Martech Foundations: Start With Marketing Automation and Key Processes

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Initiatives:Drive Tech Marketing Performance

Successfully implementing marketing automation for B2B applications requires alignment with the marketing and sales processes and campaign structure. Product marketers must outline these foundational processes that impact marketing team effectiveness.

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

- Grow Revenue Through a Resilient B2B Martech Ecosystem

Overview

Key Findings

- With the flexibility stemming from the number of martech tools available, tech marketing teams can struggle to create alignment between sales and marketing without a clear lead workflow process being defined.

- Lead workflow processes depend on synergy between lead capturing, scoring and routing techniques.

- Technology marketing teams need to structure their marketing campaign strategies to determine the type, frequency and priority of campaigns to best target customers and prospects in supporting business objectives.

Recommendations

To improve marketing performance by setting up foundational processes to optimize martech investments, product marketers should:

- Establish and obtain agreement on the basic lead flow process that reflects the lead journey between marketing and sales, and facilitates alignment and co-working on leads and opportunities.

- Ensure the lead flow processes for capturing, scoring and routing leads can be addressed by your tech stack.

- Align campaign strategies with the types of campaigns that can be supported through the martech stack.

Introduction

Implementing marketing automation for B2B use cases can be complex. Having the right marketing and sales processes to underpin them is critical and will lead to greater impact and better return on marketing investment. This research centers on defining these processes for B2B marketing automation technology but also touches on a number of other related technologies such as sales tech. Supporting all the processes needed to achieve the target results can require many different tools.

To achieve acquisition, cross-sell and retention goals, product marketers must develop coherent data, integration and lead process strategies across their ecosystem to drive the adoption and the use of effective multichannel marketing tools and programs. A disjointed strategy will lead to redundant functionality in the tech stack and lack of insights into customers and their journeys. This can lead to less successful marketing tactics and campaigns which results in less impact from the marketing investment.

Articulating the value of marketing and proving the ROI are key challenges. It is therefore important that marketers attempt to measure these factors (see Martech Foundations: Optimize Budgets and Maximize Utilization for more information). Marketers should also constantly seek to improve their performance, which may mean utilizing more of the tools they already have. Reviewing the basic and advanced processes will assist marketers in obtaining value from their tech stack investments.

Established marketing organizations realize a few key marketing processes must be created for the foundation of the martech ecosystem to be considered "in place." This research outlines these basic processes.

Analysis

Defining the Lead Workflow Process

Having repeatable lead processes is key to the success and scaling of a business and is enforced through the adoption of technology solutions such as marketing automation, which acts as the marketing system of record.

The main organizational process that needs to be determined is that of lead workflow. Lead flow describes the workflow of either an outbound lead — from its inception as an initial response to a call to action in a given channel — or an inbound lead, and how that progresses until it ideally becomes closed-won business by sales. This process overlaps both marketing and sales functions/stakeholders.

When the lead flow is working properly, it may look something like the process shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Example of Lead Flow Process and Associated Technologies

Example Lead Flow Process and Associated Technologies

Marketing			Sales	
Status				
Suspect	Lead	MQL/AQL	SAL/SQL	**Sale (Closed Won)**

Process

Targets: Ideal Customer Profile → Inbound Marketing / Outbound Marketing → Website → Inbound BDR/SDR / Qualification / Outbound Prospecting → Lead Nurturing (Marketing Automation) → Sales (Field or Inside)

Typical Technologies

Account Selection	Marketing Automation	Website	Lead	Lead Nurturing / CRM/SFA / Opportunity	Order
• Account Data • Lookalike Models	• Known and Unknown Targets • Data Quality and Enrichment	• Landing Pages/Forms • Personalization • Appointment Booking	• Lead Scoring/Routing • Sales Engagement (BDR)	**Lead Nurturing** • Marketing Automation Platform **CRM/SFA** • Leads/Contacts/Opportunities • Relationship Intelligence **Opportunity** • CRM and Sales Acceleration • Inside Sales • Sales Engagement	• CPQ • Quote • CLM

AQL = account-qualified lead; CML = contract life cycle management

Source: Gartner

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Gartner

The lead workflow typically consists of a number of stages or statuses. In each stage, different parts of the process operate, and different technologies may be brought to bear. The key stages are:

- **Inbound and outbound demand generation —** Starts by utilizing multiple channels (advertising, email, events, etc.) and calls to action (CTAs), using content in different forms, and then generally leading to a click/response. The response results in the user being taken to a landing page or a website page that will contain a web form, enabled by or integrated with a marketing automation platform (MAP) to surface the user registration with a new lead record being created.

- **Lead** — After a registration on a web form has been captured in the MAP, the new record is now deemed an unqualified lead in your MAP. Note, some web forms, such as a trial or a "contact me," infers more interest on the art of the prospect and might be deemed partly qualified and even a marketing-qualified lead (MQL). However, in most cases, business development representative (BDR) outreach would occur before this level of classification. At this point, only basic information is known about the prospect (i.e., the email, name, company and perhaps a few other fields). If a person fills out another form and creates a second new lead, the MAP should deduplicate this lead by associating it with the existing record. Some companies use specific lead-to-account matching technologies that can match leads using sophisticated techniques. The basic approach will be to match using the email address field.

- **MQL** — The next stage is for the lead to be qualified by either a combination of lead scoring or a phone call from the BDR team, ideally within a short period, such as 30 minutes. After the MQL qualification criteria are met, the lead is categorized as an MQL, and it is then handed off to sales. This process ensures that taking the time to qualify a lead is efficient for sales, so that they are not wasting time prospecting or working on poor quality leads. In account-based marketing (ABM) programs, the concept of a marketing-qualified account (MQA) or a marketing-qualified opportunity (MQO) exists rather than an MQL; however, Gartner continues to refer to an "MQL" generically here.

- **Sales-accepted lead (SAL)** — A lead should only remain an MQL for a matter of hours, or a day or two at best. Leads "decay" quickly, and the best performing sales development teams follow up MQLs quickly. [1] To enforce timely follow up, there needs to be an SLA in place between marketing and sales. MQLs can be rejected by sales, with a valid reason, and these need to be tracked.

- **Sales-qualified lead (SQL)** — Sales will now better understand the requirements, the solution fit and other qualification criteria before the SAL is deemed an SQL. At this stage, the "lead" object in the MAP will probably be converted to an opportunity, attached to an account, with one or more contacts associated with it.

- **Other stages for sales reporting** — If an opportunity is created, additional sales stages will often be used, such as value proposition, discovery, validation and negotiation.

- **Closed won** — After all the sales stages are complete, the deal will become closed won or alternatively closed lost.

This lead flow process can now be implemented in the specific MAP where email and advertising (and other channels) will be used to generate lead objects that are qualified by lead scoring and the BDR team. The lead is then typically routed to the sales representative. The routing logic can occur in the MAP tool or commonly within the sales force automation (SFA) tool. Sophisticated lead-to-account matching techniques can be utilized in large enterprises with many products, reps and territories.

The specific mechanism of passing leads to the SFA varies, but most modern MAPs have a bidirectional sync process, which allows the leads to be passed to the SFA. As the lead, contact, opportunity or account progress in the SFA, the sync capability writes back the status to the MAP. This allows attribution analysis to be conducted in the MAP by channel, content and campaigns used to generate or influence pipeline and closed-won business.

Figure 1 additionally shows the following parts of the lead workflow process:

- **Ideal customer profile (ICP)** — A representation of the target accounts that fit your ideal customer profile (ICP). These will be defined as audiences in the MAP.

- **Marketing function** — Inbound and outbound marketing teams who generate demand and leads using inbound and outbound approaches.

- **BDR or sales development representative (SDR)** — The team of salespeople who call out to inbound leads or undertake outbound prospecting in net new accounts.

- **Lead nurturing** — This is where a significant proportion of leads end up that are not converted to opportunities or are qualified out of. Lead nurturing will be a combination of sales work and marketing outreach (usually by email), but can often include other channels, especially in ABM approaches.

- **Sales** — The organization and different roles are not covered in this document.

Figure 1 also shows the typical marketing (and sales) technologies that are used at each stage:

- **Marketing automation platform** — This is the main technology used throughout the marketing stages before marketing technologies hand off to sales technologies, usually the SFA platform.

- **Website personalization** — Some MAP and ABM tools include personalization capabilities, though this can often be a third-party add-on.

- **Lead scoring** — Usually part of the MAP and can be rule-based but more often is machine learning (ML)-based, or a combination thereof.

- **CRM/SFA** — The domain of sales but may also initially handle the lead routing for the lead to get to the correct sales rep.

- **Sales engagement** — Tools that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of sales reps and are often fed by MAP and ABM tools.

- **Configure price quote (CPQ)** — Usually part of or an add-on to SFA products.

Product-Led Growth (PLG) Considerations

When PLG strategies are used, the lead flow process is somewhat different. The initial awareness and "lead" generation typically result in the trial, with the goal of prompting ongoing use of the software, and encouraging growth of that usage to additional functionality and users. Therefore, awareness motions are similar, and a lead is created, but instead of an MQL, a product-qualified lead (PQL) is the result. When there is sufficient interest and engagement around the PQL, then it may be passed on to an enterprise sales team for a more strategic sales approach. See Top Tech Provider Trend for 2023: Product-Led Growth.

Lead Flow Process Compared With the Sales Process

The lead flow process describes the journey of the lead from when it is created — from demand generation through to being closed off by sales. The sales process is part of this journey that starts when sellers accept the lead from marketing and continues through helping the buyers evaluate solutions, validate the information they are receiving, and build consensus across the buying team throughout the journey. Marketing will still be involved during the sales process, supplying content to sales as well as passively via the website and via multiple channels of outreach, but primarily via email. In a modern technology company, sales and marketing often operate in tandem.

Within the sales cycle, sales stages are defined, thus allowing sales and sales management to check on the progress and value of their pipeline. Within the sales process, sellers may want the buyer to consider specific activities, such as a demo or a proof of concept (POC). Sales management and operations will track metrics per sales stage, such as number of opportunities, average value and average time in each stage (sales velocity).

The sales process itself should be designed with the buying tasks and buyer journey in mind (for more information, see B2B Tech Buying Basics, 2022).

Additional Marketing Lead Flow Processes and Functionality

Other key marketing lead flow processes must be considered to improve marketing automation.

Generating Leads via Landing Pages

MAP tools usually allow the creation of landing pages that are "hosted" by the MAP, independent of where the company's website is hosted (techniques are often available with the MAP to allow the domain names to be consistent). Consequently, marketing campaigns (using ads and emails) direct incoming traffic to landing pages that have content specific to each campaign. Webpages on the company website could be used instead.

If the content is to be gated (that is, a registration form needs to be completed to access the content), then a web form will be needed within the page. Web forms are usually built separately to landing pages and can then be included in landing pages or in other website pages. The efficacy of the landing page and form can have a significant impact on lead generation.

As the number of fields included in a web form are increased, there is the risk of reducing conversion rates due to a poor user experience. There is a trade-off with the value of the content being gated, the length of the form and amount of information divulged, and time spent.

Starting with a minimum number of fields is a good idea, and then conversation fall-off rates can be tested in the future, if more data input fields are really required. There is a science to web forms, beyond this document, but business emails rather than personal emails are usually required. For software trials, sometimes valid credit card details are also requested.

Lead Qualification and Scoring

The qualification criteria used on a lead vary depending on the deal size and other factors, but these must be determined as part of the sales and marketing processes.

As part of lead qualification, lead scoring is commonly undertaken in the MAP. Usually scoring takes place on raw leads before they are prioritized for the BDR team, especially if the volume of leads is large. Where the volume of leads is low, scoring adds little value.

MAPS usually allow rule-based scoring models to be built where points are allocated to prospect interaction. For instance, an email open may have a very low (or zero) value, but a sales rep meeting or download of key content items may score much more heavily. Vendors usually provide scoring templates that can work "out of the box." In recent years, AI approaches have also manifested, using historic lead data and resultant sales outcomes to build predictive models that allocate the lead's score, often in real time. At a given threshold score, leads are deemed ready for handoff to sales or the BDR team.

For more information, see Ignition Guide to Improving Your Lead Qualification Process for Technology Products.

Lead Routing

This allocation of leads to sales reps can take place in the MAP. However, it often takes place in the CRM/SFA system that has access to all the sales reps records and follows rules that operate on the data passed over to the CRM system. Lead routing or allocation rules can usually be set up to operate on a variety of methods, such as round robin, skills, capacity, territory or geography.

Campaign Types and Structuring the Campaign Year

Marketers often think in terms of campaigns, and a campaign is usually associated with a given prospect or customer audience. The marketing year may be planned out in terms of campaigns, perhaps organized around themes, which use specific messaging encapsulated in content. Typically, several types of campaigns can be used, as shown in Figure 2 and described below.

Figure 2. Representation of Different Campaign Types

Representation of Different Campaign Types

Source: Gartner
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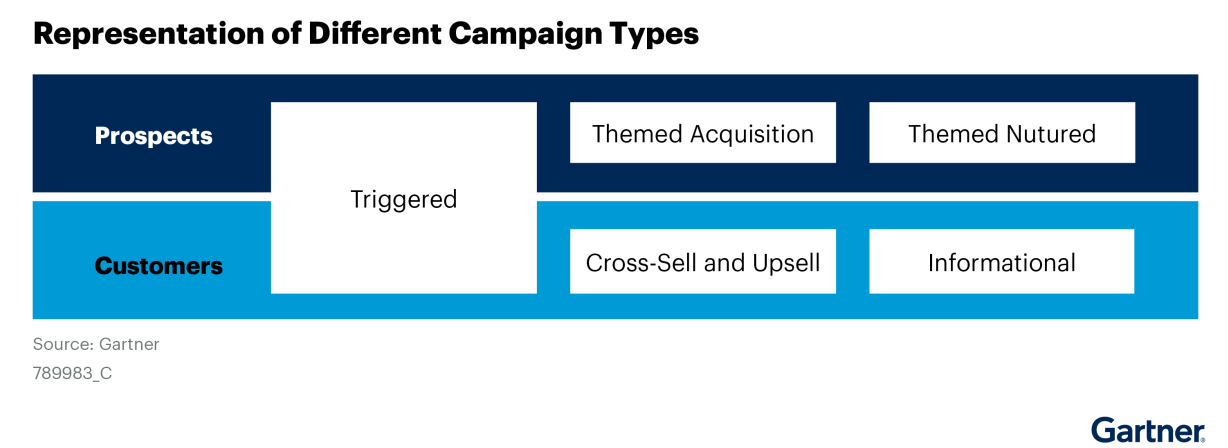
The different campaign types include triggered, themed acquisition, themed nurture, cross-sell and upsell, and informational.

Triggered or "Always On" Campaigns

These are often the most effective type of campaign in terms of conversion rate, especially those triggered by an action on the part of the user, such as a form fill. They are often called "always on" campaigns as they are set up and left to run by the MAP whenever an event is triggered.

A trigger may be caused by a data value change of a field or fields in the MAP. For instance, the MAP's "Industry" field for a contact is filled in. Most commonly, the trigger would be when a new lead record is created when a prospect fills in a web form on a gated item of content.

Once the trigger occurs, an action or, more typically, a sequence of actions (a playbook, a stream or a cadence) can be executed in the MAP, such that several actions take place in a predetermined way (i.e., send an email and set the sales rep a task to call the prospect).

Triggers are effective because the response is usually timed to when the users are currently engaging. For instance, they allocated some time today to research the product. It can be more effective to have multiple interactions during this time period rather than waiting for another week or month until another interaction, which is the case with many "drip feed" or nurture campaigns.

Marketers need to identify all the potential customer and prospect triggers in their buying (and owning) journey and the resulting actions or playbooks. Over time, this may result in tens or even hundreds of campaign triggers and related actions and playbooks.

Another type of campaign that can be considered event-triggered is advertising through retargeting. The event in this case is any visit to the website where a first-party cookie is dropped. Display advertising can then be served or "retargeted" to the user when they visit other (usually publisher) websites.

Themed Acquisition

The majority of new business campaigns will probably be of this category. Themes are determined relative to marketing's business objectives and outcomes required. For instance, a theme might be a new product release to prospects, a particular use case or a custom situation or problem, a special promotion/offer, or an event such as a webinar or physical event. A theme will consist of a campaign or series of campaigns over a period.

The content used and CTAs or hooks can vary widely. For instance, a webinar on a given topic may include a series of emails covering different aspects of the offer that will appeal to different audience personas.

Advertising channels are likely to figure strongly in this type of campaign because marketing is trying to create awareness with the currently unknown buyers of the buying committee. Email alone cannot be relied upon.

Themed Nurtured

For a given set of leads generated, some will probably be discarded, and a few will hopefully progress directly through to become sales opportunities. However, it's likely the bulk of any cohort of leads will need nurturing, potentially for many months, given the length of many B2B sales and buying cycles.

The majority of theme-based campaigns will use some form of nurturing or drip-feed campaign that consists of a number of steps executed based on time and behavior/response of the prospect. To select the content or message relevant over a long prospect journey, the MAP may consider prospects to be early, middle or late stage in the buyer journey and have content relevant to each category.

As these campaigns are addressing known users (those that have registered via a form fill), email and retargeting are heavily used.

Cross-Sell and Upsell

This could be considered a form of theme-based campaigns or triggered campaigns, but it is a set of campaigns where the organization already has a relationship with a paying customer, and hence, the messaging and offers will likely be different than those targeted at new buyers.

Maintaining and expanding existing customer relationships and increasing revenue from existing customers are the key goals for many companies, particularly in service industries.

Informational

Many organizations periodically or regularly send out news about their products and new product launches, employees, industry or company. This content type needs to be tested to see if it obtains a response and used carefully — it's more likely to resonate with customers than prospects, but depends on the value offered to the recipient. Bear in mind that news related to the brand or product may have limited real value to customers or prospects — ask what's in it for them? But irrespective, it's a common form of communication and should be considered, if needed in the overall mix, and is also an easy way to start and get up to speed using MAP tools.

Evidence

The evidence for this research was derived from discussions with leading MAP and SFA vendors, as well as discussions with Gartner clients.

[1] How to Make the Best Follow-Up Sales Call in 2021, HubSpot.

Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

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Martech Foundations: Explore Advanced Processes to Increase Efficiency

Martech Foundations: Metrics and Marketing Impact

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