

**C**oercing your customers to be your business advocates is the ultimate challenge for most or commercial entities. Much has been written about this but despite that, it's still a major challenge in these times of fleeting loyalties and increasing price sensitivity.

Since brand advocacy is present more in business-to-consumer (B2C) rather than business-to-business (B2B), is there a way for B2B entities to identify potential brand advocates who can spread a good word about their businesses?

Brand advocates and the stories they can tell would be an easy way to help ensure that your content, client lists and references are inspiring to new business prospects.

Power is shifting from sellers to buyers across all industries, and most B2B organisations are seeing this in practice where their prospects have already researched and formed an opinion about the sellers concerned before approaching them. When you have much less control over the sales process, you need advocates who will educate prospective customers, and create an interest in your products and services.

In the case of B2B, the number of customers is less than that in a B2C context and the role of a good advocate will be most valuable. So harnessing and nurturing this vocal minority can provide substantial returns, which range from increased sales and brand awareness, to combatting negative press and poor customer opinion.

Plough through your employee base to find suitable brand advocates because they're among the most influential advocacy groups you will find in your organisation. Leveraging

IMAGE



“It's important to keep things simple”

## THE TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

**Dr. Muneer Muhamed** calls for engaging brand advocates at the beginning

employees is one of the easiest ways in which a B2B enterprise can do this since the company has direct control over communication with this audience – including recruitment as well as any corresponding incentive programmes.

It's fairly straightforward to implement policies regarding social engagement and reward people for participating in it.

One of our clients has done this to its benefit by encouraging employees to be very active on the employment oriented social network LinkedIn. The client emphasised that this is important and part of an employee's job; it encouraged them to create a profile, as well as initiate connections with friends and colleagues.

The management then offered rewards ranging from movie tickets to holiday vouchers from vacation ownership companies when employees met the basic milestones. However, the greatest challenge was providing material for employees to write about – which is where a content marketing tool for social media such as SocialToaster can come in handy to make it easy for employees to share corporate content.

Apart from having a clear line of communication to employees,

the management also has a greater degree of control over what's actually being said by them on social media based on the policies they create for such communications.

For many B2B companies, this is a key area of concern in terms of execution and can be readily addressed if the target advocacy group consist of employees who are subject to parameters put in place on the basis of management policy.

Organisations can use a similar approach with other potential advocacy groups such as partner or vendor companies. The keys to success is identifying the source of the audience, mapping out a plan for engaging important members of that audience and executing an ongoing communications plan.

By setting up a customer advocacy board, organisations can provide a meaty incentive for customers to participate in quarterly meetings. This not only gathers valuable feedback for board members on keeping customers happy but also creates a built-in network of advocates who are invested in the entity's success. These interactions can then be used in customer stories and testimonials, which help draw people to the corporate website.

And by creating an online community of advocates, management can meet the members periodically. Additionally, the members can engage in online discussions amongst themselves and with your representative regularly. In such community discussions, management can offer an incentive for members who are interested in being part of longer term programmes to be a reference for customers, provide testimonials, case studies and so on.

It's important to keep things simple and easy for those who want to be advocates for your brand. The moment obstacles appear, advocates will become uninterested in championing the brand in question. Encourage them to share, use digital communities to facilitate discussion and thank them for their efforts. And importantly, listen and respond to their feedback.

Too often, brand advocates aren't recruited and nurtured until an organisation is in some sort of crisis. It's better and smarter to invest in creating programmes that track, engage and help maintain brand advocates, so that you can leverage them to promote and expand your business.



Dr. Muneer Muhamed is the cofounder and chief evangelist of a nonprofit organisation.