Leveraging Trade Associations for B2B Marketing

Trade associations do a lot more than host conventions and publish membership magazines. Associations also have resources and connections that make them valuable partners for B2B marketers.

Learn how to use these essential organizations to improve your company’s reputation, develop relationships with C-level professionals and tap into reliable, in-depth knowledge about your industry that can guide your marketing efforts.

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Improve Your Reputation

A trade association represents the ideas of an industry. Leading companies like to associate themselves with those ideas -- not only because it’s the right thing to do, but also because it improves their standing within their industries.

That’s why the logos of the biggest corporations appear prominently at trade shows, conventions and training events organized by trade associations. It’s also why it behooves B2B marketers to explore the opportunities of working with trade associations.

“In almost every case, [an] association has credibility in the market,” says JP Moery, president of Moery-LAI, a consultancy that helps trade associations meet their goals. “They bring together the most influential people in the space. As a marketer, that’s who I want to reach most of the time.”

Trade associations cannot afford to play favorites, which makes them a trusted ally of B2B marketers hoping to enhance a company’s reputation among its peers. “The agnostic voice that half of an advertising budget goes to waste, but the ad buyer never knows which half,” Engel says that when ads target association leaders, there’s a “better-than-average chance that this isn’t the half that’s wasted.”

Van Ullen points to a host of ways companies can work with trade associations to benefit their industries while burnishing their brands. IAB, for instance, has programs for digital salespeople, ad operations departments, vendors to ensure brand safety, and more. “These opportunities can really set an organization and its employees apart,” she says.

From a marketer’s perspective, the biggest names in an industry have a strong motivation to co-sponsor events, research and efforts to establish certification standards. “The ability to claim a thought-leadership role within a trade organization can be a real differentiator for a company,” Van Ullen says.

The marketing channels for trade associations -- conventions, newsletters, seminars, membership magazines -- can be powerful venues for marketers hoping to place advertisements where they’ll be seen by the highest echelons in an industry.

“There’s a reasonable chance they’re actually going to be paying attention and see your ad,” says Elizabeth Engel, CEO and chief strategist at Spark Consulting. Alluding to the famous adage that half of an advertising budget goes to waste, but the ad buyer never knows which half, Engel says that when ads target association leaders, there’s a “better-than-average chance that this isn’t the half that’s wasted.”

Connect with Strong Networks of Decision Makers

Trade associations can give B2B marketers some of their best access to company leaders who are deciding which products are chosen and which are declined. These leaders are also some of the most engaged people in the industry.

One example published in B2B Magazine illustrated how Toshiba America Medical Systems, a provider of diagnostic imaging systems, used trade associations to build contacts with leaders of the largest companies in its target market. Toshiba’s systems often cost more than $1 million, so top executives of health care companies typically have to be brought into the buying process.

Toshiba used trade association contacts to reach the leadership of hospitals and other health care providers. It also partnered with a trade association to create a grant to help hospitals and imaging centers improve patient care. A Toshiba representative said the company’s sales rose 11% over a five-year span that saw widespread declines in the industry.

Trade associations can also help you build the sort of broad networks that reflect how organizations make decisions today. It’s not about finding that one go-to person inside a company, Moery cautions. “A lot of these decisions are more collaborative than ever before. ‘Get to the decision maker isn’t accurate,’” he says. “Rarely are there decisions made by a single person.” Instead, marketers should want to connect with two or three people involved in the decision-making process. “You get multiple bites at the apple that way,” Moery says.

Moery encourages connecting with trade association leaders involved in lobbying and agenda-setting for the industry. “Marketers should align with what’s valued by members, including policy work,” he says.

B2B marketers developing these connections need to bear in mind how trade associations work, says Steven Mandurano, global lead for marketing communications and public relations for the Merchant Risk Council.

“Trade associations are not corporate America,” says Mandurano, who has worked with trade associations for more than five years. “Many of the boards are made up of volunteer leaders who may not be experienced in business fundamentals.

“The good news, above all else, is that many associations have the flexibility to approve and move forward on specific projects.”

Trade associations can be an important bridge between B2B marketers and industry thought leaders, but it’s up to the marketing folks to make the most of these connections. Events, committees meetings, town halls and webinars go only so far. “We play matchmaker,” Van Ullen says, “but it’s up to you to get the second date.”

TIP: Associations bring together the most influential people in a market.

TIP: Aim to connect with everyone who is involved in the decision-making process.
Access Reputable Data About the Industry

Reliable data is critical to developing an authoritative B2B marketing campaign. Trade associations can be an excellent resource because they frequently survey their membership and glean wisdom about the marketplace that might not be available anywhere else.

“A big charge of most trade organizations is to produce statistically important research and insights members can use to better hone their products and buy and sell more efficiently,” Van Ullen says. “Particularly now, technology is a big driver of creativity for marketers but the proliferation can be confusing.” Understanding the possible solutions can help a marketer get a leg up on the technology, Van Ullen says.

Mandurano says marketers who participate in surveys, industry discussions and networking events can gain access to industry metrics, benchmarking information and other valuable data that can drive sales. “However, the key is being involved and active,” he says.

Trade associations often can adapt to a wide array of data requests. “The most progressive of organizations are making their information open to marketers,” Moery says. Get the association on the phone and tell its representatives exactly what you want and let the organization develop its best customized proposal, he advises.

“If you’ve had a tactic that’s worked with other partners, ask for that,” Moery says. “If you have interesting content, white papers, etc., talk to the association about how to release that.”

In today’s complex technological ecosystem, Van Ullen says, trade associations can clarify how to most effectively find and connect with your consumers. “People are consuming more than ever, across multiple screens, so finding the best ways to streamline a conversation with your consumers is vital,” Van Ullen says.

B2B marketers need to do their homework and track the conversations that have the largest influence on their business. “And when you join a trade association, be cognizant of your resources and assign them wisely,” Van Ullen says. “The more deeply engaged you become in the topics that matter to you most, the better.”

Mandurano sums up the appeal of collaborating with trade associations.

“As they say, ‘the value of one, the power of all,’” he says. “Associations can be a rallying point, ‘bringing all of the players together for thoughtful dialogue that supports everyone’s needs.’”

Conclusion

B2B marketers who attend conventions, scan industry blogs daily and sign up for training seminars already enjoy the value that trade associations add for their members. It’s only a small step from there to start tapping the associations’ ability to enhance a company’s reputation and provide reliable data to drive marketing campaigns.

And, finally, working with trade associations is good for everybody from the floor sweepers to the C-suite executives. As Van Ullen puts it, “a wise man once said, ‘the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,’ and being a part of a larger membership body allows for collective problem solving that helps raise all boats.”

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