Exploring pre-purchase engagement in digital B2B settings

Purpose – In attempts to create more meaningful and lasting connections with customers in complex B2B environments, companies are increasingly interested in the concept of engagement (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2022). Extant literature has defined customer engagement behaviours as voluntary resource contributions targeted at a firm or a brand, that go beyond the transaction (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). The purpose of the study is to explore engagement behaviours "beyond the transaction" by focusing on engagement that occurs on the other side of the customer journey, prior to the purchase. Additionally, the study explores the role of marketing automation, a software tool used to automate marketing tasks including online tracking and campaign management (Bagshaw, 2015; Buttle & Maklan, 2019), in supporting B2B online engagement throughout these customer journeys.

Study methodology / approach – For this study, exploratory in-depth interviews with 29 experienced senior digital marketers working in both digital marketing agencies and in-house in various B2B organisations in Finland and the UK were carried out. The participants were selected based on their experience with marketing automation and B2B content marketing initiatives. During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences with marketing automation and online engagement marketing. These interviews were an average of 76 minutes and took place on Zoom.

Findings – The findings illustrate how online engagement manifests differently in different stages of the customer journey. In particular, the findings emphasise the importance of considering engagement before a prospect becomes a customer and illustrates how AI-fuelled technologies such as marketing automation enable the capture of such insights. Moreover, the findings reveal that the use of automation can drive engagement through personalised, instantaneous, and responsive interactions that often cannot be effectively matched with manual efforts. Consequently, the findings indicate that prospects are engaging with the selling organisation before purchase, and even before humans (e.g. marketer or salesperson) are involved.

Practical implications – The findings of the study illustrate clear benefits for employing marketing automation for B2B engagement marketing initiatives. For managers, the study provides actionable insights for creating effective engagement marketing strategies utilising marketing automation. Additionally, the study addresses ways to measure online engagement with both prospects and customers throughout the complex B2B journeys. Furthermore, the study uncovers facilitating factors that impact the success of such engagement marketing initiatives.

Originality / value – While Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) have acknowledged how customer engagement behaviours may extend beyond the transaction to include the experiences of potential customers, a large portion of academic inquiry has focused on engagement as a post-purchase activity (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Thus, the findings of the study extend our understanding of B2B engagement by considering engagement that occurs prior to the first purchase. Secondly, this study contributes to our understanding of the role of marketing automation in both stimulating and maintaining B2B online engagement throughout the customer journey, further aiding our understanding of the potential of non-human actors (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016) in fostering engagement.

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