4 KEYS TO ATTRACTING ENGINEERS TO MANUFACTURER WEBSITES

Business has changed following the COVID crisis—that is no surprise. What is surprising is the impact those changes created for engineers. The two-year office hiatus resulted in many working from home or in environments where manufacturers and distributors could not physically visit engineers. This drove many engineers to search for product information online. While manufacturers have been evolving their sites, COVID accelerated the need for change. No longer is brochureware acceptable to product influencers and decision-makers when compared to a viable website. On top of that, the newest generation of engineer has started in the workplace, creating a need for new and improved methods of accessible product information and sales capabilities.

Engineers now expect a B2C experience from manufacturer sites. They expect manufacturers to anticipate their needs and offer intuitive solutions.

Layer One Media, a marketing technology company that helps manufacturers and distributors elevate their digital customer experience, sought to better understand the needs of its customers' site visitors – engineers. Layer One commissioned Channel Marketing Group to solicit input from engineers in multiple industries to better understand the engineer's online journey and their expectations.

The research revealed:

- Engineer expectations have changed. They want better information, easily, that is actionable.

- For project prototyping, engineers want easy access to samples and software, and are willing to purchase online.

- Online search by engineers increased and will continue to be an important part of the product research and product specification process.

With input from almost 300 engineers, Channel Marketing Group identified four keys to helping manufacturers attract engineers to their websites.

1. Invest in critical content
2. Make Site Search simple
3. Design digital-first
4. Convert search to action

METHODOLOGY

At the end of 2021, Channel Marketing Group surveyed and spoke to engineers to gain their insights. This customer research generated valuable feedback to guide manufacturers on how to evaluate their site and provides a roadmap for improvement.
During this period more than 260 engineers responded to an online survey and another 30 were interviewed. Individuals ranged from entry level engineers to product development personnel and management. Entry level and seasoned personnel responded equally.

Engineering disciplines included design, R&D, mechanical, construction, process engineers and electrical engineers. Twelve percent of respondents described themselves as system integrators.

Additionally:

- 57% of respondents had less than 5 years' experience whereas 17% had more than 16 years of experience.
- 60% were working from home at the time of the survey, with another 23% working occasionally from home. This is a significant workplace change that impacts supplier interaction with engineers.
- 45.5% of survey respondents conduct product searches 2-3 times a week with another 40% searching at least once a week.
- 89% view the web as their primary research tool.

CURRENT STATE OF MANUFACTURER WEBSITES

Respondents were first asked about the current state of manufacturer websites in their totality.

When asked "Generally speaking, do you find that manufacturers' websites are comprehensive enough to meet your needs?", 43% of responding engineers feel that there is room for improvement.

Some of the areas where engineers stated they would like to see improvement include:

- "CAD files are very helpful when determining suitability of a product. Price and availability are also very common reasons why we call support."

- "Better cross referencing when we don't know the exact part number".

- "Easier access to product-specific information."

- "Fewest clicks possible to get to product specific info."
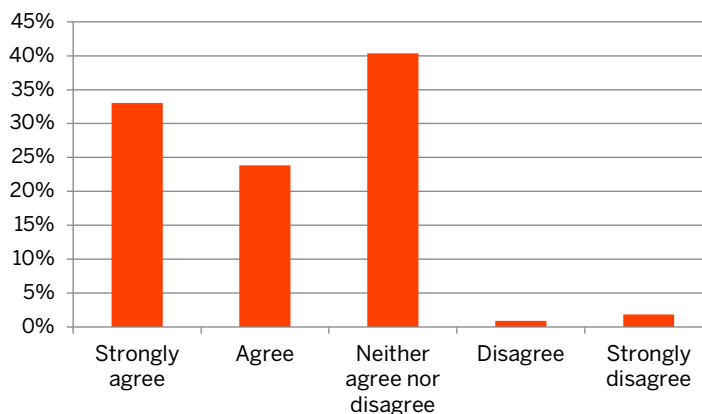
- "Most manufacturers cover the information very well for what I'm looking for. Some, however, do not, and I've learned not to consider those manufacturers simply because I can't get the information readily from their website."

- "Easy access to technical information and ratings."
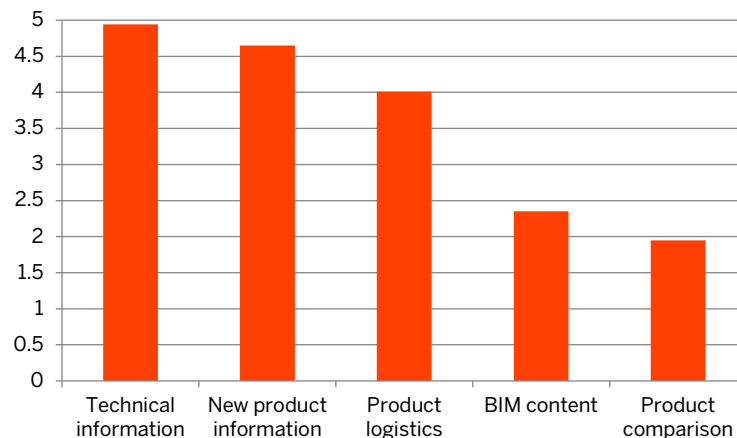
Engineers want to see additional information relating to BIM modeling information, when appropriate, and product comparisons.

In interviews, many engineers commented that product comparisons across suppliers is beneficial, albeit a challenge for a manufacturer, and hence they use distributor websites to gather these insights. They would like to be able to compare similar products from a manufacturer on the manufacturer's site to determine the most appropriate product to use for their application.

This information is all well and good—but what does it mean for the modern manufacturer or distributor?

I.   INVEST IN CRITICAL CONTENT

Engineers want manufacturers to share all their product information online, and they require certain types of information. They include:

- Brochureware

- Product Content

- Value-Added Tools

Brochureware is best defined as information about the company, its markets and product offering. This is the basics of "who, what, where and why" that explains your company.

Product Content is the "what" you sell. This relates to your product offering and includes all the information that an engineer, and other buyers, need to know about your product. Buyers often require a list of features, benefits, colors, materials, weight and measurements, spec sheets, graphics, 3D imagery, MSDS, safety sheets and more. Application is another important element that correlates to a product. Leading companies also integrate site functionality that enables engineers to compare products as well as find complementary products.

Value-Added Tools can differentiate a site to an engineer or system integrator. These include BIM files, CAD files, IES files (lighting), configurators, case and use studies, white papers, technical insights, reviews and more. These features help differentiate a site and add value to engineers and others who visit the site. The chart below gives a general overview of the types of content engineers are most interested in.
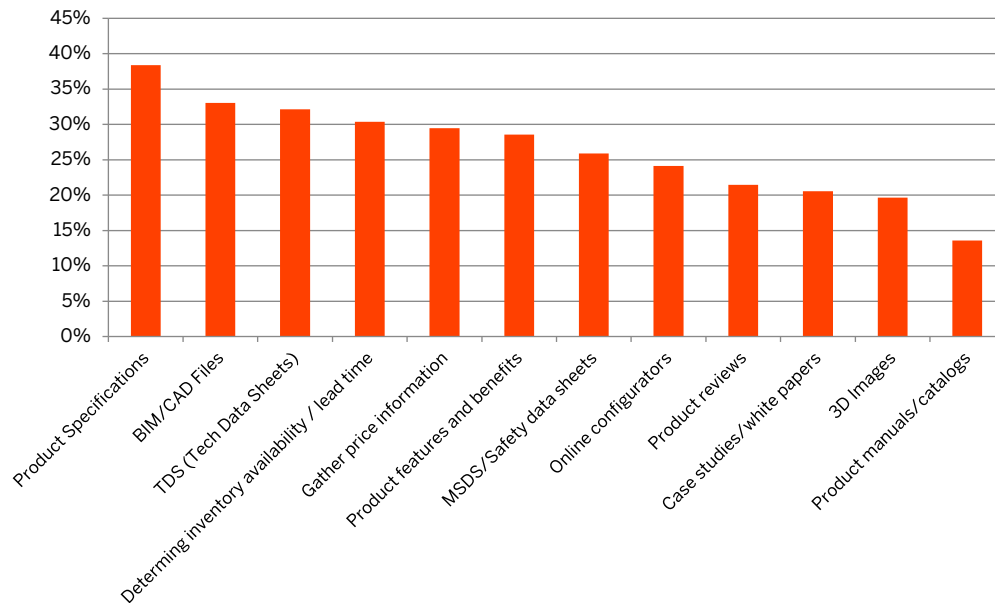
According to a design engineer at a system integrator "We are hiring and the new engineers, who don't have as much familiarity, will tend to use Google, and do much of their research online. For those of us who have been here awhile, we use our existing manufacturer websites when we can't get in contact with a salesperson." He further commented, "The business is changing and with the impact on travel the past two years field offices and distributor salespeople have missed a window to develop relationships, like we have, with the newer engineers. So, I do see a growing trend of using the web by our teams."

Another design engineer said, "CAD files are important (3D SOLIDWORKS). If the site doesn't offer CAD files, I move on to another manufacturer who does offer CAD."

An engineer at a metals forging manufacturer commented, "The electronics manufacturers I deal with have a far better web support system than other component suppliers. I need dwg files in SOLIDWORKS' format for small discreet parts and occasionally for electrical control products." Interviews also revealed that engineers desire product videos explaining the technical aspects, and applications, of the products.

These comments lead to the conclusion that, without comprehensive content, engineers will migrate to other sites to gather the information that they need to make informed decisions.

II.   MAKE SEARCH SIMPLE

Engineers gravitate to sites that they can easily find as well as those where they can easily find the information that they need. Most companies know this is the foundation of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM). Most companies are already invested in it and there are multitudes of articles on how to conduct a SEO/SEM audit.

However, this does not have much bearing when an engineer arrives on your site. How can they orient themselves to your site's landscape? Can they search for (and easily find) the product or service they want to see? If they cannot intuitively, and quickly, find what they need they will abandon your site. There are many other sites that may be able to provide the information they need, resulting in a lost sale or conversion.

Considering that engineers are visiting manufacturer websites in search of product information, the importance of "site search" is critical.

Aside from the completeness of product content, two of the key drivers of product search is the search functionality and website speed. Engineers were asked "How easily are you able to find specific products when searching on a manufacturer's site?

Unfortunately, only 23.4% rated product search on manufacturer sites as either "relatively easy or very easy". This is a strong indication that manufacturers should re-evaluate how easily engineers, and others, can quickly gather the information that they need from the manufacturer's site. While there are many different search technologies available, a key component that should be considered, according to a director of engineering is to "consider gathering the voice of the customer or conducting some focus groups or at least experiment on their own (the manufacturer's) engineers."

Survey respondents were asked to rank how well various sites helped them find the products and services they seek. According to the graph below, a Google keyword search is the easiest process for an engineer. This is followed by searching for products on Amazon, on industry-specific marketplaces, on a preferred distributor website and then on manufacturer websites and distributor websites, in general. The stark drop-off from Google to ecommerce marketplaces indicates that companies who want to boost their digital sales need to focus on their search capabilities.

In addition, companies need to consider the type of engineer who is looking at their site and making a purchase. For example:
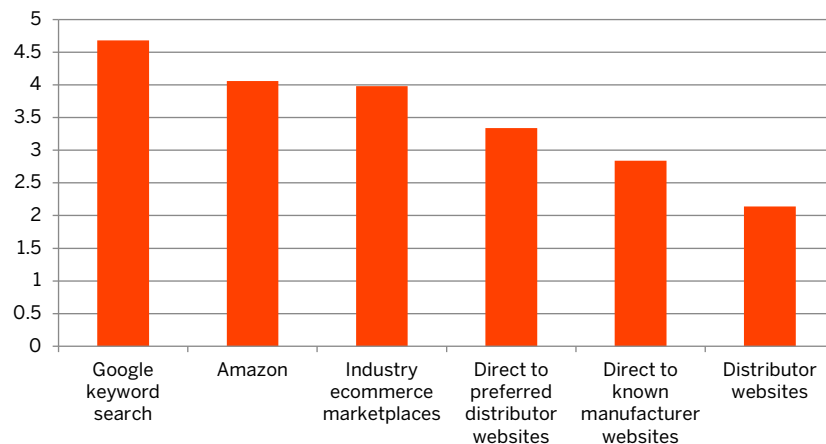
- Design engineers normally work with a blank sheet of paper in the product selection process. They depend on product application and usage as well as listing information. They rely on white papers or case studies that speak to the products used in specific applications or

environments. Material composition is often a consideration at this stage to determine its viability or approved use in applications.

- Manufacturing engineers and integrators often are already working with product guidance and are more concerned with technical specs and dimensions. They also expressed a desire to have access to competitive comparison information. For any factory automation protocols they expect that network protocol requirements and listings are called out - ideally with hyperlinks to details.

Sites that are purpose-built for search, and commerce, will likely outperform sites lacking relevant product information. Manufacturer and distributor websites are the most difficult for engineers to investigate. Many companies use out-of-the-box solutions for their search functionality, which fail to account for specific needs in specific markets and can be notoriously clunky and inaccurate. When designing for site search, manufacturers and distributors need to take their time in choosing a search solution and partner.

III. DESIGN DIGITAL-FIRST

The landscape has shifted dramatically in the wake of COVID, combined with a generational shift in the work landscape. Several engineering department managers noted newer engineers had received less exposure to branded suppliers and hence did not have personal relationships to rely upon during COVID. Those engineers either remained with branded lines that the company was already familiar with or took the initiative to search online for alternatives. It is evident engineers are shopping similarly as they do when they are the consumer, where usability and customer experience are at the forefront of the site. A company's digital design can determine whether it wins--or fails--with this new generation of engineers.

Engineers are seeking information focused on enhancing product design, supporting new facilities and/or product lines and seeking replacement parts, as indicated in the graph below.

Surprisingly almost 34% of respondents state that they are seeking new suppliers, possibly in response to supply chain issues with current suppliers or to support value- engineering initiatives. Almost 30% are looking for the latest in product information from a supplier which could be new products or additional information that they do not have readily available. In some instances, this could be installation information.
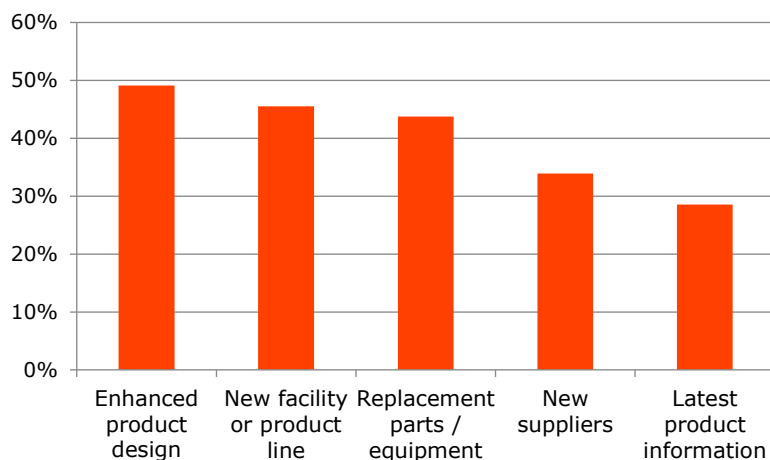
When engineers search online, almost 50% first seek manufacturer websites and then alternatively view distributor websites. This can mirror the B2C experience, where customers travel from site to site to find the information they need. Many respondents shared that the distributor websites they

visited have extensive product information, quality value-added content and interactive tools that can support them such as live chat with technical personnel, configurators, and layout tools, and the ability to compare products across suppliers. This content advantage bodes well for their chances to gain and retain customers.
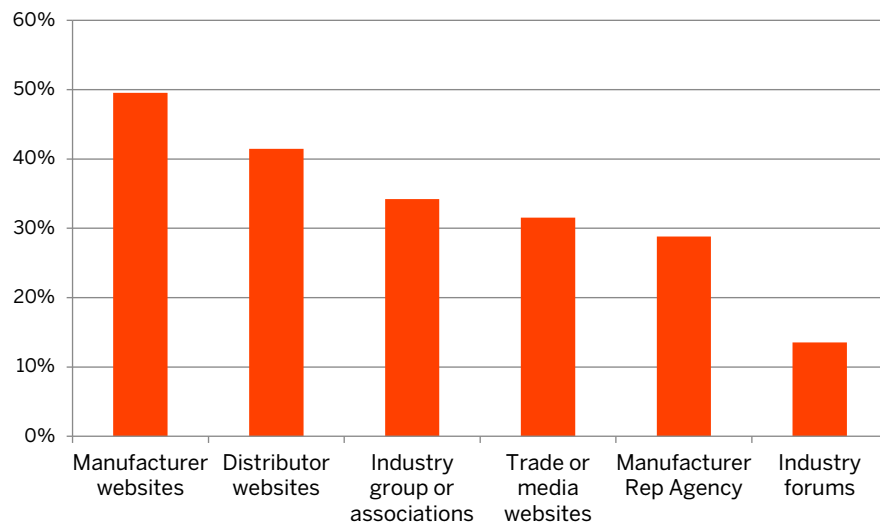
41% of respondents shared that they seek information initially on distributor sites. These can be distributors that their companies have a pre-existing purchasing relationship with or are more engineering focused. This highlights the need for manufacturers to syndicate their content to their distributors and

ensure that their content is displayed on the distributor's site.

A frustration for many engineers is that product filters are lacking. They desire filters based upon key product attributes, material, functionality, and application. Further, they want search functionality that integrates industry-specific terms (or industry "slang") as well as generic terms. Searching by a manufacturer's specific nomenclature is "frustrating" according to an automation engineer.

A plant engineer at an HVAC manufacturer commented "Search functions on manufacturer sites expect that you use 'proper terms' to get you close to usable results. It is much more difficult to search for a product when the general name or common name isn't available as a search term."

Further, PDF product catalogs should have hyperlinks to products on the website so that spec sheets can be downloaded, according to a design engineer. This would eliminate the need to copy the part number into the product search field.

Engineers also visit other sites for information, albeit these sites may be more for application-oriented information. As the chart shows, industry associations, trade publication websites, rep agencies and industry forums also attract site traffic. This reinforces the fact that manufacturers need robust content marketing initiatives to support improving brand awareness as well as generating demand.

IV.   CONVERTING SEARCH TO ACTION

While engineers are primarily interested in searching for information that will enable them to complete projects, there are several actions that would enhance their experience. These actions range from receiving various levels of support to accessing information that they can share with others to purchasing nominal amounts of material.

When asked about what support they desire from a manufacturer's website, almost 50% want to be directed to a local salesperson or distributor.

Further, the same percentage wanted to order a sample.

Next, they want to check inventory. While this may be a phenomenon due to current supply chain issues, it highlights that they need access to material to verify viability of the product for their project.

Additionally, they may need more product detail or desire to "chat" with someone who can share technical expertise.

When it comes to purchasing:

- 40.4% are open to purchasing direct from a manufacturer, however, they recognize that this may not be at the most advantageous price due to distributor relationships or that their purchasing department may have negotiated special pricing.

  According to a design engineer for an automation company, "The challenge is that if the manufacturer does not have online sample ordering access, you're stuck dealing with a local distributor who has minimum order requirements. If you don't have a contact or existing relationship with the local office the simple purchase, or obtaining a sample, can be a HUGE challenge."

- 22.9% shared that they currently purchase some material directly from at least one of their suppliers.

- 20.2% would like to order samples directly from a manufacturer and 8.3% would like to receive information or literature from the manufacturer.

In addition to purchasing, engineers expressed interest in being able to download trial versions of software and configuration or design tools, as applicable.

COVID did have an impact on engineers' online purchasing with 33.1% reporting that they have somewhat or dramatically increased their online purchasing over the past 18-24 months with another 46.8% reporting that their online purchases remained "the same."
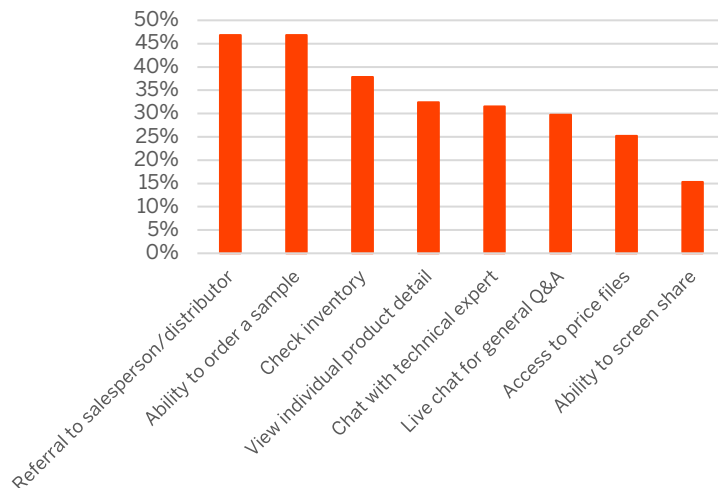
While their online purchasing did increase, engineers, and their companies, typically purchase from more traditional channels. Much of this is due to existing purchasing relationships and internal processes.

One electrical engineer said he prefers that "the manufacturer and local distributor work together in the supply chain" as this is the most efficient model for him.

Aside from purchasing online, there are a few other categories of activity that engineers can complete to be engaged with your products and marketplace.
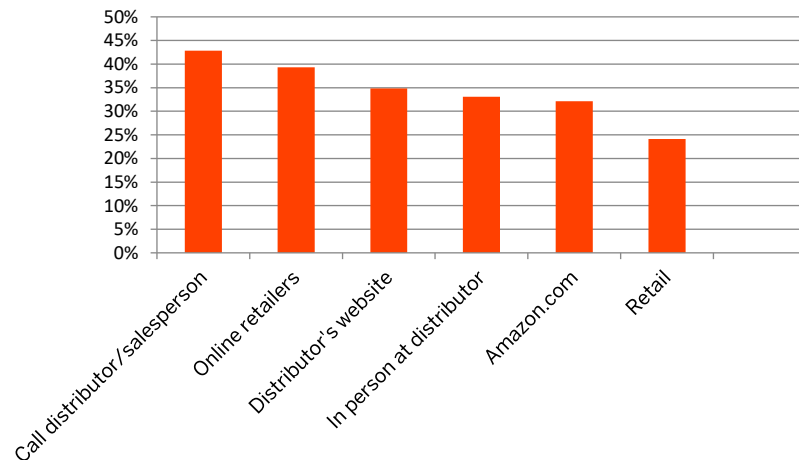
Information Sharing

- 88% are willing to share an email address with a manufacturer to gain direct access to product specifications and case studies. A caveat, however, is that they do not want to be inundated with email messaging. Channel Marketing Group research shows higher email open rates for distributor and manufacturer rep emails than for manufacturer emails. Engineer feedback reveals that the reason for this is that the engineers do not always need information on the products that the manufacturer is promoting.

    o It is also important to recognize that every industry has a different communication cadence; make sure to recognize and account for this reality as you look to gain the ability to communicate with your prospects.

- 75.9% are open to registering a project on a manufacturer's website to receive product updates, however, they do not expect to receive pricing for projects that they register.

    o 42.6% prefer to receive pricing from their preferred distributor with another 34.3% receptive to receiving the information from the manufacturer's recommended distributor (in those instances where the engineer does not have a preference) and only 11% want pricing from the manufacturer.

    o Only 12% stated that they would not provide project information to the manufacturer in exchange for valued information.

- 61.1% of respondents share information from a manufacturer's website via a PDF or a link to the site

- 38.9% share information via LinkedIn

- Only 14.8% post information or comments in blogs or online forums.

- 20% frequently post a product review on a site with another 50% stating that they "occasionally" do this. Few manufacturer sites offer this functionality, which is frequently found on B2C sites but is also an integral function on Amazon. And while few will post a

review, 85% state that they trust product user reviews, indicating that there are opportunities if "influencers" can be identified.

Follow-up

Aside from online purchasing of samples, the two most important CTAs (call to action) that can emanate from a website is a request for follow-up and a request for quotation.

- 76% of engineers responded that they prefer that a manufacturer proactively follow-up after their visit, especially if they have shared some information, however,

    o Only 47.3% desire an email

    o 32.7% want a telephone call, and

    o 20% desire a call from their preferred distributor, or at least a local distributor.

This desire for a follow-up, as well as the desired modes of follow-up, indicate that frequently engineer's questions go unanswered. This is an opportunity to share more information, gather information about the project and identify potential next steps in the sales process. Further, this is an opportunity for site developers to gather insights on what additional content should be added to the site so that it can more effectively support the sales process and enhance site satisfaction for engineers.

Regarding quotations, engineers either seek additional support or would be open to online solutions. As the findings highlight, many go to either a distributor or have an internal person, such as purchasing, handle quotations.

Alternatively, a significant percent would like access to either price files to help them with budgeting knowing that if they purchase, they can negotiate better pricing, or for the supplier to enable them to upload a bill of materials to be quoted either by the manufacturer or through a distributor.
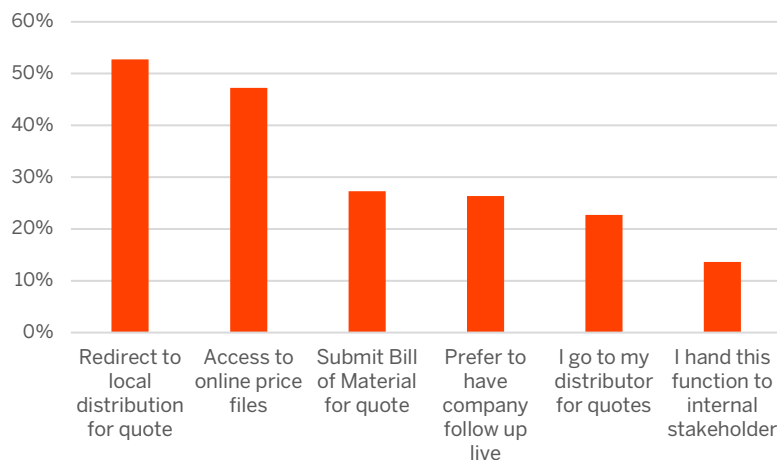
CONCLUSION

According to engineers, manufacturer websites need to be more user-friendly. Many interviewees agreed with the comment that "The electronics suppliers consistently receive praise for excellent website design. Product categories were found on the home page, a single click to access specific products and then access to both catalog PDFs as well as downloaded product drawing in multiple 2D and 3D formats for import into AutoCAD and SOLIDWORKS." Further, engineers see that "In a growing number of markets, the changes in distribution, either due to employee losses or company acquisitions, caused them to adjust the way they seek information, shop, buy, and do business.

Employees are changing companies in the same market at a rate previously unseen. Distributor loyalty is at risk and dependence on manufacturer web and field office support has increased."

These dynamics, coupled with the effects of reduced personal interaction over the past two years and a changing engineer workforce, have increased engineer reliance on manufacturer websites for information to help them do their job.

Manufacturers, and their distributors, that have valued content on their sites are able to gain a competitive advantage in having their products specified for new opportunities.

Manufacturers can capitalize on the increased traffic to their sites by continuously evaluating their websites and identifying opportunities to:

- Invest in critical content

- Improve their SEO and, importantly, their site search

- Offer a superior online experience so engineers find what they need quickly, and

- Evolve their site from solely an information source to one that delivers information, insights, and buying paths that enable smoother and quicker answers and sales.

ABOUT LAYER ONE

Layer One is a marketing technology company that partners with its clients to elevate their digital customer experience. We are honest, transparent, and live by the idea success is in the details. Accordingly, we believe the end game is not launch. Rather, it is the beginning of an enlightened overall digital strategy aimed at delivering high quality leads and greater sales.

Layer One helps companies deploy, and enhance, digital experience platforms, eCommerce infrastructure and gain insights through advanced analytics and data to convert buyer behavior into actions.

To learn more about Layer One, visit www.layeronemedia.com.

ABOUT CHANNEL MARKETING GROUP

Since 2001, Channel Marketing Group has offered strategy and marketing consulting services to manufacturers, distributors, manufacturers reps, technology companies and associations focused on the electrical, lighting, HVAC, and plumbing industries.

With its principals' channel expertise, the company serves the broader construction and industrial trades.

To learn more about Channel Marketing Group, visit www.channelmkt.com.