

VIDEO 1: WHY INBOUND MARKETING?

In all great stories, the concept of the hero's journey is simple. Essentially, the beloved hero goes on a quest, faces untold difficulty, but rises victorious and returns home transformed. They have help on the way, of course. Often taking the form of a sage or wizard, there's usually someone who aids the hero on their adventure, providing guidance and advice so that the hero can grow into their fullest potential and achieve what they set out to do.

When it comes to inbound marketing, the role of the sage advisor falls to you. Every prospect and customer is on a quest to accomplish a set of goals. They might not know where their journey with you will lead them, but as a marketer, it's your job to act as a constant guide, when your visitors need you as a resource, and an expert ready for their questions when they need answers most. Why? It's your job to act as this constant advisor because your educational guidance builds trust and long-term growth for both you and your prospect or customer.

Content acts as your voice. It enables you to speak one-on-one with the tens, hundreds, and potentially thousands of these heroes who are looking for answers and insights on a regular basis. While in the past this could only be done through blog posts and site pages, advancement in technology has led to the rise of conversational tools like chatbots, live chat, and social media, so it's easier than ever to engage in conversation. It's as if your company is actually by their side, speaking directly to them as a person. This is how online content will enable you to begin developing meaningful one-to-one relationships, and do it at scale.

The rules of content, however, are constantly changing. In the past, writing 350-word pieces of content with the correct balance of links and keywords was sufficient to rank well and get in front of your ideal audience. As more companies began to create more content, search engines needed a new way to surface the most relevant information. Today, search engines have dramatically improved in their ability to determine user intent and select the correct websites, articles, and answers accordingly.

When the goal of your inbound marketing efforts is to create one-to-one relationships, the power of context is on your side. When you know your audience, you have insight into their motivations, goals, roadblocks, and behavior. This helps you create content that's timely, aligned, and personalized to fit their needs. You have the goal of providing the right information to the right person at the right time via the right channel, every single time.

Rather than forcing people to engage with you, you can focus your time and effort on sustainably attracting the right visitors and encouraging interactions with the most potential impact.

By creating content that educates and informs your prospects and customers with context, clarity, and creativity, you can start to build trust and establish yourself as a thought leader in your industry.

With inbound marketing, your content becomes part of a cross-channel holistic experience comprised of compelling conversion opportunities and exciting offers. With this content, you're able to build a relationship with your visitors, to gather information, and learn more about each individual.

By taking this relationship-focused approach to marketing, you're not just solving for your prospects' immediate needs, but also enabling their long-term growth. The value and insight your content provides enables your visitors to critically examine their problems so that they eventually arrive at the most natural solution.

Helping your visitors reach this conclusion positions you as a resource, one they can return to and recommend to others. The hero returning from their journey will always tell their stories and spread the word of their adventures. In this case, you're playing the part of an advisor who can help a new set of heroes.

So what does inbound marketing really mean? Inbound marketing is about creating one-to-one relationships that have a lasting impact on your visitors and your brand. How do you do this? You attract prospects and customers to your site through helpful content. You engage with them using conversational tools like email and chat and by providing value once they land there. And finally, you delight by continue to act as an empathetic advisor and expert. These steps form a single methodology: attract, engage, delight, and repeat. This cycle or "flywheel" of developing meaningful relationships will power your company's growth by creating more opportunity to sell and service down the line.

In marketing, it's important to remember that while the customer may be the hero, you have the opportunity to help educate and inspire them along the way. Ultimately, this relationship with your customers should span to all your teams—marketing, sales, and services—and create the opportunity so that everyone can grow better together.

VIDEO 2: HOW DOES THE INBOUND METHODOLOGY APPLY TO MARKETING?

So how do you do inbound marketing? Inbound marketing is a cycle of attracting, engaging, and delighting people. Let's consider, as a marketer, what tools, information, and resources you need to accomplish this for your company. You and your team will act as the main touch-point between prospects and your brand.

Your prospects are on a journey that will take them through stages of awareness, consideration, and decision-making. Make sure you're aligning with this journey as you apply the inbound methodology and the cycle of attract, engage, and delight.

Before you can initiate any relationship, you need to understand who you're trying to connect with. You want to develop content that's relevant to your audience and relates to the context of their current situation. You also want to start building awareness of your business in places where your prospects already are and where they'll be most ready to be exposed to your content. After all, many people are exposed to a brand before they ever visit that business's website.

Your visitors will have different levels of understanding on the best ways to overcome their challenges and accomplish their goals. You'll need to understand what their progression through the buyer's journey looks like, from awareness of the problem to consideration of the potential solutions and to decision-making. From there, you can create content that aligns with the needs of every visitor, no matter where they are in identifying their roadblocks and determining their solutions.

Creating buyer personas is also important because it helps you develop a trait that's at the heart of inbound: empathy. Building buyer personas helps you step into the shoes of your audience, gaining deeper insight into who they are as a person and what their goals are personally and professionally.

From there, you start to gain their trust by creating the content that best aligns with them as people. You showcase your value as an advisor by helping your visitors accomplish their goals and help them solve their exact problems.

To do so, you'll also need to know where your ideal audience is currently finding and engaging with new concepts and ideas. This will tell you where you'll need to put the contextualized content. Are they active on social media?

Consider how you're leveraging ads, engagement, and business pages on platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Are your buyer personas turning to search engines for research? Consider your content strategy and how you're breaking into snippets or ranking with content like pillar pages, blogs posts, or video content. Understand the problems they face—even if they haven't been able to define those problems themselves—and how to best remove any roadblocks that stand in the way of their goals.

For example, using social media advertising, you can build demographic audiences based on your buyer personas -- targeting your ads at these audiences allows you to ensure your content on social platforms is reaching the people most likely to find your guidance helpful and engaging. Use search advertising to reinforce your presence in those searches for which you offer the best guidance to your buyer at this stage in their journey. Search advertising allows you to ensure you appear for the specific keywords or phrases your buyer might be using. Avoid interruptive advertising aimed at distracting or tricking your buyers -- instead use advertising to be targeted, relevant and helpful.

That's your starting point. Creating awareness and aligning content so that it speaks directly to your audience. This is how you'll attract visitors.

Once a visitor begins to engage with content you've created, you enter the engage phase. You've already started to build trust. Now it's time to dive a little deeper with your buyer personas so that you can answer two very important questions:

1. What is the underlying problem that produced the initial roadblock, that caused them to seek you out?
2. How can you help them continue to solve for that problem?

This is where having helpful and human website design becomes paramount. You want to deliver an experience that caters to your leads' preferences from the moment they engage with your content. If they prefer to engage with your brand more directly, create a 1:1 conversational experience to guide a visitor through your website content without creating extra work for your team. If they aren't quite ready for a direct conversation, make sure you have website pages and conversion opportunities to empower visitors to learn more.

They're beginning to trust you. Now it's time to use that trust. Work with them to identify and remove the underlying issue that created the initial roadblock in the first place. As your prospects start to define and give a name to their problem or opportunity, make sure you're aligning your content efforts accordingly. Continue to use tools like live chat, messaging apps, and bots to answer your visitor's questions as they arise. Provide offers, both gated and ungated, that match their priorities as they move through awareness, consideration, and decision-making.

Again, consider how you might best be able to reach and connect with your leads using paid advertising. This helps you provide timely and relevant content when they need it the most, wherever your buyer is spending their time online.

During the engage stage, you should also be focusing on discovering more about your prospects, beyond just what your buyer personas tell you. As your leads gravitate towards certain pieces of content on your website and provide you with more information about their interests and problems, craft ads that are targeted based on this data with content offers most relevant to your buyer's questions.

Gradually collect details about them, and you can start to contextualize, segment, and personalize their experience with you and your company. Each email or message becomes that much more meaningful as you speak to them directly as a people rather than generalized, faceless visitor.

By the time you reach the delight stage, you've added enough value and removed enough roadblocks to cement your one-to-one relationship with a visitor. Ultimately, the goal of the delight phase is to empower people to think beyond their immediate roadblocks and grow with your company. By consistently acting as their go-to knowledge broker and support system, you can become the resource they recommend and evangelize to others.

And that brings us back to the attract phase of the inbound methodology. If you're truly focused on delighting your customers, they'll naturally refer their friends to you. Take your delight a step further and ask your customers questions about how you can improve your process. That, combined with the attract work we discussed earlier, will help power your company's long-term growth in a sustainable way.

VIDEO 3: WHAT DOES INBOUND MARKETING LOOK LIKE?

Understanding the fundamentals of your inbound marketing efforts will be what puts you on the path to success.

Remember, in the world of inbound, your prospects don't want to be sold to, they want to be educated. And inbound tactics can deliver the kind of information your prospects need to help them make smart, well-informed decisions.

The fundamentals of inbound marketing begin with five key pieces - contacts, buyer personas, the buyer's journey, content, and setting goals.

Let's start by covering contacts. Contacts, and a contacts database, are the most important tools you have in your inbound toolbox. They're the real people you provide value to who, in return, help you grow your business.

Your contacts are the heart of your inbound marketing efforts and those that are moving through each stage of the inbound methodology. To understand the importance of contacts let's define, what is a contact first.

A contact can be anybody your company markets to, sells to, partners with, engages with, or employs.

Your contacts are not names and email addresses inside your database but individuals you are building relationships with. A constant reminder of why inbound is and should always be customer-centric.

And when you involve marketing, sales, and services in your contacts strategy and having them use the same contacts database, you're creating alignment and consistency in not only your inbound marketing efforts but your whole inbound strategy.

A strong contact database is instrumental in allowing your business to grow. It helps you understand who you are marketing to and stores details and context about each contact in one central location. It is the back-end "context" system that stores information about your contacts and allows you to use that data to improve the way you market. Because every detail and every behavior is stored and easily accessible, it's easy to craft relevant marketing that feels more like a 1:1 conversation. You have easy access to all the information you need to understand and engage with your lead database and delight your customers.

As your contacts move through their path to purchase: like finding your website, converting, and eventually becoming customers, you want to gather as much contact information as possible. The more information you gather, the easier it will be for your marketing team to identify which contacts your business can successfully help and ultimately to delight.

Think of it this way. Imagine you work for a pet food company and you're tasked with sending an email about new dog food that you're releasing. If you were to talk to someone in person about this new food, you'd want to first ask them what type of pet they have. If they said a bird or a cat, you wouldn't tell them about your upcoming release. You gathered that information by asking them the right questions. Think of your contact database in the same way. You want to be able to segment your contacts by the type of pet they have, so that you're sending them relevant and helpful information. Make sure you're collecting the right information that you can use later on.

But having a strong contact database is not enough. How do you figure out the information that you'll need about your contacts?

This next fundamental piece of inbound marketing is buyer personas and the buyer's journey.

Since inbound marketing is customer-centric, you need to know who you're trying to reach.

You don't want just any traffic to your site, you want the right traffic. You want the people who are most likely to become leads, and, ultimately, happy customers. Who are the "right" people? The right people are your ideal customers, what are called your buyer personas.

Buyer personas are semi-fictional representations of an ideal customer, based on real data and some educated speculation about demographics, behaviors, motivations, and goals.

Personas are created through research, analysis, and taking a close look at who's already buying from you. They can help you get into the mindset of your potential buyers and create the right content.

They're the glue that holds every aspect of inbound together. When it comes to creating a great inbound strategy, it's not enough to know just who you're trying to reach, you also have to know what they want to see.

This brings us to the buyer's journey.

Every interaction your persona has with your organization should be tailored to where they are in the buyer's journey. The buyer's journey is the active research process someone goes through leading up to a purchase. Knowing the buyer's journey for your persona will be key to creating the best content possible.

Instead of talking about top, middle, or bottom of the funnel, the buyer's journey is made up of three stages: the awareness stage, the consideration stage, and the decision stage that portray the experiences your potential customers go through.

Everyone has gone through the buyer's journey. It's the path you take when you have a problem to solve, from researching potential solutions to purchasing one.

The awareness stage is when your prospect is experiencing and expressing symptoms of a problem or opportunity. They're doing education research to more clearly understand, frame, and give a name to their problem.

The consideration stage is when a prospect has now clearly defined and given a name to their problem or opportunity. They are committed to researching and understanding all of the available approaches and/or methods to solving the defined problem or opportunity.

The decision stage is when a prospect has now decided on their solution strategy, method, or approach. They are compiling a long list of all available vendors and products in their given solution strategy. They could also be researching to whittle the long list down to a short list and ultimately making a final purchase decision.

Website visitors or leads might interact with you for the first time in any of the different buyer's journey stages, but you need to have content prepared for each and every stage.

Once you understand your buyer personas and their buying journey, it's time to start doing inbound. Inbound can't exist without content, and that's why the next best practice is to create remarkable, tailored content.

Inbound marketing is content plus context. Your content is your marketing toolkit. Things like blogs, interactive tools, photos/infographics, videos, and ebooks/presentations work to attract, engage, and delight.

Context is who you're creating it for: you can't just write any blog posts, you have to write the right ones, tailored to who you're trying to reach and what they're interested in. The best content – the stuff that's really going to fuel your entire inbound strategy – has to be grounded in the correct context. It's not enough to just write a blog post or send out an email.

The content in that blog post and that email need to be tailored to who you're trying to reach (your persona) and what they're most interested in seeing (which depends on where they are in the buyer's journey.) This brings us to goal setting.

If you are not setting goals for your inbound marketing efforts then you will not be able to answer the critical question: Was I successful in my efforts? What do I need to optimize for next time? When setting out with your inbound marketing efforts you want to start from a place where you know what you want to achieve. Is it to gain more blog subscribers? Have people sign-up for a webinar? Increase traffic to your website over a set-period of time?

If you don't know where you want to go how will you know how to get there? Goal setting is one of the fundamental pieces of inbound marketing because it not only gives your content specific actions to progress towards but also helps you internally provide alignment between your marketing and sales team.

While you might be focused on your marketing efforts you want to make sure that what happens during the attract and convert stages of the inbound methodology sets up your sales team for success in the close stage.

When measuring the success of your inbound marketing efforts, there are so many metrics to choose from. Whether you decide to look at SEO rankings, landing page performance, an email's click-through-rate, you're sure to derive some insight into how your marketing is performing.

But don't get caught up in basing your decisions on marketing activities alone. Like having, let's say, 8,000 likes or followers on Facebook. Yes, that might feel like you should give yourself a pat on the back. But what does 8,000 Facebook-likes really mean? How many of those are customers? While it can be a goal, the metric doesn't offer much insight in terms of real business results. Instead, make sure to set goals that show how marketing helps your company hit the numbers and helps with growth.

Continued goal setting provides the necessary context internally for what your marketing efforts are achieving and the value you are providing to your contacts. And don't forget to set aside time for analysis on a regular basis - this could be daily, weekly, or monthly. This step will help you figure out how effective your inbound marketing efforts have been and how they can be improved.

Inbound marketing continues to help you adapt to the fast-changing needs of your buyers and with these five fundamentals you can create a fundamental foundation for building an inbound marketing strategy for success.