



Should Your Content Be Behind Forms?

Mike Volpe **VS** David Meerman Scott

What is the right approach to inbound marketing—putting forms in front of your content for lead generation purposes or leaving the content totally free for distribution purposes?

In an effort to tackle this question, Mike Volpe, HubSpot's VP of Marketing, and David Meerman Scott, HubSpot's Marketer in Residence, engage in a debate. Read their arguments in this fun, Twitter-shaped conversation!





@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

At one level, yes, it's great to have your content spread far and wide as much as possible. On the flipside, though, most marketers have goals in terms of the number of leads they need to generate and you are responsible to your boss. Unless you have some forms in front of your content, you aren't going to generate any leads.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

This model is really driven from B2B marketing as practiced in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. It was developed before the Web because if you were going to give content to people, you had to have a form. In order to deliver a whitepaper, literally it had to be put in the mail or sent it by fax. Transferring that model to the Web doesn't take advantage of the opportunity the Web provides to spread ideas.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

There are lots of ways to spread your ideas online. They can spread a lot faster if you don't have any barriers but putting forms up doesn't mean there is no spreading. People receive some of our content without filling out a form. But again, we like to have that form there because it's something tangible we can give to our sales team. You get customers out of that, which is important for driving revenue and growth.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

The analysis I have done around form VS no form has suggested that there is a 50:1 ratio whether people will download or not. In other words, if you put up an eBook, a valuable piece of content, and you have a form in front of it, let's say you get 1000 downloads. My research suggests that if there was no form, you would have gotten 50 000 downloads—49 000 more people exposed to your ideas than you would have otherwise.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

There are two main reasons for that—one is that a lot of people will see the form and say, “Forget it. I don’t want to fill out the form.” The other reason is because the vast majority of people are unwilling to share a piece of content that has a form in front of it. A lot fewer people will blog and tweet something that has a form on it.



@mVolpe
Mike Volpe

That is a really good point. I know that on average we have about 500 different landing pages and forms on the HubSpot site. They are all targeted towards people coming from individual places. Because we do that, we have a high conversion rate on average—about 28%, so for every 100 people who see the form, 28 fill it out.



@mVolpe
Mike Volpe

Because we target it well and offer valuable content, the conversion rate is higher than most people’s averages. If I can get 10 000 people to see that page and I can get 28 000 people to fill it out, 28 000 contacts may be more valuable than even 50 000 people seeing the content. That is really where the debate comes down to. The question is what is the value of a view or a download VS someone who has actually filled out the form.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

Do you have to beat people over the head to get them to buy? I know this has been the B2B sales process for decades and you are a VC-funded company. Is that the only model? Is that the right model?



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

I think there is a continuum with that type of model—it can run from having no sales people and having a free trial that you can use online to the other extreme—having a sales team doing hundreds of cold calls every day. We are somewhere in the middle. Certainly, there is this utopia of having no sales people and a product that does all the selling.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

That's great but I don't know if everyone can get there. I would at least advocate that having some content and asking people to fill out your forms is a better place to be than doing a lot of cold calling.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

Have you experimented with secondary offers? Make the vast majority of your content totally free, no registration required, and then at the end of every piece of major content—every eBook, every whitepaper—place an offer which requires a registration. So the majority of things are designed to spread, but the advanced content pieces ask for registration.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

We do some of those secondary offers and we do have some success with them. At the bottom of our blog articles, for instance, there are secondary offers. When we did that, we tripled the number of leads we were getting from the blog. That appears to have definitely worked. I think secondary offers are something people should experiment with.



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott

Imagine that you have a piece of content that has a form in front of it and you get 1000 downloads a year. The sales people have a list of 1000 people who wanted that piece of content. Now imagine that same piece of content was totally free and you got 50 000 downloads (50:1 ratio in play) and there was a secondary offer.



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott

And imagine in the secondary offer you got just a 2% response rate—that is still a 1000 people who fill out a form. And those 1000 people already read your content. I would argue that those 1000 people are better than lukewarm leads.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

It really comes down to what exactly those percentages are. Would you get the 50 000 downloads or not? Would you get the 2% response rate on the secondary offer? What marketers need to do is start to experiment and play with those ratios. Our own data has shown that people who respond to secondary offers or do multiple conversions, convert at a higher rate from a lead to sale and our sales team likes those better.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

But as a marketer, I am responsible every month or every quarter for a certain number of leads. And I am responsible to the sales person, I am responsible to the management team... It is really, really hard to set everything free and see what comes back.



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott

The idea of measurement is really tough. Should you be measured on leads and if you are, how do you define a “lead?” I’d like to argue that might not be the best way to measure a marketing department. You are able to measure your content and how it is spreading. You are able to measure sales. That sales metric is what truly matters. I’m just not sure that a form to get a piece of content should be defined as a “lead.”



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

One thing that we have done recently at HubSpot is grading our leads, and the lead goal that we have here in Marketing is not just the pure number of leads we generate, but we get a different number of points depending on what the lead did. So, for instance, if someone fills out a demo request form, those get 10 points. For someone who registers and downloads a whitepaper, we get one point.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

If it is a free trial, it is four points. Having a system like that has pushed us a little bit more in the direction of more free content. Maybe that is something people should be thinking about implementing at their own companies. That achieves a better alignment between marketing and sales and encourages more of the right behavior in marketing.



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott

It also encourages the right behavior in Sales because they are able to say, “This is a 10-point lead—I am going to contact that person first.” As opposed to the one-point lead, “Maybe I will get to that this afternoon.”



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

That is right. It also encourages the right behavior in Marketing where you are not trying to fill the sales person's time with work to do, but you are pushing them to the activities that are most likely to result in sales. Because in the end of the day, it is all about sales.



@dmScott
David Meerman Scott

One thing we didn't talk about is the number of questions to ask in a form. If you do a form, I am a big believer of including as few fields as possible.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

I think it is absolutely true that the more questions you have on your form, the lower your conversion rate is going to be. So you need to strike that balance between the value of the information and the number of leads you are going to generate. I think most marketers usually have too many questions.

FINAL THOUGHTS



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott

I would push the limits to optimize the heck out of high-value forms and do the absolute best to remove all the other forms. When people feel it is a barrier, it is a barrier. But when they are ready and eager, and excited to give you their information, that is the best.



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

Eventually, I would love to be in a place where I am generating enough free trials and demo requests and marketing audit requests that are enough to keep our Sales team busy and help us hit quota. In that case, I will be willing to take the forms off everything else and let that stuff spread and feed those more and more. I don't think we are there yet.

Who is right?

Share your thoughts with David and Mike! Tweet at them and let them know who you think won the debate!



@dmscott
David Meerman Scott



@mvolpe
Mike Volpe

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