The Five Pillars of Inbound Maketing Success

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Introduction

Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.

Henry Ford

Years ago, businesses that published regular blog content were applauded for their content marketing prowess. Marketing teams that followed a documented SEO strategy were idolised, and those that optimised their strategy based on real data were envied. Today, these (and many more) marketing activities fall firmly into the one program: inbound marketing.

Strategy, content creation, amplification and distribution, analysis and optimisation, growth-driven website design, lead nurturing, and sales enablement - an inbound marketing program has several moving parts. Today, bringing them together is only a beginning. Keeping them together is progress. Having all of the gears of your marketing machine working together is inbound marketing success.
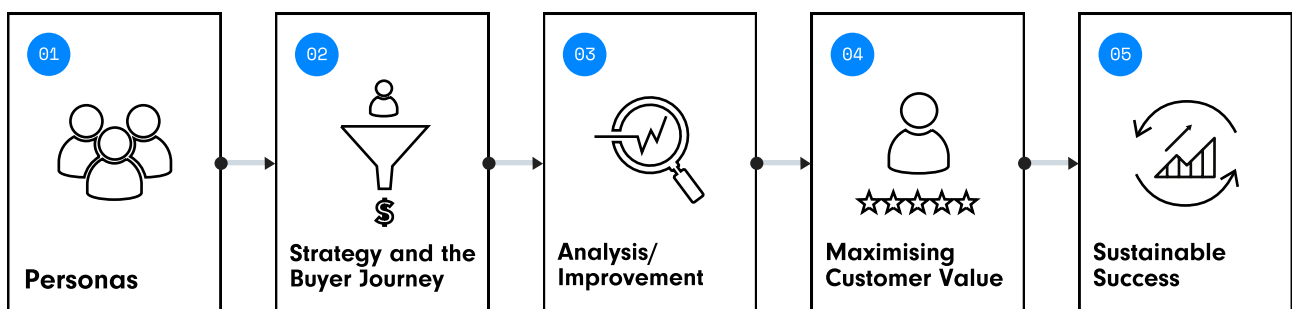
The creation, dissemination and measurement of content alone is a multidisciplinary process, which requires a carefully designed framework and collaboration between departments. As Gill Worby, Virgin's Head of Digital Marketing, says:

No one person or one team can own content. There is a massive need for strategic alignment and someone to lead that, but you can't take it all on yourself.

When you consider the countless other activities that are essential in any effective inbound marketing program, like optimisation, design and development, sales and marketing alignment and consistent data collection and analysis, it's easy to see how even small-scale inbound programs require significant legwork.

However, five pillars govern how businesses should approach each of these individual marketing activities:

01 Personas	02 Strategy and the Buyer Journey	03 Analysis/ Improvement	04 Maximising Customer Value	05 Sustainable Success

Pillar One: Personas

Buyer personas are the bread and butter of the inbound marketing methodology. These semi-fictional representations of your "ideal" buyers aim to shed light on your target audience, inform your marketing messages, your content formats, your keywords and your distribution channels.

Unfortunately, like many other guiding documents, buyer personas are often a "set it and forget it" asset. There are countless articles written about how to create a buyer persona, but not nearly as many on how to use them effectively within your marketing program. This is because their application is often limited by the accuracy of the documents themselves.

Some marketing organisations may feel that their buyers have changed, or that their initial customer research process was flawed. The truth is, both of these assertions are most likely correct. Buyer persona documents should be ever-evolving because no one gets it exactly right the first time. Even if they do, their customer profiles will be approaching obsolescence after a few months, because the way prospects navigate the digital environment is changing as rapidly as the environment itself.

Buyer Persona Best Practices in the Age of Rapid Change

How can businesses use buyer personas to guide their marketing activities, when in reality, their buyer's habits are changing rapidly? The answer isn't to make them more generalised, but to establish the systems and processes needed to form a constantly updating picture of your buyers, that changes as they do.

Below is a 3-part roadmap to consistently gathering information on your buyers and using it to guide your marketing efforts:

| 01 | 02 | 03 |
| Input Your Personas into HubSpot | Analyse the Underrepresented | Review and Revise |
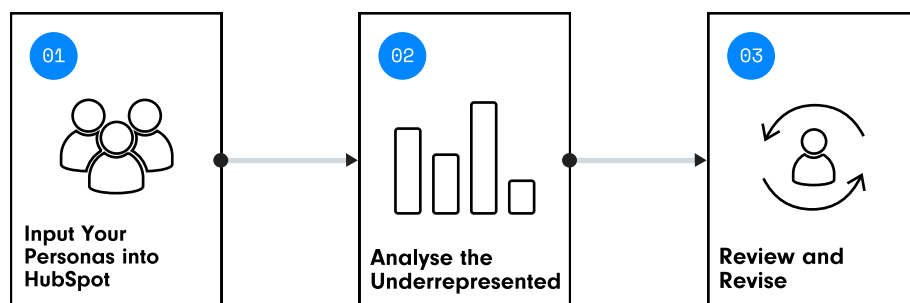
1. Input Your Personas into HubSpot

Mapping your buyer personas into HubSpot is an essential first step. Generally speaking, five individual personas should be enough to summarise your target customer base.

2. Analyse the Underrepresented

Once you have mapped your personas into HubSpot, you should begin analysing the volume of contacts who fall into these categories each month. A large portion of contacts with a "no value" attribution doesn't guide your future marketing efforts, so ensure your forms include persona triggers wherever possible.

For example, a simple "which role describes you best" question on contact forms can be an easy way to identify the personas that make up the majority of your actual audience. If you notice that a persona is consistently underrepresented, and it's a persona you are dedicating resources to, it may be time to revisit your strategy or your picture of the buyer.

3. Review and Revise

Once you are collecting regular information on your buyers, ensure you review and revise the persona documents. As mentioned, businesses often find that their main persona is in fact overtaken by an unexpected buyer group, in which case a reallocation of resources may be required. Persona data to analyse may include:

- From which sources are your individual personas arriving to your website from? (E.g social media, referral, paid advertising, organic search, email marketing)
- Which content formats are your individual personas converting on? (e.g eBooks, video, articles, infographics)
- How many touch points do your individual personas have with your website before they convert?

Using this data will allow you to refine your persona documents, and leverage them to implement better-performing marketing strategies moving forward.

Pillar Two: Strategy and the Buyer Journey

Strategy is arguably the most important element of any inbound marketing program. The good news is, if you've embarked down the inbound route, you've already made some commendable strategic decisions:

- You've identified that your buyers are more likely to convert when they are actively seeking the services you offer. In fact, the inbound acquisition channel has a lead-to-opportunity conversion rate of almost 4% - significantly greater than outbound efforts like sales prospecting.

- You've identified that your buyers are least receptive to "push" marketing tactics and that your resources are better spent attracting quality visitors to your website through strategic content marketing. In fact, 80% of business decision makers prefer to receive brand information via an article than through advertisements.

- You've identified that the cost of acquisition is significantly lower through the inbound channel than outbound marketing. In fact, businesses that use inbound marketing save almost $15 for every newly acquired customer.
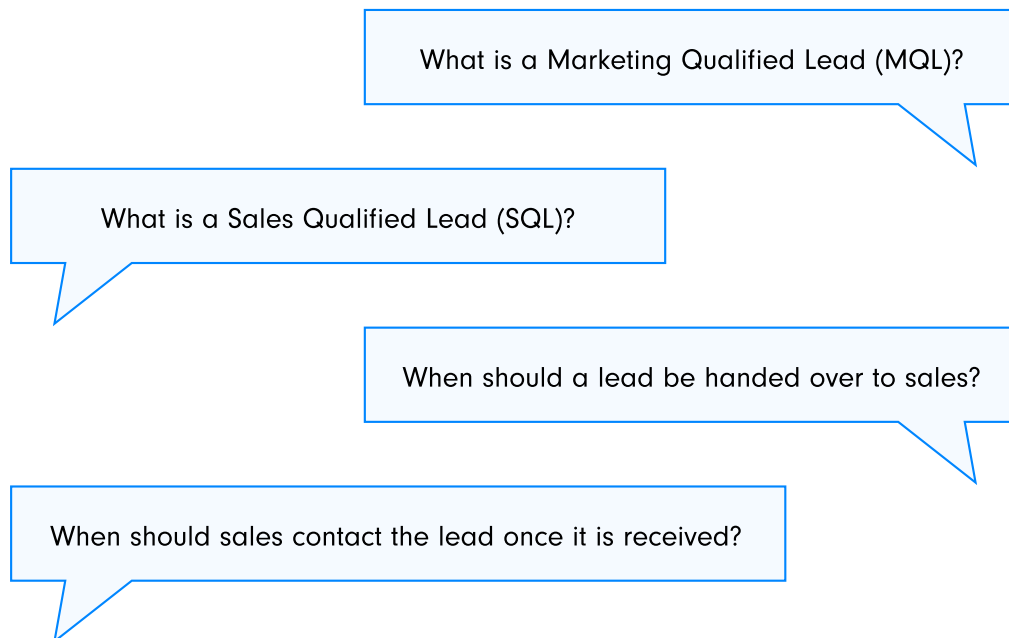
Despite these promising statistics, inbound marketing is not a strategy that works for every business. For items with a short sales cycle (like that of a B2C apparel business), the attract, convert, close, delight methodology loses effectiveness. However, if your business demonstrates the following characteristics, an inbound strategy has great potential to deliver outstanding results:

- You are a B2B business.
- Your products and services are bigger-ticket items with a longer sales cycle.
- Your buyers undergo a considerable education process before purchasing your products and services.

Initial Organisational Strategies

Once you've committed to an inbound marketing program, it's time to begin documenting your strategy. In these early stages, it's important to align all stakeholders to common definitions, marketing goals and measurable KPIs. In particular, spend considerable time aligning your sales and marketing teams, so that each function with defined processes like lead handovers and qualification. Fundamental questions to settle between marketing and sales may include:

What is a Marketing Qualified Lead (MQL)?

What is a Sales Qualified Lead (SQL)?

When should a lead be handed over to sales?
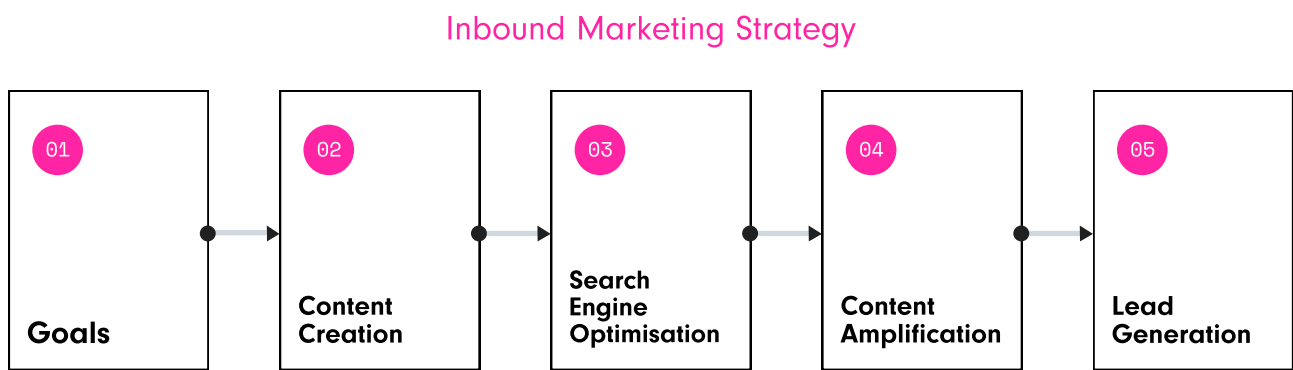
When should sales contact the lead once it is received?

Organisations with a strong marketing and sales alignment, often called 'smarketing', enjoy 20% annual revenue growth.

Essential Elements of an Inbound Marketing Strategy

Your inbound marketing strategy is the mechanism through which you attract visitors to your website, convert them into leads, close them into customers and delight them into promoters and advocates of your business. There are many tactics at your disposal to action this methodology, and the ones you select will depend on your personas, your resources and your marketing goals.

The following are five essential elements of an inbound marketing strategy:

Inbound Marketing Strategy

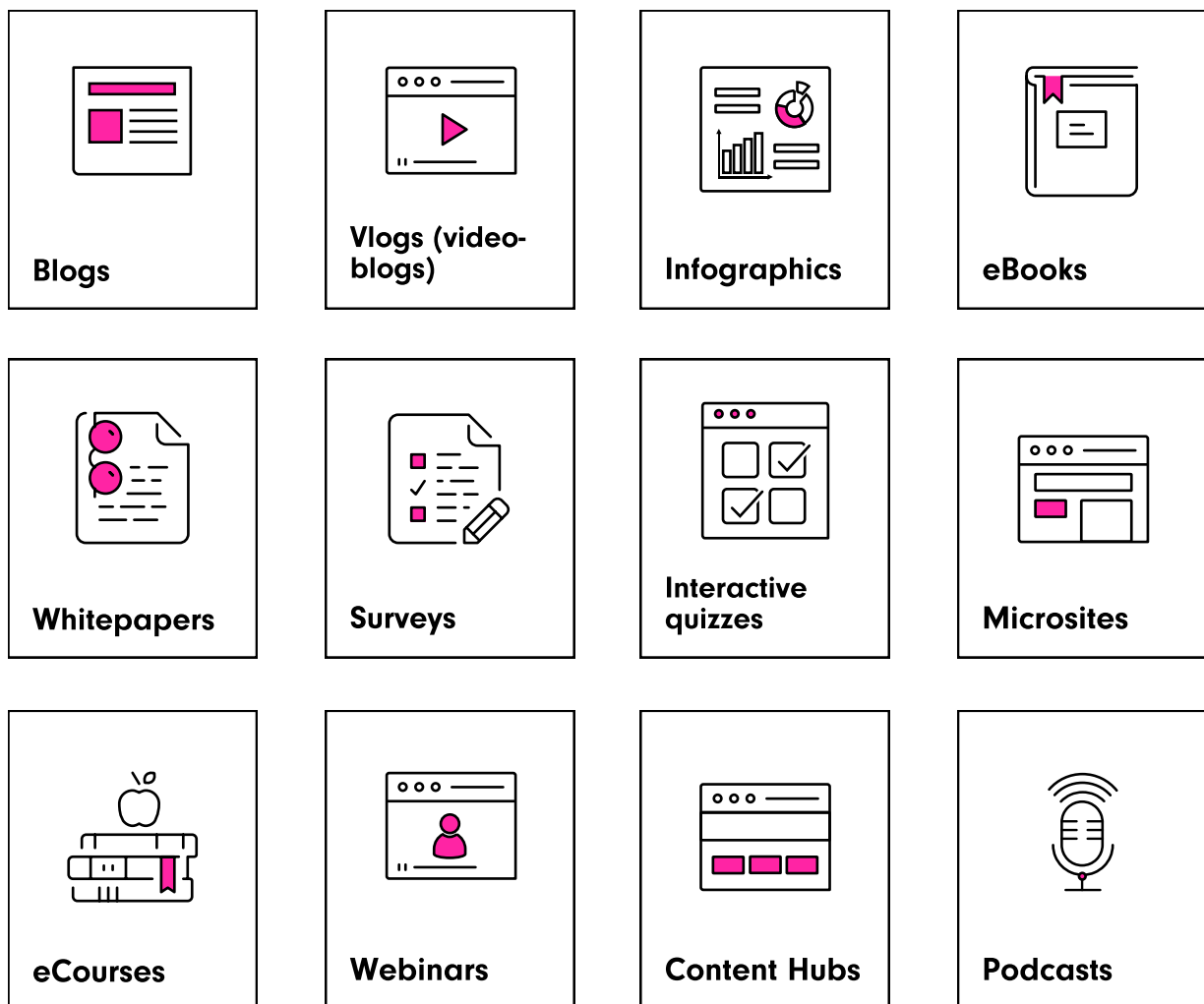| 01	02	03	04	05
Goals	Content Creation	Search Engine Optimisation	Content Amplification	Lead Generation

1. Goals

Without measurable goals, your inbound marketing strategy will struggle to deliver tangible business results. Your goals may be as finely-tuned as increasing email newsletter signups by 10% over a 3-month period. Or they may be larger in scope, like delivering a 20% year-on-year increase in Sales Qualified Leads over the course of 5 years.

For campaign-based marketing efforts, some common goals may centre around traffic, lead generation and conversion. Each of these should be measured with defined metrics, and involve collaboration between departments.

2. Content Creation

As the primary way to attract quality visitors to your website, a significant portion of your inbound marketing strategy should involve the creation of strategic, relevant and optimised content. This can take several forms:

Blogs	**Vlogs (video-blogs)**	**Infographics**	**eBooks**
Whitepapers	**Surveys**	**Interactive quizzes**	**Microsites**
eCourses	**Webinars**	**Content Hubs**	**Podcasts**

The list of possible content formats is extensive. Again, the ones you select will depend on the way your buyer personas prefer to consume information online. However, choosing a format is only part of the content creation puzzle. Determining the contents of your content, where it fits into your buyer's journey, and its larger role in delivering measurable results for your business is a process that continues to challenge even well-established inbound marketing teams.

3. Search Engine Optimisation

Without effectively optimising your content for search engines, your content creation efforts will suffer from underperforming traffic - having a flow-on effect on lead volumes, conversion and sales. Traditionally, the presence of target keywords throughout content has formed a large part of a marketing team's SEO efforts. However, new research is finding that keywords are waning in importance as a ranking factor for Google.

According to a comprehensive study conducted by search engine marketing leaders SEMrush, the most important ranking factors are:

1. Direct website visits
2. Time on site
3. Pages per session
4. Bounce rate
5. Referring domains

SEO is a multidisciplinary activity that touches every aspect of your digital activity, which is why it's an essential element of your strategy. Some of the most important SEO tactics you undertake may not even lie in content creation, but in website redesign to improve the user experience; reducing bounce rates and increasing time on site and page views per session.

4. Content Amplification

Many businesses fall into the habit of allocating significant resources into creating content, but fall short in their amplification efforts. Unfortunately, a 'build it and they will come' strategy isn't viable in inbound marketing. While you should be optimising your content to rank for specific long-tail search terms (even with keywords waning in importance as a ranking factor), you also must promote the content you produce via the channels used by your target personas.

Possible content amplification tactics may include;

- Social media promotion
- Email newsletters
- Influencer marketing
- Platforms like Outbrain
- Guest blogging
- Direct publishing to sites like LinkedIn and Medium
- Answering relevant Quora questions with snippets from your content
- Comment marketing on relevant articles
- Repurposing existing content into different formats (e.g SlideShares, video, infographic)

As you can see, amplification strategies can be comprehensive, however your efforts are best focussed on the specific channels used by your buyer personas.
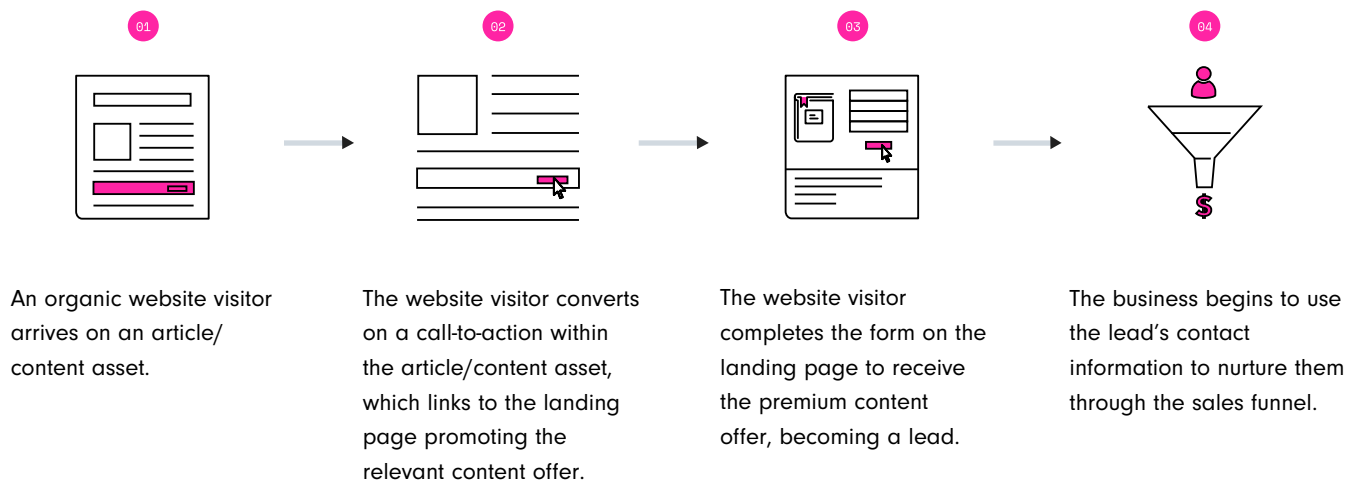

5. Lead Generation

Lead generation is usually a primary focus of inbound marketing programs. The creation, optimisation and amplification of content should attract relevant traffic to your website, but your lead generation efforts will convert these visitors into leads.

A time-tested approach to lead generation is producing "gated" content offers - that is, content offers that can only be accessed in exchange for contact information. Downloadable eGuides, white papers, templates, webinars, eCourses and product trials are strong candidates for your gated (or "premium") content offers.

The typical lead generation lifecycle can look like;

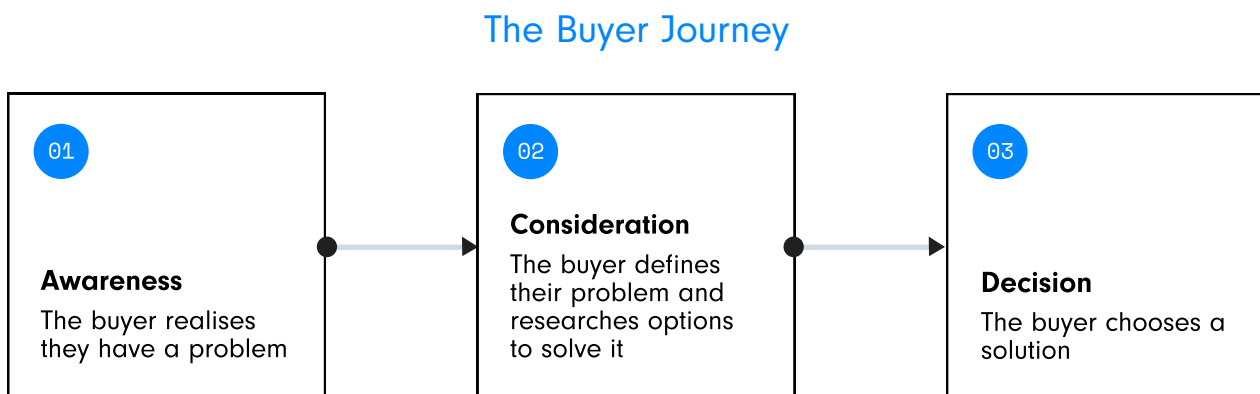| 01	02	03	04
An organic website visitor arrives on an article/ content asset.	The website visitor converts on a call-to-action within the article/content asset, which links to the landing page promoting the relevant content offer.	The website visitor completes the form on the landing page to receive the premium content offer, becoming a lead.	The business begins to use the lead's contact information to nurture them through the sales funnel.

For an optimised lead generation campaign, remember to;

- Ensure all content assets that you create and promote link to a relevant premium content offer.
- Remove all website navigation and distraction from your landing pages to drive conversion.
- Use a "less is more" approach in your HubSpot forms, where the number of form fields is relative to the perceived value of the content offer.
- Use form fields that depend on where your content offer sits in the buyer journey. For example, a content offer that will convert MQLs into SQLs should gather information to assist the sales team in building a detailed picture of the prospect.
- Just as you would amplify your supporting content assets, you should promote your premium content offers.

The Buyer Journey

Every content asset that you produce should fit somewhere into your buyer's journey. As defined by HubSpot, the buyer journey consists of three stages: awareness, consideration and decision:

The Buyer Journey

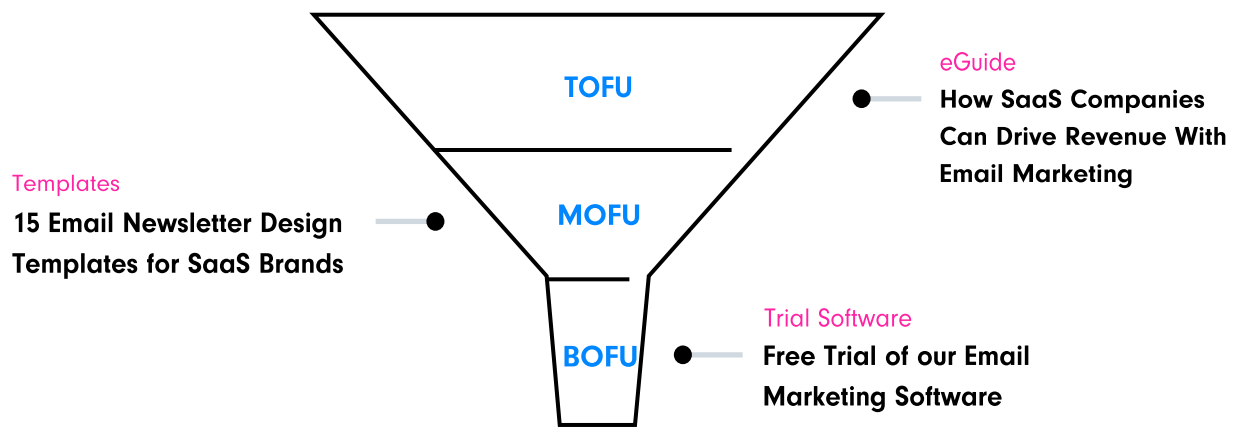| 01	02	03
Awareness The buyer realises they have a problem	**Consideration** The buyer defines their problem and researches options to solve it	**Decision** The buyer chooses a solution

Article No.6 | The Buyer Journey

Determining how your prospects act at each stage of the buyer journey will inform the content you produce, the channels you use to promote it, and the premium offers you use to nurture them through the sales funnel.

The buyer journey is closely related to the sales funnel, which can also be divided into three general stages: top-of-funnel (TOFU), middle-of-funnel (MOFU) and bottom-of-funnel (BOFU). Of course, in reality, the sales funnel is more intricate than this and even unique to each prospect. However, to implement a strategy that speaks to each stage of the buyer journey, it's useful to work with TOFU, MOFU and BOFU categories.

A holistic inbound marketing campaign addresses each stage of the buyer journey, with a combination of relevant content assets and premium offers.

For example, consider the following campaign for a fictional email marketing software company, that allows businesses to create custom email newsletters with drag-and-drop functionality. This campaign is focussing on their software-as-a-service persona;

TOFU

eGuide
How SaaS Companies Can Drive Revenue With Email Marketing

Templates
15 Email Newsletter Design Templates for SaaS Brands

MOFU

Trial Software
Free Trial of our Email Marketing Software

BOFU

Top-of-Funnel

Gated content offer: eGuide: How SaaS Companies Can Drive Revenue With Email Marketing

Content to direct visitors to gated offer: Engaging editorial series designed around general email strategies for SaaS companies.

Middle-of-Funnel

Gated content offer: 15 Email Newsletter Design Templates for SaaS Brands

Content to direct visitors to gated offer: Video tutorial series on creating effective emails.

Bottom-of-Funnel

Gated content offer: Free Trial of our Email Marketing Software

Content to direct visitors to gated offer: Comparative articles on email marketing providers, pros and cons of email marketing software.

As you can see, each stage of the buyer journey is addressed with a gated content offer to capture leads and supporting content to direct visitors to that offer. TOFU content introduces email marketing as a valuable strategy for SaaS companies, MOFU content provides some hands-on examples of how to implement an email marketing strategy, and BOFU content positions their product as the ideal solution to this problem.

Pillar Three: Analysis/ Improvement

Your inbound marketing program should never be set in stone. Rather, it should be subjected to consistent analysis, from which ongoing improvements are made to every facet of your marketing.

Just as there are numberless working parts in an inbound marketing program, there are numberless opportunities for improvement. Whether that may be a 3% increase in conversions on your TOFU landing pages, or a greater click-through-rate on your email newsletters - every marketing activity you implement should be put under the microscope and iterated for success.

However, this kind of constant analysis and improvement requires a suite of tools, an effective testing framework, and the agility to implement findings in future strategies.

Testing Technologies

The HubSpot platform consolidates a number of powerful analytics tools, from keyword performance to A/B testing, general web analytics and individual blog optimisation. These alone will provide enough data to begin your analysis and improvement.
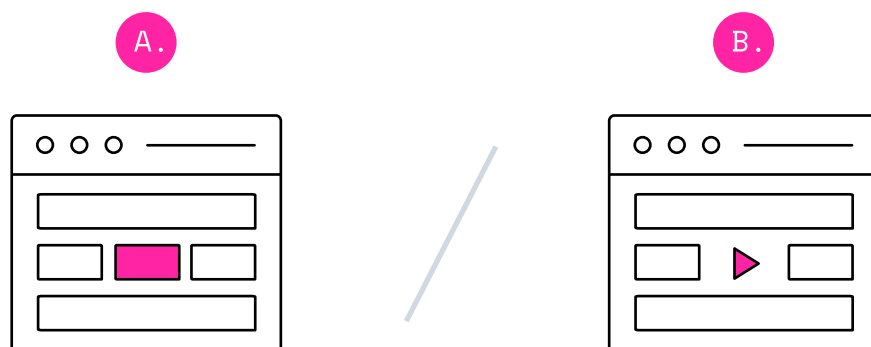
Testing Framework

The availability of data isn't the challenge in analysis and improvement - it's knowing what to do with it. An effective testing framework will provide you with much-needed testing direction, and be a centralised location for your results.

For smaller teams, overseeing multiple testing programs can be difficult, resulting in analysis paralysis. If you are only beginning to test and optimise your marketing activities, choose a simple metric like conversion rate on a call-to-action. However, ensure you test just one element of the call-to-action at a time, like colour, size, copy or placement. Changing multiple elements won't provide you with clear results at the end of the testing period.

Agility

Surprisingly, the most difficult element of your analysis and improvement can be having the agility to implement your findings. For example, consider a business that has discovered that video content is far outperforming editorial content on their blog in terms of traffic and conversions. Despite these findings, the business is bound to a concrete content calendar that has laid out the remainder of the year's editorial content. Without the flexibility or resources to alter this strategy to include a greater proportion of video, they proceed knowing that their blog traffic and conversion will suffer.

Agile inbound marketing teams are designed with analysis and improvement at front-of-mind, not as an afterthought. They prioritise ongoing testing and iteration over "big bang" campaigns that leave little room for alteration while in progress. Achieving an agile operating structure in your business requires an overhaul of your systems and processes, which is simply unachievable for a number of in-house teams who are bound by stringent approvals and inefficient collaboration between departments.
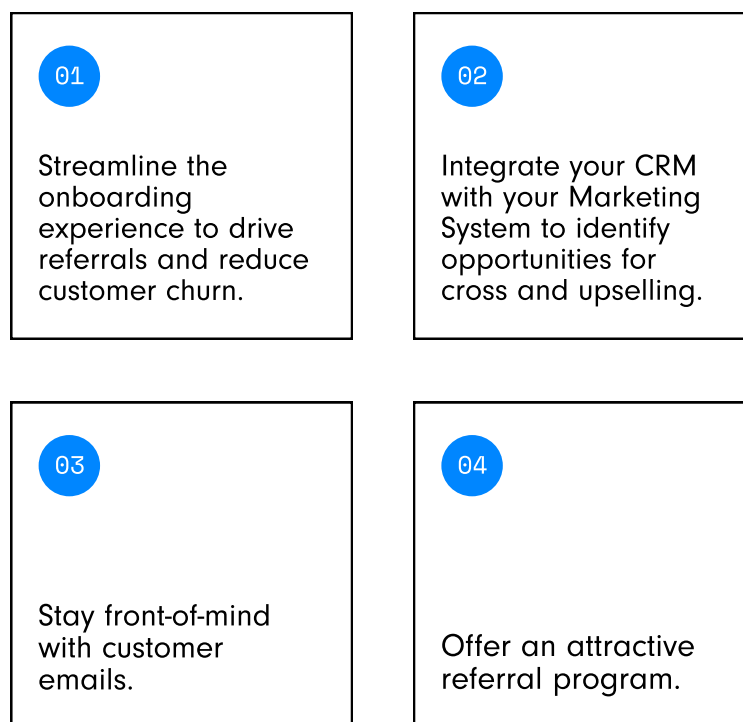
In this respect, many businesses are finding that outsourcing their inbound marketing programs to agencies who are designed for agility yields far better performance.

Pillar Four: Maximising Customer Value

Maximising the value of existing customers is an often-overlooked element of inbound marketing. Given that roughly 20% of new sales come from repeat customers, and that it's 5 times less expensive to generate sales from an existing customer than to acquire a new customer, this shouldn't be the case.

One of the most effective ways to grow your business is from the inside, by increasing the customer 'share of wallet' and nurturing advocates for your business. This can be achieved in a number of ways, including:

01

Streamline the onboarding experience to drive referrals and reduce customer churn.

02

Integrate your CRM with your Marketing System to identify opportunities for cross and upselling.

03

Stay front-of-mind with customer emails.

04

Offer an attractive referral program.

You can also delight your customers with simple strategies to streamline user experience, like using HubSpot Smart Forms that pre-populate with information your customer has already provided.

Let's look into each of these initiatives in more detail.

## Delighting Customers With a Streamlined Onboarding Experience

Many businesses spend significant time and resources winning customers yet don't give their onboarding process the same attention. If a customer has been promised the world during the sales process, but a clunky and unpleasant onboarding experience doesn't meet their expectations, the relationship immediately begins on a sour note.

As Customer Success Consultant Lincoln Murphy notes:

> *The seeds of churn are*
> *planted early.*

For example, let's look at a Software as a Service (SaaS) company that is getting their customers up and running with their product. According to Lincoln Murphy, onboarding a SaaS customer should focus on Time to First Value and First Value Delivery (FVD), where your product has provided them with a quantifiable initial success.

To facilitate this initial customer success, the SaaS company could send a succinct email following sign-up, directing the customer to a resources centre with how-to videos and FAQs, and assuring them of their continued support with the product.
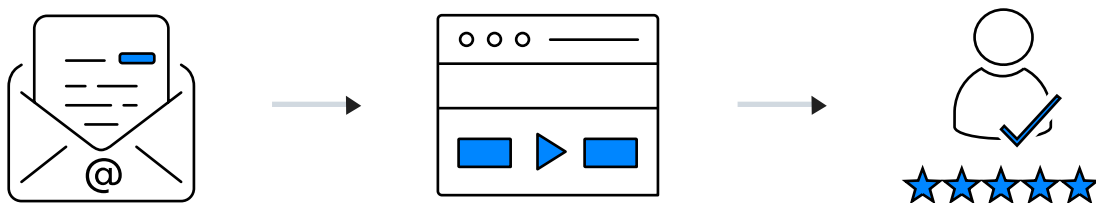
Integrate Your CRM With Your Marketing System

Customer relationship management systems can highlight valuable cross and upselling opportunities with existing customers to increase 'share of wallet'.

Consider a wealth management company that offers a suite of services, including estate planning, retirement planning and business advice. With an integrated CRM and marketing system, this company has complete visibility into what services each customer is currently receiving and whether there is an opportunity to cross sell them into others.

For example, a retirement planning client who has been visiting business succession planning content on the website can be nurtured through the marketing system and cross-sold relevant services.

HubSpot's integrated CRM and marketing tools make this customer success process extremely efficient.

Stay Front of Mind With Customer Emails

Your customers shouldn't be left in the dark as soon as they've committed to converting. Keeping them up-to-date with product developments, business news and industry insights is an effective way to demonstrate your continued commitment to them, build rapport, and also to generate steady website traffic.

eCommerce businesses like Amazon are renowned for their customer emails, which use an individual's browsing history to curate an automated selection of products into a hyper-personalised email. Small businesses can also use customer emails to great effect, which should be personalised and come from a senior member of staff.

An email automation tool like HubSpot makes the personalisation of emails simple, and can be used for sophisticated workflows to maximise conversion.

Offer Attractive Referral Programs

Referred prospects convert roughly 30% better than leads that come through other marketing channels, and they have a higher lifetime customer value. A strong referral program is thus one of the most powerful assets to any B2B business.

Companies like Dropbox owe much of their success to their strategic referral program, which offers extra storage space to customers who refer friends, and to the referred user. Micro-investing app Acorns follows a similar tact, offering $5 to referrers and referees.

Rewarding both parties is central to a good referral program. Begin with identifying your advocates, offer a compelling incentive to them and the people they refer, and map this data in a centralised platform like HubSpot.

Maximising your customer value is the core of the delight stage of the inbound methodology, which shouldn't be an afterthought of your marketing program.

Pillar Five: Sustainable Success

The final pillar of any effective inbound marketing program is what we call sustainable success. Sustainable success involves;

- Creating the systems and processes needed to support your inbound marketing program into the future.
- Retaining the resources needed to support your inbound marketing program into the future.

Sustainable Systems and Processes

Like analysis and improvement, your inbound marketing program needs carefully designed systems and processes to perform well into the future. These may be simple documents like customisable content calendars, client request logs and campaign planners, or more complex organisational frameworks like agile project management dashboards.

Communication tools like Slack and Zoom, and document-sharing tools like Google Drive and Evernote also form an important part of your team's systems and processes. Your goal should be to create an efficient and uniform system that supports your marketing activities.

Sustainable Resources

Inbound marketing is considered a long-game, whereby the success of your program directly correlates to the time you invest in it. Building domain authority, contacts, a content library and brand awareness takes time, which is why you need access to the resources to sustain your inbound program.

Companies that embark on their inbound marketing in-house may be tempted to find the "unicorn" employee, who is competent with everything from design and development, to copywriting and strategy. Not only are these employees extremely difficult to find and expensive to hire, but they can also become stretched too thin in a comprehensive inbound program. Inbound marketing agencies offer the perfect solution to securing the resources needed to sustain your inbound program.

Conclusion

Inbound marketing is a truly diverse practice, but one with incredible revenue opportunities for so many businesses. To implement it effectively, organisations need skilled employees, supportive systems and the strategic expertise to analyse and improve over time.

These five pillars of inbound marketing success; personas, strategy and the buyer journey, analysis/improvement, maximising customer value and sustainable success, are guiding principles that should be used to govern your inbound marketing.
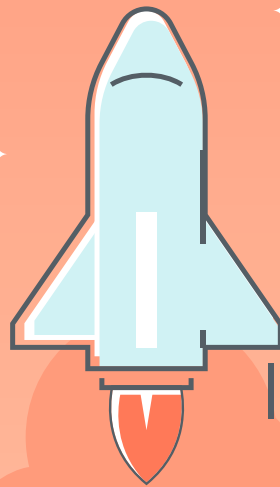
Within each of these lies countless activities, and in the words of Henry Ford:

Bringing them together is only a beginning. Keeping them together is progress. All of these working effectively together is inbound marketing success.

To discuss how Spinfluence can help your business grow with inbound marketing, get in touch with us today.

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