



Marketing Plan for Growth

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Introduction

I've been in the business of marketing, mostly digital, for close to 20 years; long enough to experience the web's impact firsthand. As a marketer, I've never been as excited as I am now about being able to leverage the web to rebuild a marketing effort from the ground up and achieve the kind of ROI that only 5 years ago would have seemed unimaginable.

I've been reading about this phenomenon called "inbound marketing" for a couple of years now. I'm a skeptic by nature, and am embarrassed now to say that I overlooked the potential of inbound marketing for way too long. But the constant barrage of case studies coming through my feed reader finally convinced me that change on my part was due. 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 an entirely new approach to serving our customers, providing value that far exceeds anything we did 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'm guilty, I'll admit, of building more than my share of websites that excelled as visually-appealing and highly usable brochures, but failed miserably at producing measurable impact to my customers' bottom lines. I'm grateful, though, to have seen the light, which has illuminated just how powerful are the tools and techniques of effective inbound marketing for not only filling up the top of a sales funnel, but for moving prospects through the funnel toward purchase.

My days of centering client website discussions around features and design are over. Those elements can be important, mind you, but they are only a means to an end. Websites should generate leads, period. How we get there involves far more than cool features and slick design.

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

Mature Tools and Methodologies

It doesn't take fancy tools or software to produce great content, a central pillar of effective lead generation. But there's more to the picture, and clearly challenges can result from doing without the benefit of a legitimate marketing automation platform. 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, which are integral to deriving insights for improvement;
- Integrated lead nurturing tools, which would be practically impossible to replicate externally.
- An built-in “process” to help guide you in the planning and execution of your strategy.

These are the biggies, but there are a number of other extras that the better tools include, too. In short, all these benefits work together to make the latest incarnation of marketing automation platforms both mature and affordable. Combined with a solid strategy and committed execution, their value is undeniable.

Fact is, even if you were able to pull off a successful inbound marketing strategy *without* a good marketing automation platform, then your efficiencies would, with such a toolset, skyrocket and ultimately drive even greater success. Likewise, if you’re not quite up to speed on or committed to what inbound marketing is all about, no amount of automation is going to make you more successful.

Your Customers (and Competition) Are Ready

Every day 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 overwhelmingly favorably to these “new” ideas about inbound marketing. The point is this: While inbound marketing may seem like a new and shiny toy today, tomorrow 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 a 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 forever and positively impact the results of your marketing efforts.

Wisely, you may suspect that there are at least as many “wrong” ways to approach this as there are paths to success. We agree. And while we would like to be right there with you in the

diamond 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 firm—before you step up to bat.

We have assembled a high-level outline of the methodology we've developed internally, a synthesis of hundreds of resources as well as our own experience.

Assemble Your Team

You might as well understand 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 gen strategy without some fundamental and significant changes to your daily processes. Most of us are swamped with more work (if only it were all profitable) than we can handle already, so it's 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're looking for someone here who has a fairly solid grasp on brand strategy already. Good brand strategists aren't cheap, and fortunately it's not critical that your company bring one on staff. Instead, you'll want to have such an expert help you get your project rolling via a thorough examination of your company and your target audience groups. A content strategist, likely also in a temporary consulting role, then leverages the output of those exercises to help you develop an editorial calendar, content topics and to 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's 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 the biggest 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.

In the beginning it is common to rely heavily on external resources, but you'll want to consider whether it makes sense to develop this resource internally, even if it takes a while. For one, 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 becomes

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 that one promote 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 that specialize exclusively in only one of these areas. Assuming you’re not yet a veteran of inbound marketing, however, you’ll want to be working with one or two people that have a broader range of knowledge across all these topics.

You could develop such resources internally or hire them off the street. Many companies outsource the search-related activities, but I’m less clear on how the same can be done for social media. Social media, like blogging, seems inextricably tied to a company’s brand. As with content creation, while I can see external resources playing a role in these activities in the short-term, it seems short-sighted to avoid attempting to develop social media competencies internally.

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 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’s not leads we’re after in the end, remember, but revenue. If you can’t 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 (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 programs, lead nurturing 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 a fighting chance 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's not enough for Digett to know that our best prospects are business owners and marketing execs. We need to also know essentially what makes each of them tick. There are, in fact, 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 what 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 over emphasize 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 will indicate what's good and what's not with your marketing efforts.
- Lead nurturing - Use timed delivery of targeted content to strengthen your brand in the minds of your prospects and to build trust.
- 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 will experience 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, though, consider that the quality of content is one of the, 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 do all of this.

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 that it helps 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 for yours, the more you should be conscious of the fact that a buyer will have different needs and concerns depending on where they are within the 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 are typically exploring a wide array of alternatives as they educate themselves on the problem and its possible solutions. Educational white papers (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 are comparing 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 my 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 don’t want to squander. If a buyer is ready, make it easy on 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’re willing to swap a name and email address for it. Is it too much to ask for a person’s identity and contact info when they want to benefit from the substantial expertise you’ve shared in the form of a video or white paper?

Plan to Promote

Just 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, and you should leverage them where it makes sense. 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, white paper, 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 won’t need to spend any more time wondering what you need to be producing from week to week.

Publish, Promote, and Engage

No more planning. It’s time to begin creating, posting and promoting content. Because you’ve assembled an effective team, you have the resources you need to generate the content. Your

search engine performance begins to improve, and your other efforts to promote your content are paying off handsomely. Because you have put your best content behind well-designed landing pages requiring users to swap a name and email address, you begin to see a steady flow of leads coming from your website, where before you saw very little beyond the occasional less-than-satisfying analytics report. For a marketer, it doesn't get much more exciting than this moment, watching all the moving parts come together.

Publishing lies at the crux of lead generation. It's not easy, and that's one reason why such great rewards are to be had by those that can pull it off. To synthesize your content strategy you developed an editorial calendar that serves 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 all we were after, we could go home now. No, 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 it. They have downloaded a white paper, or they have responded to an offer for a free consultation, or they have performed some other action wherein they had to swap their name and email address. Now we can put them on a "drip" of ongoing, scheduled email communications conveying more valuable information related to their interests.

We're not talking "newsletter" here, nor anything else that could be remotely construed as sales collateral. Instead, our emails are delivering repeated, favorable brand experiences that can extend across a buying cycle, keeping you top of your prospect's mind. This is powerful branding, and is incredibly powerful compared to a single encounter with your website through a search engine.

Analyze and Adapt

A beauty of digital marketing is that almost everything can be tracked or measured. And you'll want to leverage that ability to improve your results over time. You'll 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

In the old days, 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 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 putting the cart before the horse. Are you effectively

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

Visitor-to-Lead Conversion Rate

The hope is that some percentage of visitors to your website will indicate their interest in one of your offers and leave you a name and email address. That percentage is a key target for improvement. Assuming you have reasonable traffic volume, then you may be able to get bigger bang for the buck here than anywhere else. Assuming you have at least two or three lead forms on your website, you likely are already seeing that some of your offers are more effective than others. Take note, and commit to creating more offers that resemble those that are already most effective.

Lead-to-Customer Conversion Rate

Of the leads coming through your website, some percentage should be turning into paying customers. If you are fortunate enough to have a marketing automation platform and some level of integration with your sales management software such as Salesforce.com, you already know that figure. How can you move it higher? If, once again, you have more than a single nurturing program in place then you can likely make some assumptions about why one is working better than the other. Improvement is usually not about recreating the wheel, but rather about doing more of the stuff that's getting desired results, and less of the stuff that doesn't.

In Conclusion

I believe it is David Meerman Scott who is credited with the origin of this advice to today's marketer: Think like a publisher. I believe this applies to every level of the organization, far beyond the walls of the marketing department. Companies that can truly internalize the need to publish and promote—all the way down to actually staffing the effort—are in the best position to reap the rewards of inbound marketing. It will take sustained dedication, if not fierce determination, to develop the mindset necessary to make inbound marketing successful. 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 be weak, and the content itself may miss the mark. But with every blunder and misstep will come a better understanding of what works. The data will begin to show you the way, and your commitment to continue and improve will prove to be all you need to win.