

Lead Generation -
what it takes to make a sale

4CM
B2B MARKETING, PR & DIGITAL CONTENT



What it takes to make a sale

Successful business development and sales require skill, focus, commitment and unbounded enthusiasm and persistence

Selling anything is tough. Even big consumer brands – Apple, BMW, Canon et al – that supposedly have products that fly off the shelf, have had to work hard over many years to reach a position where sales can
be assured.

In the B2B space life can be even tougher. Companies, products, solutions and services often lack true differentiation, have to compete in a crowded, noisy and cost-cutting marketplace, or simply don't have the marketing and sales resources required to build and sustain a dominant position.

Despite this, it is possible to succeed – and for small and medium sized companies it's often possible to succeed against bigger, better resourced and aggressive competitors or industry-leading brands.

Where do you start?

Clearly, having a good product or service that meets the needs of your target audience is crucial

The challenge is getting your offering in front of potential customers and then, given that most B2B purchases have sales cycles measured in weeks, months or years, building and nurturing a solid relationship that keeps your business at the front of the prospective customer's mind.



Ultimately, a successful long term sales process depends on the relationship that you, or your sales team, develops with each customer. The role of marketing in this context is to help you identify and explore possible opportunities, create new leads and then to support the lead nurturing process throughout the sales cycle – essentially to enable you to maintain the dialogue while adding value to the customer experience as a means of creating differentiation, positioning and leadership.

First, however, you need to generate the lead.





Lead generation

Leads are normally categorised as inbound or outbound

As the terms imply, inbound leads are generated by prospects finding your business as a result of your marketing or promotional activities such as:

- PR
- Advertising
- Referrals
- Web site via effective SEO

Outbound leads originate from direct targeting activities that you have carried out, including:

- Direct mail
- Email
- Trade shows
- Telephone marketing or sales

Inbound lead generation



In the pre-Internet days most inbound leads were received as reply paid cards, coupons or enquiry forms

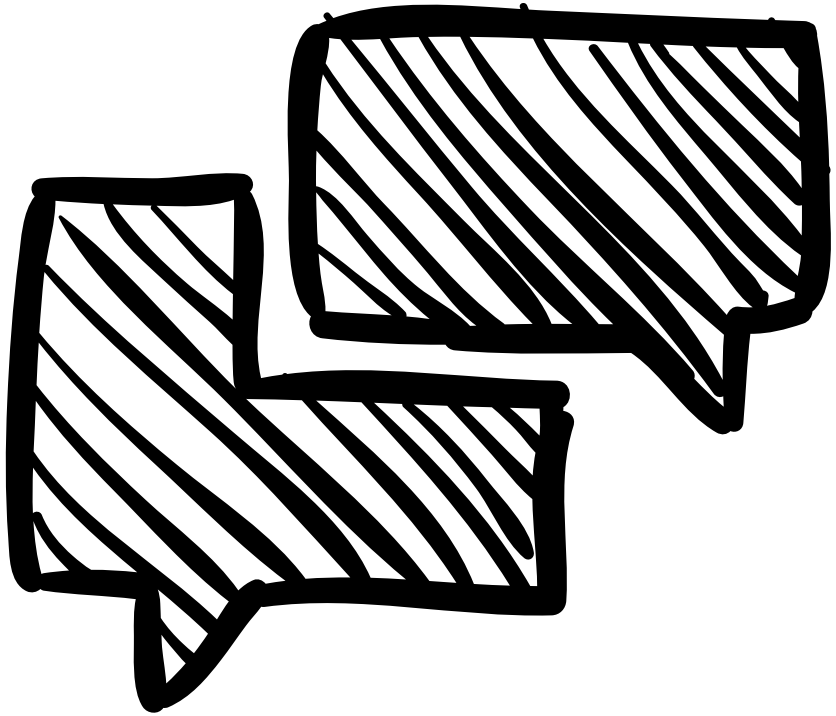
From advertising, on-pack promotions, or editorial coverage in the trade, technical and business press.

With the advent of the Internet, which today offers us a plethora of potential communications channels, this situation has been transformed.

Advertising and PR are still important, but both disciplines have evolved dramatically. Advertising now encompasses tools such as pay per click (PPC), banners, buttons and paid for newsletter entries.

PR has become the driving force behind the new discipline of content marketing, where it provides the fuel that powers the ideas, techniques and materials that are key to effective SEO and attracting and engaging with web site visitors.

In simple terms content marketing is about creating high quality, relevant content that is of value to your target audience



Often referred to as assets – think of white papers, blog posts and video as examples – and embedded in your web site, this content can help your web pages rank highly in web searches. The same content can be promoted using email, social media, PR and so on.

In each case, the goal is to attract quality web site visitors, keep them engaged with your web content and encourage them to carry out a specific action that moves them a step closer to converting from a prospect to a customer.

In many respects, content is no different to any other form of marketing. You need to know your target audience, understand its challenges, desires and frustrations and make a structured offering that satisfies these demands. Where content differs from much of what has gone before is that it is not fundamentally an overt sales process.

In the past, companies tended to rely on sales materials to promote their products and services. At best, the focus of these materials was on customer benefits, related back to product features. Thereafter, discussions were generally based on price, availability and on-going customer support.

These factors are still relevant but they are no longer the starting point.

The customer decision journey



Once the salesperson was in control – they had all the information, statistics, specification and pricing details – now it's customers who control the buying process

Each customer will have carried out considerable research online before making contact with potential suppliers; indeed, they will probably have produced a shortlist of suppliers without direct contact with any of them.
The customer decision journey – from the point of initial need or awareness, through finding possible solutions, to choosing a supplier, placing an order and becoming a long term customer – is no longer linear.

Customers now research, evaluate, select and even share experiences about products and suppliers. There are more people involved, not just in the immediate purchasing decision but in influencing the path taken to reach a decision; and this number grows as the value of the purchase or the length of the sales cycle increases. Add to this mix the ability for influencers and decision makers to use multiple on- and off-line channels for their research, on mobile, tablet as well as desktop, plus the disruption effect caused by your competitors, and you have what is essentially a fluid, complex and distinctly non-linear customer decision journey.

To make sense of this it is nonetheless useful to think of the customer decision journey as a process that starts with a need, a problem or a challenge

It may be as simple as requiring a new source of office supplies, or as complex as designing, building and operating a new process plant. In each case, the same fundamental techniques can be applied to guide the customer from discovery of the options and solutions to a point where they are comfortable making an initial enquiry.

It's often been said that people buy from people that they respect and trust. The same applies to the companies that they choose to work with.

The challenge is moving your business to this position of trust, where it is recognised as a thought leader, and known for its skills, knowledge and experience by both existing and prospective customers alike. This includes customers who may not have yet contacted you, or may not yet know that they have a need for your products or services.

Content marketing, often in conjunction with other sales and marketing tools, plays a key role in this process. In essence, by creating a solid body of material that educates, informs, inspires and motivates, content marketing guides your customer along the decision journey.

> "70% of the customer decision journey can be over before you even know your customer exists"

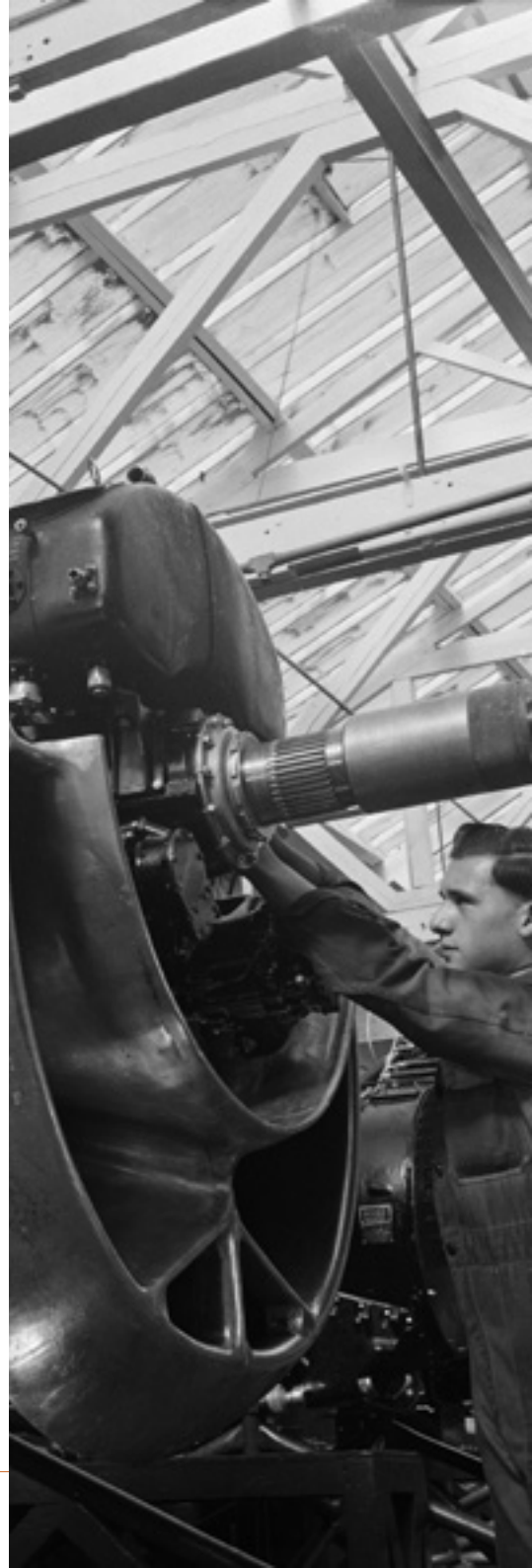
Creating exceptional content

The key to successful content marketing, as a means of generating inbound sales leads, is to fully understand your customer

You then need to offer them ideas and information that help them as individuals in their job role and that satisfy the broader needs of their business. Content therefore has to be:

- personalised and corporate
- informative and interesting,
- work at both an emotional and rational level for each individual

Bear in mind that most decision making is primarily carried out extremely quickly by the emotional part of the brain and is then post-rationalised to justify the decision using facts and figures.



Content also has to be of value to both influencers and decision makers

Content assets therefore have to contain different sets of information for each group. For example, in the process of buying a new item of capital equipment it is important to reach:

- The factory manager to explain how the new machine will help them meet their production targets
- Training staff and line operators to talk about how simple and safe the new machine is to use
- Engineering teams to stress ease of installation and low maintenance costs
- Finance and procurement to discuss leasing options, payback and resale values
- Board level or business owners to emphasise the overall value to their company



To identify the correct messages for each group it can be useful to create a persona, or character profile, for each target job function. This persona generally includes a description of the typical person in each role – their age, interests, preferred methods of communication etc – together with a list of the factors that drive them in their job and in their wider business function. These can be the things that keep them awake at night or make them get out of bed every morning and might be as simple as: I want to impress my boss, or I want to purchase products and services that make me look good and deliver real improvement to my business.

In many respects personas mirror the type of information that any good salesperson would build up in their head about their customer, as they develop empathy

The difference is simply that in this context personas are being used as the basis for crafting the messages and content to attract and engage with the target audience. Once you have a clear understanding of your customer group or groups then it becomes much easier to develop content assets. To repeat an earlier point: these must be focussed on what interests your customers, not on directly promoting your business. Your goal is to create materials that educate and inform, as a means of building credibility, trust and reputation, from which the sales process can subsequently be driven.

The types of material that work best vary from market to market, campaign to campaign and company to company, but normally include:

- White papers
- Videos
- Articles
- Blogs
- News stories
- FAQs
- Case studies
- Reports
- How to E-books
- Infographics
- Tweets & posts



Compelling content

Content has to be compelling

Of course, this is sometimes easier said than done as there is probably a limited number of truly thought proving, imaginative or innovative things can be said or shown to capture the interest of your target audience.

This should not, however, be a constraint, as one of the key elements to successful content marketing is to extract maximum value from each asset.

For example, if you've created a great white paper on a key aspect of your market then the content of the white paper can subsequently be repurposed in many different forms and channels: blog entries, news stories, video, executive comments, tweets and posts, email and so on.

Depending on your market sector it may be practical to create one outstanding piece of content each quarter, exploring in detail a specific market or customer issue

This asset can then be exploited as widely as possible before moving on to the next quarter, where a different topic is explored.

Over time, this builds a solid core of high quality and relevant content on your web site and online channels, linked to external sources such as news portals or independent blogs, and which ranks highly with relevant web searches. Most importantly, this attracts new traffic to your web site and offers assets of value to your prospects that they are prepared to exchange for their contact details. This begins the process of lead nurturing, where an initial expression of interest can subsequently be developed using a combination of email, new assets and, at a later stage as the level of interest intensifies, telephone marketing or sales.

For large organisations, or where larger volumes of enquiries are involved, lead nurturing is best achieved using one of the many marketing automation tools available. These allow the process to be managed efficiently and to maximise the opportunities by integrating the content marketing, marketing and sales functions to create a cohesive and cost effective customer-facing entity.

> “85% of the decisions we make are made by the unconscious part of the brain”
>
> Martin Lindstom, author of Buyology



Outbound lead generation

Unlike inbound lead generation, where prospective customers find your business, outbound lead generation uses telephone and email marketing to target known customer groups

Although face to face selling will almost always be the most effective method of generating new orders in the B2B space, it is followed closely by the use of the telephone as a key sales tool.

Telephone marketing is a particular skill, which requires considerable experience to be truly effective. In any situation you have a short period of time to engage with the prospect and need quickly to build a degree of empathy, so that the prospect gives you permission to continue the dialogue.

Careful targeting and timing is critical. Given the long sales cycles of many B2B operations it is often a matter simply of maintaining contact until the time is right for the direct sales process to begin

This is where the use of appropriate content assets can play a valuable role, providing an opportunity to re-establish contact with the prospect without it appearing that the telephone call or email is actively soliciting the prospect's business.

In many respects, the early stages of telephone marketing are essentially an information gathering exercise. This involves confirming that the contact details are correct, understanding what role the contact has in the decision making process – and clarifying if others in the business are involved as influencers or decision makers – defining the pain, needs or challenges and establishing the time scales involved.

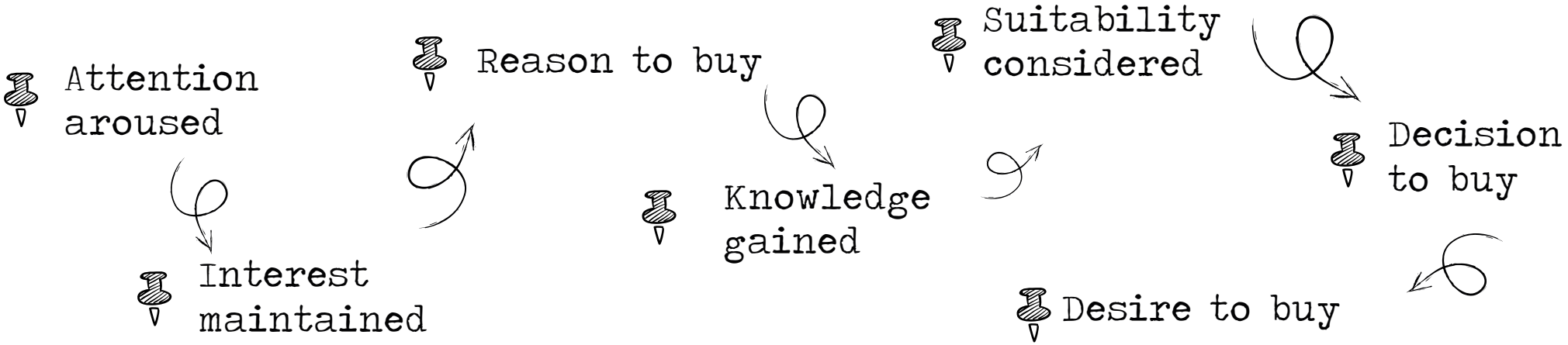
It may therefore be that from the initial prospecting call the most appropriate action is to follow up with a sequence of emailed or posted content assets, rather than sales materials, linked to an occasional telephone call to maintain a dialogue until the point is right for a sales meeting to be arranged.



An important point to understand is that a professional telephone marketing call is not a sales call but what can best be described as a smart call: one that engages with the prospect at both an emotional and rational level – in much the same way that content marketing works

Bear in mind that the initial call is simply the first step on a journey of discovery designed to build a long term relationship with the prospect – a journey that is developed stage by stage by subsequent contact and that consists not of a simple yes-no decision, but instead of a long series of micro-yesses, that eventually build up to your name on a purchase order.

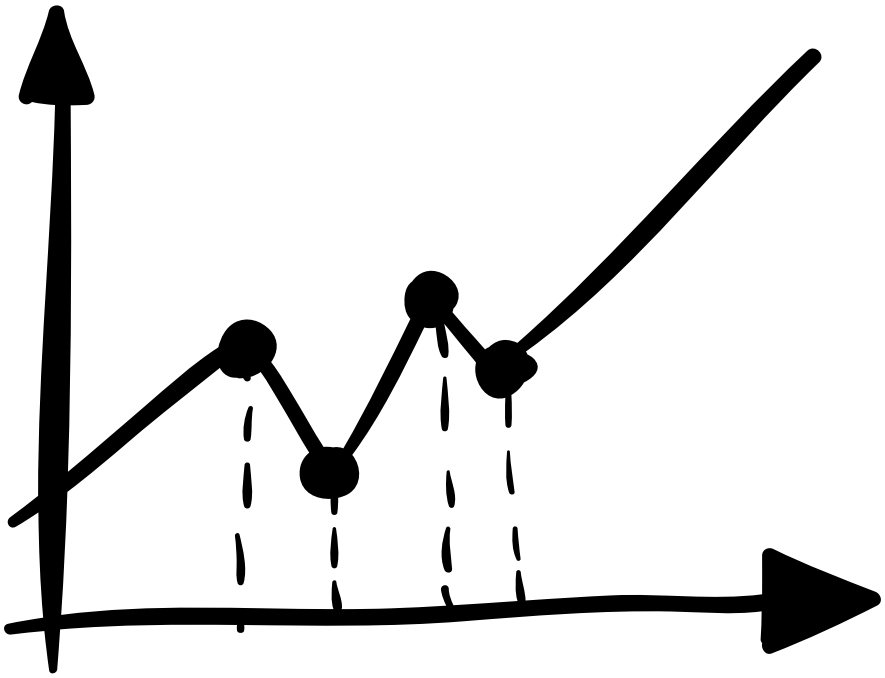
In simple terms this process can be defined as follows:



Telephone and content marketing should therefore be integrated to support this process as it progresses, until the point is reached to hand the prospect over to the sales team to close the deal.

No quick fix!

In conclusion, content and telephone marketing can deliver outstanding results, as a means of driving inbound and outbound sales leads



Note that although these techniques are not a quick fix, and require investment in terms of time, effort and money, especially if external agencies are required, they can offer an excellent return on investment, often in a ratio of up to 10:1.

Ultimately, ROI is calculated by sales revenues. This can, however, be a long process so in the mean time ensure that you are making maximum use of your online monitoring and analytical tools. As a minimum, these should include Google Analytics and IP tracking code to identify changes in web traffic and visitor behaviour, and the individual companies visiting your web site. These can be supplemented by marketing automation and monitoring tools for social, trade and business media.

When combined with other traditional sales and marketing techniques content and telephone marketing will play a crucial role in positioning your business as a thought leader, to build market share, help you penetrate new markets and generate sales.
If you would like to discuss how these techniques can help your business grow still further then please contact us for an initial meeting – there's no commitment other than an hour or so of your time.

Get in touch

If you're short of time or resources then we can help. If you'd like to learn more about our B2B marketing, PR and digital content services then please give our Managing Director, Nick Brooks, a call on 01908 533253 or email nick.brooks@4cm.co.uk.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Brooks is founder and Managing Director of 4CM Ltd, one of the UK's leading B2B marketing, PR and digital content consultancies.

With over 30 years in B2B marketing, working with clients ranging from start-ups, to SMEs and global brands, Nick has the knowledge and hands-on experience to help clients create a strong market profile, build customer engagement and generate sales leads.