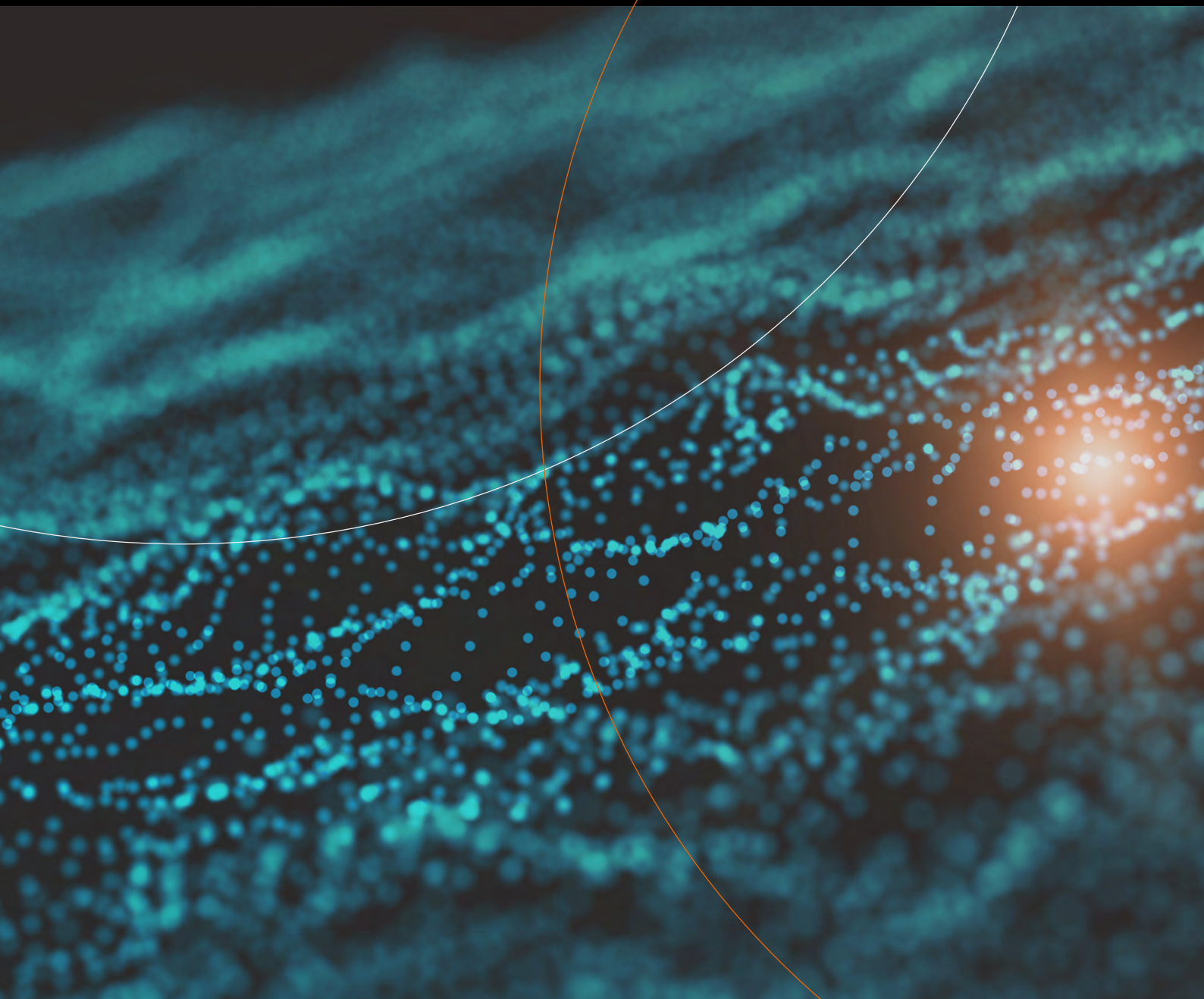
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ABM: Which approach is right for you?

Findings from a recent roundtable, held in association with Pulse

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ABM: Which approach is right for you?

Marketers are always on the lookout for the next great panacea.

Account-based marketing has been touted as such. But while most of us understand no silver bullet exists, are there elements of ABM everyone can prosper from and how can you determine which approach to ABM to take? Is there a single approach to ABM that guarantees results, even though each set of accounts is unique?

B2B Marketing gathered some of the best client-side minds practising ABM for a roundtable, held in association with Pulse, to discuss how they got started, what's been successful (and what hasn't) – and what they'd do differently if they had the chance. Here's what they told us.

What's the catalyst for ABM?

Among almost all attendees, the catalyst for starting ABM came from the marketing function and, in particular, an individual marketer who had success with ABM in a previous role or business.

For one ABM veteran, it was an obvious solution to the lack of sales and marketing strategy. "There was a huge gap, but a couple of things we put in place immediately brought us closer together," he says.

For another, ABM had been done for some time but it hadn't been formalised. And in a further case, ABM was simply another strategy to trial on accounts that weren't receptive to other approaches.

Pulse viewpoint:

Those attending the roundtable had experienced ABM in some shape or form, and at the moment ABM is driven by marketing. But the catalyst for ABM is based on marketing and sales misalignment. Sales deal with accounts and marketing has traditionally dealt with audiences. Aligning terminology and approaches means a great chance of success both through marketing and sales.

What barriers have marketers faced when introducing ABM?

Many participants cited the title – ABM – as one of the biggest obstacles to overcome. Anything that refers to 'marketing' is an instant turn-off for many stakeholders – "more bloody jargon" – or it implies marketing will be doing all the work with no input required from

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Success from ABM really depends on building a decent relationship with the account exec

them. And it's just as big an issue when a previous ABM programme has failed, contaminating the term for those left behind.

Whether you call it 'account-based strategy', or something like '10 by 10' (10 accounts by $10 million), according to one of our ABM experts the key message is: "We're going to work together to build a strategy. There'll be elements where marketing will support you, and there'll be elements where we'll need your input, but let's build a plan together so we can accelerate the sales cycle to get you closer to closing the deal than you would on your own."

Once you've secured the attention and buy-in of the sales or account teams, challenges remain. Building a strong relationship with account executives is vital, but the high turnover of staff on key accounts can complicate this. Marketers recommend ensuring there's some agreement that the sales person will stay on the account for a period of time to enable the strategy to bear fruit. "ABM success really depends on building a decent relationship with the account exec," said one.

It's not just the account execs who move on quickly, sometimes it's the targets too. One marketer said his business was considering marketing to specific individuals (rather than just personas) as part of his ABM strategy. That would allow him to target those who frequently switch roles within the same sector.

Pulse viewpoint:

Getting sales on board can be a big barrier, and without their buy-in your ABM initiative may not get off the ground. Equally big a factor is buy-in from marketing itself. Depending on the type of ABM you're adopting (one-to-one or one-to-many), you'll need the buy-in of marketing ops, product marketing, marcomms, etc.

This may sound simple, but once you start to cross over into other people's functions, you see complications. Ensure you get the entire marketing function's buy-in from the start, as they may have some interesting approaches you hadn't thought of.

How does the account selection process work?

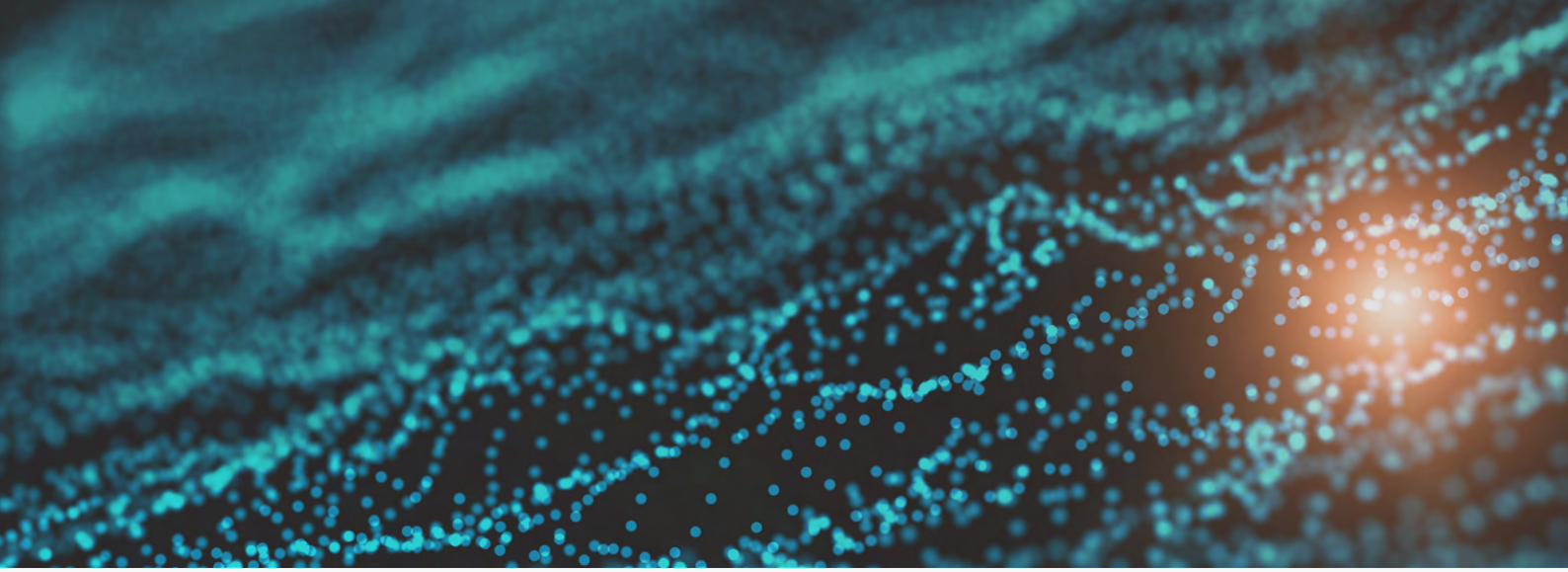
A number of factors go into which accounts get selected for an ABM programme, and it can depend on the programme's maturity, the type of account (whether it's new business or existing), and the level of buy-in from the sales team.

For those just getting started, account selection can be a process of testing and learning, as there may be limited information on who the organisation's key accounts are.

One marketer started with 10 accounts, and then tried to build enough momentum with their account managers to justify the cost of the initial account research. "I wish it was more scientific," he says. "But sometimes it's whatever you can get to work and do the best with – none of the sales guys really knew which were the best accounts for this."

For the more experienced, the process can be much more formal. "We look at the top accounts, and take a value judgement on those with the biggest growth potential. That generates a list and then we pick the ones where we think we can work with the account execs," says one experienced ABM practitioner. Account managers see it as a compliment to be chosen, she says, "but that's only because we've been doing it for a long time."

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Those getting started with ABM tend to favour targeting new business accounts – as proving you can open a previously closed door can be a powerful motivator.

First-party data (or even just useful internal conversations) is the primary influence on account selection. The more sophisticated are supplementing this with intent data from third parties. This can have a huge impact on success, confirming or confounding what you thought you knew about your accounts.

Pulse viewpoint:

Using a mixture of internal (first-party) data and insights is just as valuable as using third-party intent or predictive analytics. Using all of these elements in combination can deliver genuine value. More importantly, it can act as a vital mechanism to get the sales team trusting the marketing engine. For example, if you can show them intent and predictive signals for their accounts – and they verify they're seeing that type of interaction – they're much more likely to trust the strategy and approach being developed. All of a sudden, it moves away from sales dictating the account list to a collaboration between marketing and sales.

What skills does ABM require?

One barrier to ABM was surprisingly cited as resistance from within the marketing function itself. Marketers are often doing ABM at the same time as their current role, but not working with an ABM mindset.

"I can't grow the ABM practice because I haven't got enough of the right people," was the complaint from one participant. The argument is it's difficult to find marketers who understand the strategic side of ABM – such as asking the right questions, being curious, and understanding how the account is going to grow – rather than just running a process.

"Salesmanship is sadly lacking in many up-and-coming marketers. They don't really know what it's like to sell," was one response. Because of this, many lack the necessary credibility to converse with the commercial or sales director to deliver the strategy.

"If you can't do the job of the sales team, how are you going to offer them support?" questioned one. Almost all the successful ABM practitioners around the table had sales experience in their career.

Is the solution to hire people who know how to do ABM, or graduates you can train? Both bring challenges. ABM veterans are often wedded to a particular methodology that might not always be appropriate. But graduates sometimes lack the drive to see the bigger picture. Hiring sales people and training them in ABM could be an answer, but to execute this strategy you need to be able to have others to collect the insights.

What's the ideal allocation of resources for ABM?

"How can we make ABM work with the resources we have?" It's a familiar question for those assessing their ABM strategy.

Those getting started tend to allocate accounts among the team, so each member has one or two to concentrate on, in addition to their current responsibilities. This drives focus on accounts and customers, but can have unintended consequences. One business found the ABM

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ABM is about hitting more people via more channels in a more joined up way



strategy for each team member's account mirrored the marketer's area of expertise – the event marketer would propose a series of events, for example.

This siloed approach is very inefficient and misses one of ABM's major benefits. As one ABM chief exec explains: "I'm most helpful when sharing information about what's working on other accounts, and when you only have one account you're not able to do that."

The alternative to a one person per account strategy is a centralised nucleus of ABM practitioners, which draws support from the rest of the team. But few marketers are fortunate to be able to dedicate all their time to ABM activity.

The balance in performing ABM is always between risk and return. A £25,000 account won't require the same level of personalisation as one worth £25 million. One-to-one, bespoke customer offerings, is simply not possible for most due to the effort involved. Instead, it's about finding commonalities between accounts, so you can create similar-looking campaigns with small amounts of one-to-one personalisation.

One participant advises: "ABM is about hitting more people via more channels in a more joined up way, not necessarily making a bespoke direct mail for a single account. It's about organising resources and budget against those accounts in a very orchestrated way."

How deep should you go with account planning?

This will really depend on the maturity of your account team. One experienced ABM practitioner only has a short account plan – around 12 pages – based on a

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If I could turn up with an organisation chart, people would look at me like I was the messiah

template, as execs are expected to know their accounts. If you're trying to get buy-in for the programme, presenting a deep dive analysis that demonstrates real intelligence can be a great way to get the ball rolling.

Pulse viewpoint:

The depth of account planning completely depends on the accounts you have, or the approach you're looking to take. But account planning is vital – irrespective of whether you have 1000 accounts or 10. The difference is the level of involvement. Often this is dictated by the success factors and/or the sales team's requirements.

Is ABM really different from demand generation?

The consensus was there is a subtle difference between the two. ABM involves a more structured, conscious effort about who you're targeting. One business separates the two based upon deal value. High value prospects form part of the ABM programme, while lower value deals are directed toward channel marketing. The most successful ABM programmes are those that use data gathered from demand generation to fuel the strategy. The two are converging, but ABM is a much smarter way of operating.

What's the best way to measure ABM?

How businesses track the contribution of ABM usually mirrors wider marketing metrics, such as revenue generated, appointments secured, or contact engagement.

These traditional measures can create their own challenges. For a business that measures marketing on revenue generated, for instance, an ABM strategy might not be able to deliver a return in the required timeframe. This leads to hard conversations about how much can be spent.

Those expecting to deliver quick results from ABM might be disappointed. While it's possible, accounts that take a year or two to show some return will struggle to cope with a quarter-by-quarter budgeting schedule.

Aside from revenue, appointments or meetings secured could be used to develop an engagement score, which can incorporate insights from across social media, email opens and clicks, event attendance and asset downloads.

But for some, just generating account insights can provide significant business value. "I know a few accounts where if I could even turn up with an organisation chart of what the structure looks like, people would look at me like I was the messiah," says one.

Pulse viewpoint:

When you're building a programme, you're spanning so many departments that you need to have reporting that works for all, so there won't be just one way to measure ABM that applies to all.

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For example, if you're asking for budget from the business to run an approach that's new, you'll need to showcase high-level business reporting. The fact you're running a marketing programme means you still have to provide marketing metrics. The point of ABM is to engage accounts and help accelerate and grow sales. This means it's vital to generate insights that are actionable at an account level and feed them to the sales team. While this should be easy for them to adopt in theory, we've seen this can be a gradual and sometimes challenging process.

The key for ABM is not to report in a linear function, but to use the insights to constantly refine and improve your approach.

If they could start again, what would they do differently?

Ironically, the top response when asked what they would do differently was to put more effort into internal marketing. Some felt simply changing the name would have enabled programmes to start and build momentum faster.

Another recommendation was to put agency support in place earlier. While it might be tricky to identify exactly what you'll need, thinking it through in advance will mean you're not responding to requests in a knee-jerk fashion.

A further learning was the importance of maintaining a strategic and impartial view, to avoid blindly following the latest trend that's hot among agencies. Experience helps, but make sure you're soliciting a wide range of opinions and putting your own stamp on the strategy, rather than just signing up to someone else's approach.

It's about being willing to put your neck on the line, staking 50% of your Q1 budget on one account – whether it closes or not

What separates the great ABMers from the rest?

There was consensus that a key trait of the best ABM practitioners is courage.

As one practitioner puts it: "It's about being willing to put your neck on the line, staking 50% of your Q1 budget on one account – whether it closes or not – but having the statement of intent to believe it was the right thing to do.

"Having the guts to do it is a big thing, otherwise you just end up turning the little wheel doing the stuff that's always been done," he says.

Pulse viewpoint:

In our view, what separates the best from the rest is the will to gamble. This is where the really great ABMers can run a programme that mixes strategy and full channel activation, and then know how to harness these insights. The risk is in understanding your strengths and being able to pull in additional resource where necessary to make your programme as successful as possible, instead of taking cuts.

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About

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B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

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Pulse is the fastest growing B2B marketing agency in the UK, with a client roster that includes some of the most prominent B2B companies in the world. The agency's growth has stemmed from making marketing easy for its clients, and in no area more so than account-based marketing.

There is a myriad of different terminology, data to support, martech providers and different strategies to consider. Over the years Pulse's experts have helped dozens of businesses navigate the tricky ABM waters by applying considerable learnings in the area through hands-on real experience, not overcomplicating and making programmes simple and easy to implement.

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