that you leave has the potential to either add value or take value from that blog. Add value to the conversations that are happening in the wider blogging community and you’ll build yourself a reputation as a wise, insightful, and knowledgeable authority figure. Conversely, every comment that you leave that is obviously self-serving, that illustrates that you’ve not read the post, or that tears down others says something about you and can give you a different kind of reputation.

Survey Results of 300 B2B Technology Websites — What 7 Out of 10 Marketers Aren’t Doing Online But Should Be

During the summer of 2008 I visited the websites of 300 business-to-business technology companies looking for one thing: **RSS feeds**.



RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a Web feed format used to publish frequently updated information such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video in a standardized format. Website or blog visitors may subscribe to RSS feeds through a widget button on a site using [Feedburner](#) (recently acquired by Google) or other free service.

I found that 70% of B2B technology companies are not using RSS at all, and of the 30% that are using it, only 10% are using more than one feed in order to offer targeted information updates.

What’s the big deal about RSS? MarketingSherpa and KnowledgeStorm³ surveyed over 3,000 B2B technology decision makers, asking them “How important is RSS in helping you stay up-to-date on technology information?” 8% responded that it was a “necessity”, 24% responded that it was “important”, and 39% said it was “nice to have.”

While only 16% of the general public uses RSS feeds, 71% of technology buyers assign at least some value to their RSS use. **By not offering this option, most B2B tech marketers are missing out on a valuable opportunity to influence this audience.**

According to Rok Hrastnik, author of "[Unleash the Marketing and Publishing Power of RSS](#)," the problem with most RSS marketing plans is that the marketer doesn't go beyond providing a simple RSS feed for all of their online news or blog.

Marketers need to correctly plan their RSS marketing strategy, starting with deciding how RSS content will be delivered. Mr. Hrastnik recommends providing individual RSS feeds for:

- ◆ Individual target audiences
- ◆ Types of content
- ◆ Content topics

Target Audiences


Start by listing the target audiences you want to deliver your content to via RSS. Each of your audiences has different content needs, resulting in different groups of RSS feeds that need to be created. For example, one RSS group for the media, one for employees, one for the general public, another for your existing customers, and so on. You can even go further and divide your master groups in sub-groups, based on their prevailing interests.

Content Types

Now consider the different types of content you want to deliver to these audiences. For example your latest news, blog posts, how-to articles, press releases, podcasts, the latest posts from your forums, direct communications messages, etc.

Content Topics

Take a look at each individual content type for each individual target audience and further break that down by content topic, if needed. If you're trying to cover many different topics for each content type, you will need to provide different RSS feeds for these



In most cases these types of content don't mix well together. If someone wants to receive your blog updates, which are full of your company representatives' personal opinions and commentary, they may not want to receive your more formal press releases.

different topics, because, again, people interested in topic A are not necessarily also interested in topic B.

Just remember that you should only break this down as far as it makes sense, keeping in mind the actual content that your target audiences want from you.

Decide How You Will Deliver Content

Once you have your RSS content mapped out, you need to consider how you are going to make this content available to your target audiences. This is especially important since it's going to influence the tools you need to get started with RSS publishing.

- ◆ **One size fits all RSS feeds** — Publishing one RSS feed to meet the needs of all of your target audiences at once or publishing multiple topical RSS feeds, which always remain the same. The easiest to do, it can be done with any RSS publishing tool on the market.
- ◆ **Customizable RSS feeds** — The more complex you get with the different feeds you're offering, the more difficult it is for your visitors to select exactly what they want, because an individual subscriber might be interested in 10 of your 100 feeds, but he doesn't want to be subscribed to that many feeds from your company.

In this case the best way to go is to also offer your visitors the opportunity to customize your RSS feed so they decide exactly what content type and the content topics they want to receive in one or a few RSS feeds they'll be subscribing to.

The opportunities here are quite endless, as you can allow them to customize their feeds based on topics, content types, authors, and more.

To do this you will need your RSS publishing solution to support feed customization.

- ◆ **Search-based RSS feeds** — Search-based RSS feeds are a subset of customizable RSS feeds, and they work just like a search engine. You type in a certain keyword or keyword combination and the search engine gives you the most relevant or the latest results for that keyword combination.

You can do the same with RSS, allowing your visitors to enter specific keywords and then get the content from you only based on those keywords.

- ◆ **Personalized RSS feeds** — Giving users the choice to customize the content they are receiving from you is one thing, but certain content may make it beneficial for you to personalize the feed using your subscribers' personal information.

The most basic variation, used to lift response, is addressing your subscribers by name or using other data about the customer from your database, such as their address, previous purchases, etc.

- ◆ **RSS feeds with content targeting** — Create individualized campaigns to individual subscribers, based on the information you already have in your database about their activities, demographics, etc. For example, to send a promotion for product A only to those subscribers that might be most interested in product A.

In this case you will need an RSS solution that can pull this data from your database and then segment your subscribers based on the actual data.

- ◆ **Auto-responder RSS feeds** — The concept is simple: a certain action by a visitor on your website triggers a sequence of e-mail messages, delivered to that visitor (provided you have their e-mail address), over a designated period of time.

Direct marketers use this to automatically communicate with the prospect after a certain action, trying to get them to follow an immediate call-to-action.

Now apply this to anything you're doing with RSS, where it makes sense to follow-up with additional information to your new subscribers once they subscribe, of course depending on the feed topic and target audience.

Very few RSS tools offer auto-responder capabilities, but some do.

B2B Technology Companies Doing RSS Right

To give you a head-start in planning your RSS strategy, here are a few B2B technology companies I found that are in the 10% doing RSS effectively:

- ◆ [DataDirect Technologies](#)
- ◆ [Progress Software](#)
- ◆ [Approva](#)
- ◆ [SugarCRM](#) (see bottom of left menu bar for drop-down box)

Industry Peer Blogs and RSS Feeds Don't Replace Other Tactics

This article isn't meant to advise you to abandon other online (or offline) marketing efforts — just the opposite. Engaging industry peer bloggers and incorporating RSS feeds into your overall marketing strategy serve to support your other efforts. You can promote your company, products, and services in a targeted manner that's welcomed by those that influence the potential purchase, a rare opportunity in today's crowded marketing landscape.

Article Sources

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About the Author

Kim Cornwall Malseed is principal consultant and founder of B2B B2G marketing communications consulting and copywriting firm MarCom Ink, LLC. Winner of multiple marketing and PR awards and a published author of industry insights, Kim specializes in working with business-to-business and business-to-government companies to develop strategic marketing and PR plans, offline and online collateral, and Web search

engine optimization (SEO) that drives lead generation, persuades sales decision makers, and retains current customers.

Prior to founding MarCom Ink in 2006, Kim spent a decade 'earning her stripes', first as an account executive at a Washington D.C. PR agency, then as manager of public relations, marketing, analyst relations, and inside sales at multiple enterprise technology companies, public and private.

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For a free consultation and no-obligation quote on your next B2B or B2G marketing communications project, contact Kim at kcornwall@marcomink.com or call 703-729-9159.

You can also connect with Kim on [LinkedIn](#), [StumbleUpon](#), and [Twitter](#).

Free B2B and B2G Marketing Resources

More free resources for B2B and B2G marketers can be found at Kim's blog, [B2B B2G MarCom Minute](#), by subscribing to the [B2B MarCom Minute Newsletter](#), and on the [MarCom Ink website](#).