



Marketing Plan for Growth

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Introduction

I have been in the business of marketing, mostly digital, for close to 20 years; long enough to experience the web's impact on our industry firsthand. As a marketer, I have never been as excited as I am now about the potential to use the web to rebuild a marketing effort from the ground up and achieve the kind of ROI that only five years ago would have seemed unattainable.

I have been reading about what is sometimes referred to as "inbound marketing" for a few years now. I am a skeptic by nature, and am embarrassed now to admit how long I overlooked the potential of inbound marketing. Fortunately the barrage of case studies appearing in my RSS reader finally convinced me that change on my part was overdue. What my team and I have learned since opening our minds to new possibilities has not only transformed our own company, but has resulted in a new approach to serving our customers, providing value that exceeds just about anything we may have done for them before.



What's the (new) big deal?

It starts with the belief that a website can and should be more than just a pretty face. I am guilty of building more than my share of websites that excelled as visually appealing and highly usable brochures, but that failed miserably at producing measurable impact for my clients. It has been illuminating, therefore, to discover the powerful nature of the tools and techniques of content marketing, lead generation and lead nurturing. When combined and executed effectively, these strategies can fill a sales funnel and move prospects through the funnel toward purchase.

As a result, our days of centering client website discussions around features and design are over. While those elements are important, they are only a means to an end. Websites, as a general rule, should generate leads, and how we get from here to there involves more than cool features and slick design.

So why now? There are probably lots of reasons you should consider *now* as an appropriate time to re-examine how you spend every marketing dollar. But let us consider the two I think are most relevant:



Mature tools and methodologies

It takes neither fancy tools nor complex software to produce great content, a central pillar of effective lead generation. But content, in the absence of a legitimate marketing automation platform, may fall short of its potential to drive traffic and leads. Such a platform addresses a few key aspects:

- ❖ Basic content management, without which one would have great difficulty publishing timely content;
- ❖ Data capture, measurement and reporting components, all integral to deriving insights for improvement;
- ❖ Integrated lead nurturing tools, which are difficult to replicate using piecemeal methods; and
- ❖ A built-in workflow and inherent methodology to help guide you in the planning and execution of your strategy.

These are the essentials, and more features can be found in some of the better automation tools as well. These benefits work together to make the latest incarnation of marketing automation platforms mature and affordable. Combined with a solid strategy and committed execution, their value is undeniable.

There is a hand-in-glove relationship here. An inbound marketing strategy coupled with a solid marketing automation



platform creates efficiencies that drive success. Understanding that relationship—and committing to a comprehensive inbound marketing strategy—is key to turning your company’s website into an effective lead generation platform.

Your future customers (and competition) are ready

Every week I see new firms popping up that provide services related to inbound marketing. I see new marketing automation platforms announced. I see new seminars and conferences that promise to make us successful in our lead generation efforts. In my sales presentations, I see business owners and marketing VPs responding in an overwhelmingly favorable fashion to these “new” ideas about inbound marketing.

While inbound marketing may seem like a new and shiny toy today, tomorrow it will see large-scale adoption. Competing in that environment will not only be more challenging, firms that have waited to adopt the new paradigm will have already lost market share.

Embracing inbound marketing now gives companies time to learn, refine and leverage the tools and techniques that will



prove vital to attracting and closing more business for the next five years and beyond.

Let's go

Okay, so you are convinced that your company's website can and must be more than an online brochure. You believe the rewards of executing a successful inbound marketing strategy can justify the effort and expense. Congratulations, as you are in the minority of those who have adopted a mindset that will have a lasting, positive impact on their marketing results.

Wisely, you may suspect that there are at least as many “wrong” ways to approach this as there are paths to success. While we would like to be right there with you in the batter's box to help you knock the first pitch out of the park, we understand that you may want to more thoroughly assess whether this is something you can actually pull off—with or without the help of an outside partner—before you step up to bat. For you we have assembled a high-level outline of the methodology we've used internally, a synthesis of hundreds of resources including our own experience.



Assemble your team

You should know up front that inbound marketing is not a magic powder that you can sprinkle on your website or throughout your phone system's hold music. It's hard work, and the work never ends. Avoid the mistake of thinking that you can read some industry blogs to get up to speed, set a few aggressive lead generation goals, and then successfully develop and execute a lead generation strategy without some fundamental and significant changes to your daily processes.

Most of us are swamped with more work than we can handle already, so it is unrealistic to believe that we can easily make the substantial shift in focus and additional commitment in time it will take without radical internal change, if not a good dose of outside help.

Here is a list of the skill areas you'll need to tap to develop and execute an inbound marketing strategy.

Brand & content strategy

You need an expert with a solid grasp on brand strategy, someone who initiates the project with a thorough examination of your company and your target audience groups. Highly



regarded brand strategists are not cheap; however, many companies are able to fulfill this need by engaging a consultant in the field.

In the same manner, companies often enlist content strategists in a consulting arrangement. This specialist can help a company develop an editorial calendar, establish content topics, and identify and document appropriate channels for promotion.

Content creation

Creating compelling content may not have to be the hardest part of inbound marketing, but most of us in the business agree: it is by far the biggest hangup for professionals and their customers alike. It can seem like a ghastly chore, if not an impossible one, which is likely one reason that few even attempt it.

Plan for this by identifying up front who will be responsible for creating content, and ensure this person has the appropriate time and skill sets to do it.

Initially, it is common to rely heavily on external resources, but you will want to consider whether it makes sense to develop this resource internally, even if it takes a while. Creating content should be a natural extension of your firm.



While good writers from the outside may produce remarkable work for you, they are at an inherent disadvantage when compared to a salaried, full-time employee who is entrenched in your culture. In an era of “thinking like a publisher,” the implication is that companies should develop this as a core discipline.

Content promotion

Attracting visitors to a website requires promotion of website content through organic search (SEO), paid search (SEM), social media and other channels — both online and offline. Given that many of these disciplines have spawned their own industries, it is not out of the ordinary to find professionals who specialize exclusively in only one of these areas. Assuming you are not yet a veteran of inbound marketing, you will benefit from working with one or two people who have a broader range of knowledge across all these topics.

You could develop such resources internally or hire them off the street. While many companies outsource the search-related activities, the wisdom of doing the same for social media is less clear.

Social media, like blogging, seems inextricably tied to a company’s brand. As with content creation, the best strategy



here would seem to include limiting use of external resources to a defined start-up period and developing social media competencies internally for the company's long-term advantage.

Web development and integration

Your website is not the only channel in the inbound marketing game, but it lies at the center, and all roads lead back to it. You must hire or assemble a competent team that can deploy a website and execute those changes that are beyond the realm of a non-techie. This is typically more than one person (although rare hybrids do exist), including a web designer and programmer at a bare minimum.

Inbound marketing specialist

Even after the dust settles from initial strategy development, website development, integration and content seeding, someone must be accountable for executing the day-to-day activities within the context of the newly developed and approved editorial calendar. Someone must post content, deploy landing pages, monitor traffic and search performance, perform A/B testing, and attempt to gain the necessary insight for improving performance all the way around.



Sales representative

Your sales team, to be clear, is not the subject of this article. But you cannot afford not to consider whether your existing sales processes can withstand the strain of an influx of new leads. It is not leads we are after in the end, remember, but revenue. If you cannot respond appropriately to each and every qualified lead that comes in the door, how will you realize the potential new revenue?

Get clear on your brand

We have worked with few firms who could not benefit from execution of a couple of key exercises related to gaining brand clarity prior to launching an inbound marketing effort. When you consider that connecting with quality prospects by engaging them with compelling content is essential to an effective inbound marketing effort, reason should suggest that you cannot produce compelling content if you cannot articulate either who you are, or who they (i.e., your prospects) are.

Who am I?

One effective way to sum up who you are is through development and adoption of a brand positioning statement



(BPS). A carefully considered BPS unifies your sales and marketing teams and gives you a solid foundation from which to launch an effective inbound marketing strategy. We like using the BPS because:

- ✦ It provides structure to help clients understand the meaning of “brand” (at least at some level) and its importance. While “academic” in some sense, it is simple to grasp and practical in the real world.
- ✦ It implies a bare bones methodology with which to approach strategy development.

Your BPS addresses four components that comprise your brand (or your product’s brand), and should end up resembling something like this:

For [target audience], [brand name] is the [frame of reference] that delivers [USP] because only [brand name] is [reasons to believe].

1. **Target Audience** - A description of the ideal buyer.
2. **Frame of Reference** - The context that gives the brand relevance to the customer.



3. **Unique Selling Proposition (USP)** - The most compelling benefit that the brand can “own” in the hearts and minds of its target audience.
4. **Reasons to Believe** - The most convincing proof possible that the brand delivers on its promise.

Take a look at Digett’s BPS as an example:

For business owners and marketing execs, Digett is the digital marketing provider that helps clients generate more sales leads. Digett provides inbound marketing strategy, methodology and platforms, along with training to enable our clients to drive their own lead capture and nurture programs, and ongoing improvement of return-on-investment.

We have addressed all four components of a good BPS, and have clearly described what we think is the greatest benefit of our services. Does the BPS adequately explain all of our services? Of course not, and it should not. In the process of distilling the seemingly limitless array of things that most of us believe we do for our customers into a couple sentences, we are forced to reexamine what is most important. By refocusing and maintaining our attention on our most compelling unique selling proposition, we breathe new strength into our marketing efforts as a whole and give ourselves every opportunity to



establish our brand amid ever-present competition in the marketplace.

Who are they?

Just as important as knowing yourself is knowing your audience. It is not enough for Digett to know that our best prospects are business owners and marketing execs; we need to also know what makes each of them tick. There are some fundamental differences about these audience groups; the more accurately we can identify and speak to those differences, the better chance we have of connecting with them. Connection leads to trust, and trust leads to purchase.

At Digett we develop buyer personas as an exercise in understanding significant factors influencing a prevalent personality among a company's target audience. This process reveals and organizes key buyer traits which ultimately help guide us in determining what content will be viewed as valuable. It also identifies which channels of communication might be most effective for promoting our content.

Finally, it uncovers factors that may influence the timing of our activities. If, for example, we



want to sell inbound marketing services to CPA firms, we probably would not stuff our publishing schedule with heavy activity from February 1 through April 15, knowing that our efforts may never even be seen by the majority of our target audience.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of knowing your target audience. Without such knowledge it is virtually impossible to develop an effective content strategy.

Assemble your marketing automation platform

Successful inbound marketing implies a higher volume of leads than you have probably had to handle up to this point. It also is a “high-touch” game, employing frequent and recurring connection with your leads. Trying to do this manually would be time-consuming and fraught with error. Your chances of developing any meaningful insights would also be limited, as data would be inconsistent and widespread at best. These problems speak to the value of modern marketing automation platforms. What follows is a list of the primary roles of such platforms:



- ❖ **Landing page deployment** - Quickly deploy new landing pages that incorporate compelling offers and content, lead forms and calls to action.
- ❖ **Lead capture** - Collect and aggregate leads coming from your website into a centralized repository.
- ❖ **Lead tracking** - Follow a lead as he advances through the stages of the sales funnel. Observe behaviors that indicate what's good and what's not with your marketing efforts.
- ❖ **Lead nurturing** - Use timed delivery of targeted content to build trust and strengthen your brand in the minds of your prospects.
- ❖ **Performance reporting** - Evaluate “micro” performance factors (details related to the performance of a specific landing page, for example) as well as “macro” performance factors (overall growth in traffic, improvement of visitor-to-lead ratios).

Regardless of the value of full-scale automation, you're not prevented from dabbling in the practice of inbound marketing without it. Consider your own situation. On the downside of implementing automation are costs related to implementation and integration, ongoing fees for use of the platform, and its associated learning curve. Those costs will not somehow go away no matter how long you wait, though, and the increased



effectiveness your team experiences from using the system may easily compensate for the costs.

Develop a killer content strategy

As with many phrases indigenous to the web culture, “content strategy” means different things to different people. In this context, consider that the quality of content is one of the most, if not the most, essential elements of a successful inbound marketing strategy. Content strategy describes, then, *what* content one should **create**, *when and where* one should **publish** it, *when and where* one should **promote** it; and finally, *who* is going to be responsible for all of it.

Speak to your audience

The topics of your content should be derived directly from what you know about your target audience. This game is all about giving buyers information or offers they can use to improve their situation. Educational content is ideal, as it establishes your credibility as a knowledgeable source, conveys tremendous value and helps build trust. Yes, you can talk about your products, but it should be done exclusively within the context of the larger problem they help solve.



The keyword is king

Maybe not all of your content will be index-able by search engines. But a great deal of it must be if you expect your website to perform well in organic search. Develop the habit of incorporating keyword strategy into decisions you make about what content to produce and then leveraging those keywords in the content itself.

Consider all phases of the sales funnel

Buy cycles vary from product to product. The longer the buy cycle, the more you should be conscious of the fact that a buyer will have different needs and concerns depending on where they are within that cycle. Your website's content should reflect this reality, and you must provide clear calls to action for prospects regardless of where they are along the cycle.

In the early stages, buyers typically explore a wide array of alternatives as they educate themselves on the problem and its possible solutions. Educational whitepapers (like this one), webinars and self-serve videos have great “pull” to attract these buyers to your website.



Having done enough research to identify a short list of the most likely solutions, buyers enter an evaluation mode, wherein they compare pros and cons of each alternative. Case studies can help illustrate how your product “fits” into their specific scenario. Live product demos and screencasts are also well-suited to the buyer who is ready to learn more about your specific solution.

As a buyer closes in on his decision, offering a free trial may tip the scales. Testimonials here are priceless, and our favorites are served up through video. At the very least, consider some form of “Get Started” call to action button linking to a sign-up form. This is a critical moment that you do not want to squander. If a buyer is ready, make it easy for them.

Swap your best content for an email address

Most of your website content should be freely accessible. This serves your readers and leverages the power of Google’s search engine.

But you should also be producing some amount of advanced content that users can have only if they are willing to swap a name and email address for it. Your substantial experience—presented in the form of a whitepaper or video—is well worth



the exchange of contact information from someone looking to benefit from your knowledge and business acumen.

Plan to promote

Throwing content onto your website is not in and of itself going to guarantee a flock of new visitors. You must promote your content by reaching out to your target audience where they hang out. LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook are the social media platforms *du jour* (with Google+ and Pinterest making recent splashes as well), and you should leverage them where it makes sense to do so. Industry blogs and online forums can be excellent venues to interact with potential prospects and to link back to your content.

Search engine marketing (e.g., Google Adwords) should not be overlooked, either. Even traditional trade journals can be effective in some situations. Your promotion strategy, like your overall content strategy, should be guided by your understanding of your target audience.



Develop an editorial calendar to guide future efforts

To consolidate the results of all of your analysis and planning, create an editorial calendar listing each piece of content you plan to develop for the upcoming months, including the intended author, the target medium (blog post, video, webinar, whitepaper, etc.), key goals for the piece (keywords, call to action) intended publication date, along with where you will promote this content.

This is your primary planning resource moving forward. Your work is hardly complete, but you will not need to spend any more time wondering what you need to be producing from week to week.



Select & deploy a marketing automation platform

Successful inbound marketing implies a higher volume of leads than you have probably had to handle up to this point. It also is a “high-touch” game, employing frequent and recurring connection to nurture your leads. Trying to do this manually would be time-consuming and fraught with error. Chances of developing any meaningful insights would also be limited, as data would be inconsistent and dispersed at best.

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- ❖ **Lead tracking** - Follow a lead advancing through the stages of the sales funnel. Observe behaviors that indicate what is and is not providing adequate return.



- ✦ **Lead nurturing** - Use timed delivery of targeted content to build trust and strengthen your brand in the minds of your prospects.
- ✦ **Performance reporting** - Evaluate “micro” performance factors (details related to the performance of a specific landing page, for example) as well as “macro” performance factors (overall growth in traffic, improvement of visitor-to-lead ratios).

Implementing a full-scale automation platform carries an initial cost, ongoing usage fees, and an associated learning curve. You may be tempted to wade into the process with scaled-back processes or no automation at all. Our experience would indicate that initial and ongoing investments can pay for themselves through the increased effectiveness of your team and the additional business generated by the automation process.

Publish, promote, and engage

With an automation platform in place, it is time to begin creating, posting and promoting content.

Because you have assembled an effective team, you have the resources to produce great content. You see your search engine performance improve, and efforts to promote your content are paying off handsomely.



Deployed behind attractive landing pages that compel users to exchange a name and email address. You begin to see a steady flow of leads coming from your website when before you saw very little beyond the occasional less-than-satisfying analytics report. Watching all the moving parts come together can be extremely satisfying for a marketing professional.

Publishing is at the center of lead generation. It is not easy and that is one reason why the rewards are great for those who can pull it off. The editorial calendar you develop will help synthesize your content strategy and serve as your map of weekly activity. Use your calendar to eliminate any guesswork about what you should be doing.

Nurture

If you have successfully executed to this point, you have already built an effective lead generation machine. If leads were the end goal, our work would be done. But our interest is in driving revenue to the bottom line, and to do that we want customers! How do we convert leads to customers? We nurture them.



Lead nurturing involves sending useful, targeted content to those who have already expressed an interest in the services or materials you are providing. They have, for example, downloaded a whitepaper, responded to an offer for a free consultation, or performed some other action that (1) provides you with access to their contact information, and (2) indicates their willingness to receive further communication from you.

Now we can put them on a “drip” of ongoing, scheduled email communications conveying additional valuable information related to their interests.

These specially-focused communications are not delivered in “newsletter” style or any other format that could be remotely construed as sales collateral. Instead, our emails are delivering repeated, favorable brand experiences in the form of valuable content. The experiences can extend across a buying cycle, keeping you at the front of your prospect’s mind. This is incredibly powerful compared to what might have otherwise been a single encounter with your website.

Analyze and adapt

One beauty of digital marketing is that almost everything can be tracked or measured. And you will want to leverage that ability to improve your results over time. You will be looking at three



primary opportunities for improvement: website traffic as a whole, your visitor-to-lead ratio and your lead-to-customer ratio.

Overall website traffic

It wasn't long ago that many search firms staked their value on their ability to drive traffic to your website. Traffic still has value, but that value is derived more through quality than quantity. Still, monitoring the flow of traffic to spot trends and exceptions can prove insightful. And let's face it, if overall traffic is suffering, then focusing all of your time and energy on improving conversion rates may be premature.

Are you effectively publishing and promoting? If so, these numbers should show gradual growth over the long haul. If the numbers do not seem to reflect your activity, you may want to have a search expert take a look at your site. There could be some fundamental architectural issues that need to be fixed.

Visitor-to-lead conversion rate

A goal is to entice a percentage of your website visitors to go to a landing page and indicate their interest in one of your offers by submitting their names and email addresses. With reasonable traffic volume, there is a significant opportunity here to increase that percentage.



Once you have at least two or three landing pages with lead forms on your website, you will probably notice that some of your offers are more effective than others. Adjust your approach to include creating more offers that resemble your most effective pieces.

Conducting simple A/B testing on landing page design will help you discover improvements that can increase your visitor-to-lead conversion rate.

Lead-to-customer conversion rate

A percentage of the leads coming through your website should turn into paying customers. If you have a marketing automation platform and some level of integration with your sales management software such as Salesforce, you may already know that figure. How can you move it higher?

By having more than one nurturing program in place, you can make some reasonable assumptions about why one is working better than the other. Adjust your offerings accordingly and improvement in your overall customer conversion rate should follow.



In conclusion

Online marketing strategist David Meerman Scott is credited with the origin of this advice to today's marketing professionals: Think like a publisher. This wisdom can be applied to every level of the organization, far beyond the walls of the marketing department. Companies that truly internalize the need to publish and promote—including making the commitment to actually staff the effort—are in the best position to reap the rewards of inbound marketing.

It may take sustained dedication and fierce determination to develop the mindset necessary to make inbound marketing successful in your organization. But its rewards are great.

Get started and do not be afraid of imperfection. You may craft an imperfect brand positioning statement at the outset. You may inaccurately identify your target audience. Your content strategy may need to be strengthened, and the content itself may initially miss the mark. But with every misstep comes a deeper understanding of what works. Analytical data will help show you the way. Initiating an inbound marketing program and making the commitment to continuously evaluate and improve it will prove to be a winning strategy for your firm.

