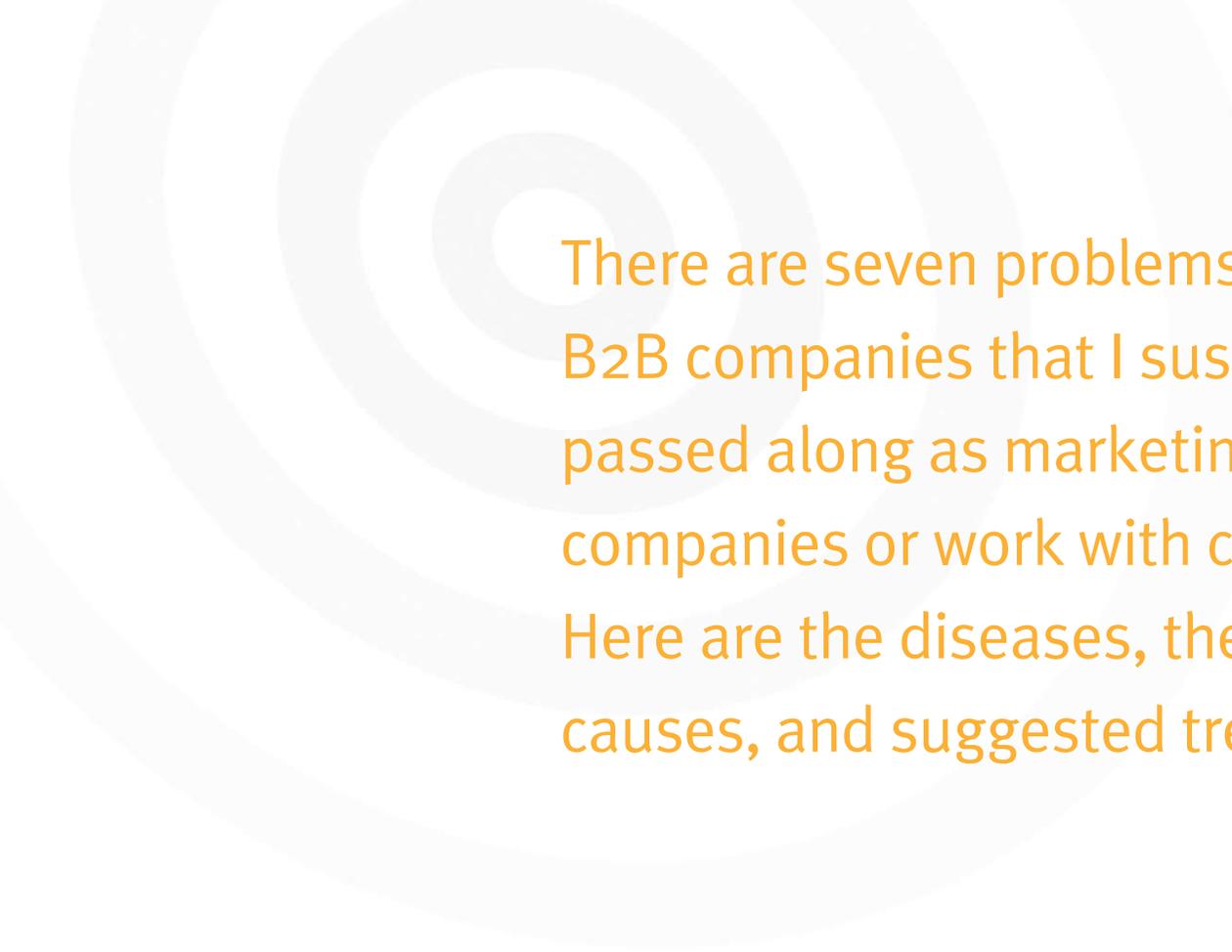




Seven Infectious Diseases of B2B Marketing — and Their Cures

BY KATHRYN ROY



There are seven problems I find so rampant in B2B companies that I suspect they are infectious – passed along as marketing people switch companies or work with contagious agencies. Here are the diseases, their symptoms, probable causes, and suggested treatments.

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1. Glitzitis



This is a sick ad

Glitzitis refers to companies that produce gorgeous ads and collateral pieces that fall flat because they aren't based on solid analysis.

When we conduct focus groups for clients to test messages with their target buyers, we always test their competitors' key messages or positioning as well. I used to assume that companies spending millions of dollars on advertising and expensive collateral vet the relevance of their proposed messaging with their target audience. It was a shock to see how off the mark many of these messages are.

Mark Twain said it best: *"It ain't what you don't know that will hurt you. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."*

Sales trainers use a research study conducted years ago by Xerox to remind salespeople that their effectiveness declines after roughly 18 months. The reason is that as salespeople become more confident of their assessment of the prospects' needs they spend much less time questioning and listening to their prospects.

The corollary for marketing professionals is this: The effectiveness of marketing professionals declines as their confidence increases if they don't take the time to properly test their gut instincts.

A "trust but verify" attitude can also protect Marketing from Sales. In big-ticket item companies, salespeople can over-influence messaging. Their instincts are just as fallible as those of experienced marketers. A discipline of testing before investing will help prevent wasting marketing funds on the wrong messages.

SYMPTOMS

No exterior symptoms. Occurs with unexpected frequency in B2B companies with fabulous-looking Web sites and collateral.

SUSPECTED CAUSE

Relying on the following sources for messaging without verification of relevance to larger target audience:

- A close customer contact
- An analyst
- Salespeople
- Company executives

TREATMENT

The only reliable means of correction is to test candidate key messages anonymously with the target audience or devise tests using interactive marketing techniques.

2. Checklistosis

Checklistosis is a disease of marketing departments whereby marketing professionals are so focused on execution, they skip the planning stage – and pay the price.

All too often, a glimpse into a B2B marketing department shows a hive of activity focused on meeting deadlines for updating collateral, producing an event, or sending out the next email campaign. In these environments, it is not unusual to find marketers completing projects without having done the analysis that can determine which activities are valuable and which activities not on their list would make a larger contribution.

In some cases, it's due to a natural tendency to replicate the process and activities from a prior company. Clearly, there is a set of deliverables, like Web sites, that are common to most companies. However, the relative priority of activities and how they are executed should be based on the dynamics of the target market segment, including the competitive environment.

“Juicing the Orange”, a book by the advertising team that came up with United Airlines’ wildly successful advertising campaign, has a free [15-page workbook \(pdf\)](#) with 127 questions to help marketing professionals deeply understand a company’s market and challenge. This analysis is its prerequisite to prescribing messages and mediums for delivery. (Not all 127 questions will necessarily pertain to your situation.)

SYMPTOMS

Inability of marketing professionals to quickly and confidently answer questions such as these:

- What is the biggest impediment to sales growth today?
- What are the different market segments you are pursuing and how do they weigh the relative importance of different product/service capabilities?
- How does your offering compare with competitive alternatives on the key product/service characteristics listed above?
- Can you describe the buying process and buyer roles and specific concerns by role for your top segment?
- What is the target segment's current perception of your company and your competition?

SUSPECTED CAUSES

Measuring output instead of results.

Mismatch between marketing resources and expected deliverables.

TREATMENT

Carve out time and resources to do a thorough analysis. If staff is not experienced, bring in outside help for the initial round.

Build new marketing plan based on the analysis.

3. Sleep Apendea

Commonly found in companies staffed with passionate sales and marketing professionals, Sleep Apendea is a disease whereby every conceivable reason customers should buy is stuffed into collateral, Web sites, and presentations. Coincides with the belief that prospects are patient enough to troll through your materials until they stumble across items relevant to them.

Mark Twain once wrote a friend: *“I wanted to write you a short note, but I didn’t have the time.”* There’s a corollary for marketing: the briefer the marketing piece, the more agonizing the process.

It’s hard to sift through the possible things you could say and choose the few that will have the greatest effect.

Studies show that, if anything, prospects are more impatient now than ever before. Eye-tracking studies of Web pages show that prospects laser in on headlines, tables, charts, and bullets, often ignoring much of the body.

There are phases in the buying process when prospects might take time to read information in depth – e.g., educating themselves about a new topic. However, for most phases, especially early phases of the buying process, expect an impatient prospect and choose carefully the few points you want them to retain – points that stress your differentiation.

Sleep Apendea is especially a problem with marketing staff who don’t have deep experience with the target audience. They can be creative in suggesting motivations for prospects to become interested. Not all of these suggestions will resonate with actual prospects, however.

SYMPTOMS

30- to 60-slide presentations forced on all prospects in first visit.

A high number of densely packed Web pages relative to number of products.

Multi-chapter collateral pieces.

SUSPECTED CAUSES

Not distinguishing between different buyer roles and stages of the buying process.

Passion for your product or service that is untamed by pity for the reader.

Inexperience with target audience.

TREATMENT

Identify and eliminate redundant messages with different wording.

Test messages to confirm relevance.

Map key messages to buyer role, buying-process stage, and market segment. Determine where to deliver which messages.

4. Ad Offerphobia

Offerphobia is seen in companies that invest in advertising but do not include an interesting offer that will help track the ad's performance and capture prospect contact information. Since business customers take months to make purchase decisions and are devilishly hard to locate, B2B ads need to pull double duty. In addition to building awareness/generating interest B2B ads must also try to capture contact information so you can interact with them during their purchase process.

Calls to action that motivate the prospect to share information, say by offering a topical white-paper or analyst report, are much more useful. They allow the vendor to capture additional contact information, provide a reason to call and ask a few questions to assess the level of interest, and nurture the lead during their purchase process.

SYMPTOMS

In strain A of Ad Offerphobia, the only URL on the ad is for the homepage. Strain B is becoming dominant, however, with a URL to a page with an unappealing offer like “advice”.

SUSPECTED CAUSE

Lack of interesting fulfillment pieces.

TREATMENT

Identify an area your target prospect seeks education and create a great fulfillment piece.

5. Venereal Offeremia

A near opposite to Ad Offerphobia, Venereal Offeremia is seen in marketing campaigns that kill any desire of the recipient to ever talk to your company. Related to Venereal Linerea exhibited at bars with pickup lines like: *“What’s your name? Wanna go to my place?”*

It makes perfect sense with lower-priced consumer purchases to have calls to action like “Call now to get free Ginsu knives with your purchase!” More expensive B2B purchases have longer buying cycles and more cautious buyers. Asking prospects to call for an appointment with a salesperson assumes both that they are ready to buy and that you’ve persuaded them in very few words that you’re likely to be the ideal vendor.

Outreach vehicles like advertising and direct mail have very limited space to communicate with prospective customers. Typically, there is just enough space to relate to the underlying need, convey one reason that the vendor should be considered credible or merit further investigation, and make an offer in exchange for small pieces of information about their situation. But there’s not enough space to persuade them to confidently engage with a salesperson yet.

SYMPTOMS

Marketing campaigns with a call-to-action that asks for an appointment with a salesperson.

SUSPECTED CAUSES

A desperate scarcity of leads.

A paucity of interesting fulfillment pieces.

Sales driving Marketing plans.

TREATMENT

In general, the treatment for Checklistosis is also very helpful here.

Identify the recipients by stage of buying process and develop a fulfillment piece to help them move a step further.

6. Branderhea

Branderhea is a delusional psychological condition in companies that believe prospects will invest time to memorize vendors' cute names for products and services that aren't related to blockbuster consumer categories.

When Lotus conducted brand market research in the '90s, they learned to their surprise that many end users did not associate their spreadsheet, 1-2-3, with Lotus. These users thought 1-2-3 was the product and the company name.

Many startups, ambitiously anticipating the launch of multiple product lines, invest in both company and product names. Given the prevalence of URL claim-stakers who have locked up almost all valuable URLs in hopes of selling them at a future date for exorbitant prices, most of these new names are anything but descriptive.

To get prospects to begin to remember one of these names takes repeated exposure in relevant contexts. If you double the number of names a prospect needs to remember in any interaction with your company, you halve the probability that they will remember either.

B2C companies can use trademarked names for ingredients to impress consumers: “Try our facial cream with Rejuvens™ microcapsules.” This technique doesn’t translate well to B2B companies unless you simply use the ™ sign simply to stress some attribute such as “One-minute-install™.” In this case, you don’t really expect anyone to remember the name but simply hope that the ™ helps people notice your differentiator in speedy installs. It is not recommended with newly minted words. Limit ™ use to recognizable phrases.

SYMPTOMS

More than one ™ symbol per marketing deliverable.

SUSPECTED CAUSES

Insufficient interaction with prospects.

Asking friendly customers if they like your brainchild.

TREATMENT

Limit the number of “brands” to one for every \$100m in revenue.

7. Analyst Mentalpause

Analyst Mentalpause occurs in industries where analysts are important influencers. Marketers confuse the language of analysts – who seize upon new category names that make concepts look fresh and exciting and help to sell research – with the language that actual prospects use.

In *“Crossing the Chasm”*, Geoffrey Moore recommends using a “new category” as a short hand that helps differentiate your product or service from the prior generation of (inferior) offerings.

Some examples would be 3D Computer Aided Design (CAD) vs. 2D CAD or Web 2.0 recruiting applications vs. old recruiting applications without social-networking.

When the new category labels are intuitive to prospects, they have the desired effects. They seduce innovators into exploring how they can push the productivity curve for their company. They make it easy for prospective buyers to determine if this solution is likely to help them.

The problem arises when new category names are not intuitive. One well-known example is Lotus’s labeling Notes “Groupware” to distinguish it from combined email and calendar applications. As a label for a new category, Groupware provided analysts with fodder for columns and events. It attracted innovators who like to explore new concepts. But it was not intuitive to the less intrepid majority of buyers.

More recent examples include Talent Management and Human Capital Management (HCM) to describe the maturing suite of applications that automate HR functions like recruiting and performance reviews. In focus groups, it turned out that HR executives not only did not find HCM intuitive, they found it insulting. Talent Management, at the time of the focus groups, was a confusing concept: the test subjects each defined or described it differently. After extensive use by the press and analysts, Talent Management is starting to have a more consistent meaning to prospects.

Before leaning heavily on a new category name, determine first whether the term is acceptable and clear to your target audience. If it is not yet well recognized or understood, it is fine to use it in the body of marketing materials to label a concept you've just explained. But avoid using it in headlines intended to draw a reader in to read further. If they don't intuitively know what it means, it won't attract their attention.

SYMPTOMS

Heavy use of category names that don't even register in the list of popular Internet search terms for your target audience.

SUSPECTED CAUSES

Analyst-blindness: the inability to distinguish between prospects and analysts.

TREATMENT

Use industry analyst terminology in presentations to analysts and at analyst events.

Test proposed terminology anonymously with prospective buyers.

Stay abreast of keywords popular with your prospects.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Roy is a marketing and strategy consultant with over 20 years of experience helping some of the most successful and fastest growing B2B companies including IBM, Avid, CA, Lotus, AT&T and dozens of other technology companies.

She has helped companies:

- hone strategy, positioning, and messaging via primary research
- boost sales productivity through sales enablement training and tools
- evaluate and prioritize market opportunities

Kathryn has published in *HBS Working Knowledge*, *Marketing Profs*, *Guidestar*, and *Mass High Technology*. She has spoken at industry conferences across the US.

Kathryn holds an MBA from Harvard Business School and an MS in Operation Research from the University of California at Berkeley, in addition to a BA in Math from Colgate University.

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