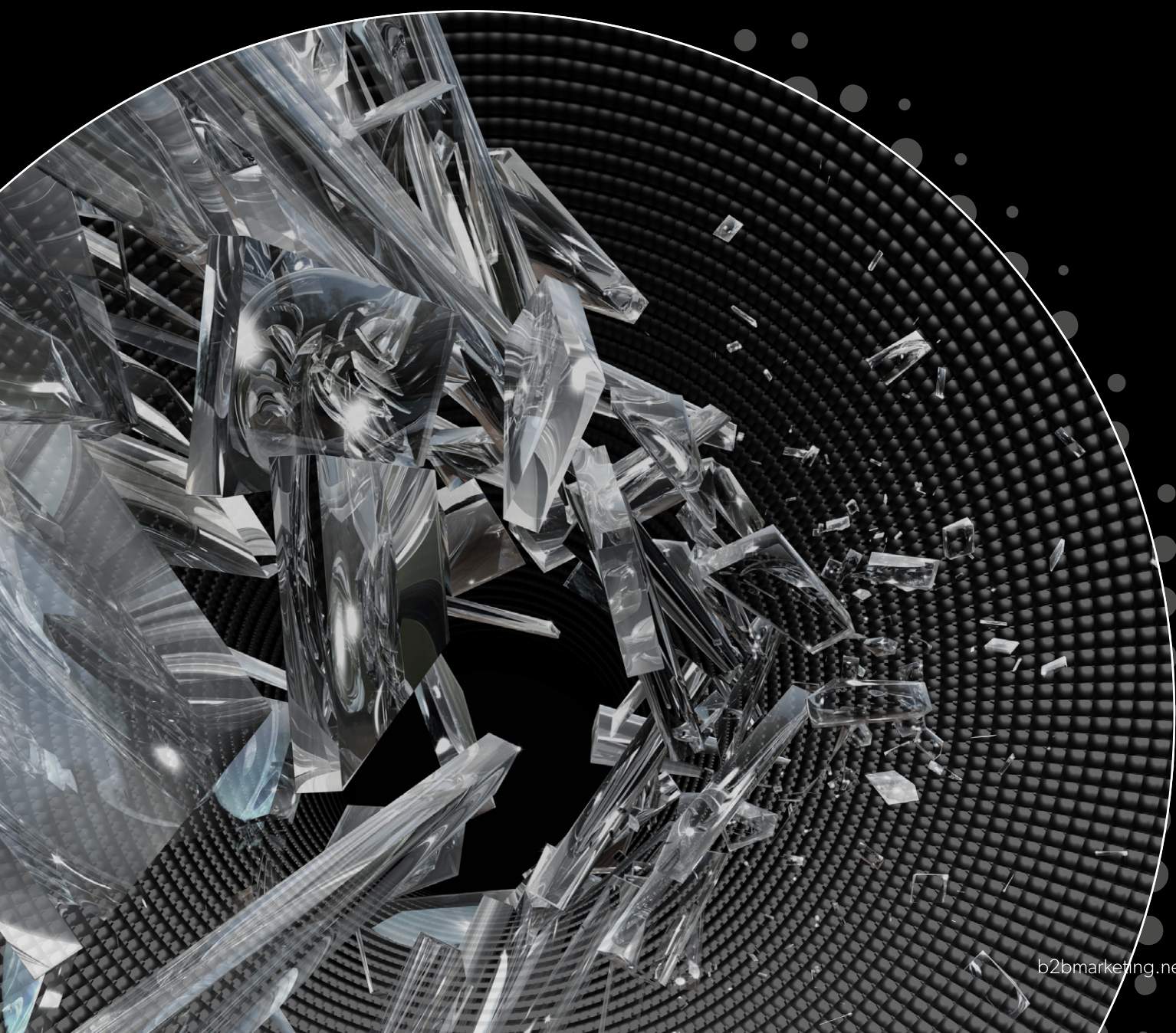


# The middle of your funnel is broken:

Why leads aren't everything and you need to align your content with self-serve buyer journeys



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## SECTION 1

# Introduction



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When Bill Gates said ‘content is king’ in 1996, he was speaking to a world that wasn’t living its life online. In fact, he was speaking to a world that was walking out of the debut of *Independence Day*, and driving home in their Ford Tauruses blasting *Wannabe* by The Spice Girls.

Simpler times.

Of course, I would never discourage such enviable behavior, but the online world now takes up a much larger share of our attention. Working life is now spent mostly online, with B2B brands competing in the same space as customers’ favorite B2C brands.

Indeed, it feels like today every B2B brand is also publisher. And this only makes sense. In order to reach their audience, they need to tell stories, and deliver the content their audience wants when they

want it. Of course, as we know, pressure from the board can sometimes force marketers’ hand, making them deliver high volumes of leads through their content marketing strategy, regardless of the likelihood of conversion.

With this in mind, we wanted to take a deeper look at the middle of the funnel, and see what marketers are getting wrong in their content marketing, and how to get things right.

In order to build this report, B2B Marketing content writer, Lucy Gillman, spoke to content marketing experts from a variety of industries, all to help you reach your audience effectively, and to stop wasting your time doing the wrong things.

We hope you enjoy this report. Now where’s that Spice Girls cassette I left hanging around?

## SECTION 2

# Words of wisdom from... Albert Einstein



**Glenn Landauer,**  
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Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, but expecting different results. Whether Albert Einstein ever actually said this is irrelevant, but it captures the current state of B2B marketing. The collective 'we' who run marketing for enterprise business are under greater pressure than ever to produce increasingly ambitious results. But if we aren't open to challenging the status quo and changing our approach, how can we expect a different outcome? This question was our catalyst for change here at MOI Global.

Einstein would tell you, the funnel no longer works. This is because most brands still focus on traditional goals like lead generation – a volume game – at the cost of more progressive strategies that reward getting the customer context right. Instead of buying attention through cheap online media impressions, what if brands commit to earning attention through premium digital content that is fit for purpose? This is the promise of value-driven marketing that sits squarely in the middle of the funnel. It is where content experiences are not only tailored to the customer's journey and mindset, but where it is responsive and intelligent enough to adapt to the customer's appetite and readiness to buy.

Let's be clear: a broken funnel is a shared burden that is bad for everyone. For the customer, it means a disjointed experience where it's hard to find the information they need. For brands, it means it's more difficult to get in front of customers at precisely the right time, when they have an inquiry or are actively in a consideration mind state. And for marketing departments, it means the squandering of precious

resources: on retargeting ads and filling the pipeline with unqualified leads that (no surprise) fail to convert down the road. A broken funnel is bad for customers and it's bad for businesses, and this is reason enough for the B2B industry to pursue a change agenda.

The good news is we can fix a broken funnel, but we must stay focused. A successful marketing program will delicately balance how brands win (and sustain) attention through the path to purchase. This means pairing an investment in media with an equally robust investment in high quality, high-performing content. If executed well, you can expect to deliver tangible customer value and earn your rightful place within the conversation. Now that's something to celebrate with your sales team.

Let's let this report provoke a much-needed conversation about the B2B marketing playbook, and while the funnel may be a 'broken' artefact, it can not only be fixed but made relevant again, by harnessing customer-centric content and refocusing on the hardest working part – the middle.



## SECTION 3

# The changing buyer journey

For B2B marketers, it's no secret that the customer journey has demonstrably changed – not just over the past 10 years, but also during the past 24 months throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Customers now spend weeks, months or even years silently researching brands before coming to a purchase decision – and they expect both a relevant and seamless experience with the brands they do business with, regardless of when, where and how they engage them.

In addition to this, marketers are under increasing pressure to deliver quality leads to their sales counterparts, but in a fraction of the time, and at a fraction of the cost.

This means their content has to be better than ever before – delivered in multiple formats, perfectly targeted to the right audiences, all while tangibly proving important ROI.

Set all these concerns against a backdrop where the marketplace can change at the drop of a hat, and it's no wonder B2B marketers are feeling the squeeze when it comes to content marketing and lead generation.

The most marked change to the buyer journey over the past few years is that people are now doing the majority of their provider research online. Whether that's through product reviews, social media activity, case studies or browsing a brand's content library, digital now takes precedent.

Indeed, B2B marketers are well aware of famous statistic claiming B2B buyers are 50–70% of the way through their purchase decision before first engaging with a brand.

"In B2B, and professional services in particular, a long research period with little direct engagement has been the norm for a long time," says Dan Gray, head of content at Blick Rothenberg. "It's where that research takes place that has changed. And where B2B prospects already have a provider, there's no real need to make a quick decision."

What this really demonstrates is a clear shift towards the customer now dictating the parameters of the research phase, rather than the marketers. Gone are *Mad Men*-esque days of forcibly tapping up potential clients in airport lounges or private clubs.

And even gone are the more recent days of email blasting cold prospects or bombarding people with sales calls the second they share their basic contact information. Marketing just doesn't (and shouldn't) work like that anymore. B2B content must be highly personalized, highly relevant, but also highly aware of the fact the customer now calls the shots.

"Fundamentally, people just don't like being sold to anymore – they don't like pressure," says David McGuire, creative director at Radix Communications. "Particularly in B2B, where the sales cycle is long and there are multiple people involved, they need to make their decision at their own pace."

## SECTION 4

# Mid-funnel mishaps: Is the funnel broken?

For many B2B marketers, the top and bottom of the funnel are where they place most focus. It's their bread and butter: engage a prospect with a high-level blog or report, then pass the lead to sales. Job done, right?

Oh so wrong. According to Glenn Landauer, VP customer experience at MOI Global, "The top of the funnel (awareness) and the bottom of the funnel (purchase) merely represent the outer edges of a complex and multifaceted journey that, by and large, takes place in the middle."

Further to this point, he continues, "the middle of the funnel plays host to an ensemble of mission-critical activities that determine success: everything from interest and consideration to evaluation and decision takes place here."

The modern B2B buyer journey is incredibly complex, and passing poor quality leads (based on one single engagement with your brand) will ultimately do more harm than good to your brand.

Typically, the customer journey can be split into four distinct sections:

- 1. Awareness:** A prospect discovers your brand through any number of potential touchpoints (search, social media, word of mouth, events, etc).
- 2. Interest:** Through subsequent research, engagement and exposure to your content, the prospect learns more about your brand and what you can offer them.
- 3. Decision:** Based on their research and the success of your content and relationships building, the prospect decides whether you're the right organization to enter into business with.
- 4. Action:** The prospect takes an action and converts into a paying customer.

Evidently, a B2B marketer's first job is to tap into why a prospect is looking to move (what pain-points are they looking to address? Why is their current provider not making the grade?), before then determining how best to target them with **content related to those concerns**.

Not only that, but it's also about tailoring that content to each stage of the funnel. A prospect's content needs may differ wildly from when they first engaged with your brand versus the moments leading up to a potential purchase decision.

For example, at the top of the funnel, a prospect is perhaps best served with high-level content, but as they near the point of purchase, the content should be increasingly personalized, and extremely relevant to specific business problems facing their organization.

A big mistake that many B2B marketers make is jumping down the funnel too quickly, before that all-important authority and trust has been built.

"If a B2B buyer is at the early stage of their journey, then they've likely touched base with a few companies, and are considering their options," says David. "What they don't want is to be overloaded with calls and emails from loads of pushy salespeople – it just doesn't align with their mindset at the time."

Indeed, for Dan, he was explicitly hired to address the mid-funnel content gaps plaguing many B2B customer journeys. "I was specifically brought into my company to develop a content strategy that would allow us to speak to our prospective customers at each specific stage of their buyer journey, ensure those prospects had the tools available to make an informed decision, and empower our own people to ultimately secure their business."

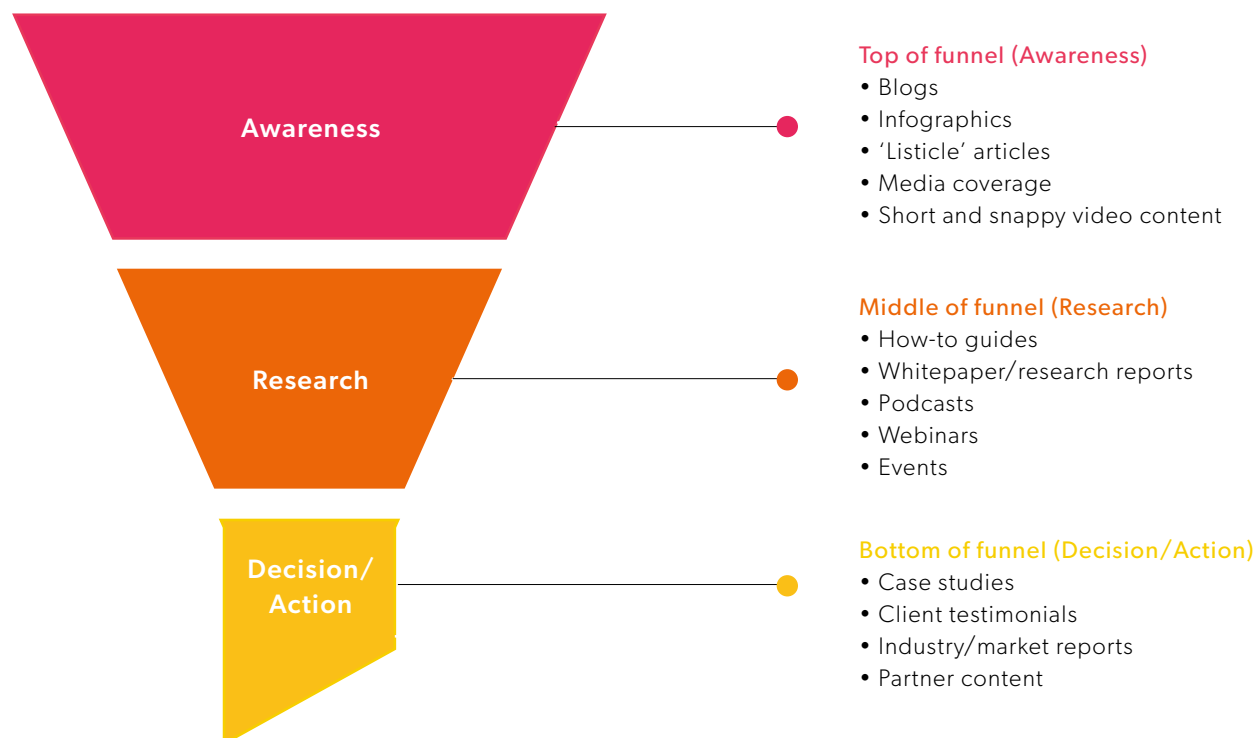
*A big mistake that many B2B marketers make is jumping down the funnel too quickly, before that all-important authority and trust has been built*

## SECTION 5

# Stages of the funnel: Which content works best, and where?

Which types of content, then, are best suited to each specific stage of the customer journey? After all, it's no use presenting someone who's never heard of your

brand with an in-depth market report, or vice versa serving a prospect who's close to converting with a piece of media coverage.





Tying all the above content together is the need to establish authority and expertise – what we refer to in the B2B marketing game as thought leadership.

“Thought leadership content lends to your credibility as a provider, it demonstrates your technical expertise to help build trust and, quite frankly, it makes you interesting,” says Dan. “It’s also fantastic for building your media presence with PR-related content.”

However, as Dan goes on to observe, everyone consumes content differently, and this should play a significant role in a B2B marketer’s content strategy.

For example, while one prospect may like to sit back and digest long-form articles on a regular basis, another may prefer video content, for its shorter, more digestible nature. “We tend to pair content formats together so that we’re appealing to different audience preferences,” Dan says. “So, we’ll often include a teaser introduction video at the beginning of a blog, which encourages people to read the rest of the article.”

For Ethan Beute, chief evangelist at BombBomb, human conversation is the primary goal for his team, and it drives how they create and deliver content. “We tend to focus on a lot of interactive content, constantly focusing on the human-to-human aspect,” he says. “If our content creates conversation and prompts people to ask questions, then we’ve done well.”

The critical reminder from Dan is to not be afraid of giving away knowledge for free, but also balancing that with the need to usher prospects further down the funnel. As he explains, one of the best ways to engage prospects is by not only serving them content that addresses existing business problems, but by also revealing a challenge they may not even have known their organization was facing.

And most of all, content has to demonstrate value. In an age where people are more wary than ever about sharing personal information, B2B marketers must make it clear the **worth** of the content people are giving up their details for.

“Content has to be a value exchange,” agrees Dan. “If a prospect invests their time consuming a piece of your content – whether that’s something as simple as watching a video or sharing their information to download a whitepaper – then you must provide them with value – with a return on their time investment.”

Glenn agrees and cautions us that “by winning their attention in the first place, you’ve entered into an unspoken contract. The customer has tacitly agreed to participate in a dialogue, but only if you give them something in return.”

*“Content is, by definition, an exercise in modern marketing. Whereas traditional advertising is brand-led and attention is purchased, content is customer-led and attention must be earned”*

—

Glenn Landauer

## SECTION 6

# Targeting through technology: Making your content go further

So, what good is all this content, if you have no idea who's consuming it? B2B marketers dream of constructing short and simple customer journeys: prospect reads blog, prospect follows link to download whitepaper and share contact information, lead shared with sales team for conversion.

Of course, the B2B buyer journey just isn't this linear – it's what makes B2B marketing such a complex yet fascinating career.

Tools and technologies that allow marketers to build dynamic audiences offer innovative ways for teams to deliver targeted content to specific segments, based on their browser behavior. Using AI and machine learning, users can experience a completely different experience based on their location or which type of content they consume.

"We use AI tools to identify customers who have been active on our website, interacting with various product offerings, to piece together each stage of the journey, and begin mapping that against which content works best for each audience," says Steve Mudd, head of content marketing studio at NetApp.

For example, if a prospect is repeatedly visiting your site and consuming content related to a specific subject area, machine learning algorithms can serve them bespoke content experiences, such as more in-depth pieces related to their interests.

For Steve, one of the most valuable skills that B2B marketers can exercise when it comes to content marketing analytics is patience. "True experts in analytics, who also get marketing, are extremely hard to come by," he says. "They're hot commodities, so you have to remain patient, prioritize what content should be measured first, and use their time wisely."

And if B2B marketers can ensure both their audiences and the content served to them remain dynamic and fluid, then they're onto a winner. This means moving prospects between segments based on their behavior, and also using techniques like A/B testing to analyze which content is performing best against those audiences, then tweaking accordingly.

However, it would be short-sighted to rely solely on your website for your content marketing needs. There are going to be times, particularly at the top of the funnel, when you just don't know who your prospects are. That's why, for Dan, it's all about quality over quantity when it comes to content.

"Let's be honest, if you don't know who your prospects are, it's going to be difficult to engage them with anything other than top of funnel content, like general blogs and videos," he says. "The worst thing you can do with a prospect is immediately bombard them with gated content when they land on your site. But if the quality of your content is high enough, then you'll be able to naturally guide them down the funnel, because your content will be offering consistent value."

# What are marketers getting wrong? Five common content marketing mistakes

## 1. Focusing on what's attributable, as opposed to what works

With pressure to demonstrate value and ROI, there's often pressure to focus on metrics that, ultimately, aren't important. What good is it that your latest whitepaper has had 1.7 trillion downloads if none of these people are potential customers? Unfortunately, with the buying journey taking months or even years, demonstrating ROI on your content is not an easy thing to do, and it's hard to say which specific piece of content really helped sway the customer in the right direction. Glenn says this is why you have to "think about content as a system. It's much easier to attribute progression, hence 'value', in a well-architected system of content than it is to a single asset". With that in mind, it's time to stop focusing on meaningless metrics just because it feels like you should.

## 2. Gating everything to increase leads

Unfortunately, due to the increasing pressure to deliver leads hard and fast, all too often marketers are gating their content in an effort to acquire 'leads.' They then pass these so-called leads to sales regardless of whether or not they're likely to convert.

As David explains, he often receives irrelevant calls from salespeople that don't really align to the information he's shared with their marketing team. "As a content writer, I regularly download whitepapers for research purposes. I share my details to access the report, including my job title, and, nine times out of 10, I receive a sales call the next day, even when I'm clearly not in the market for the product in the first place," he says.

## 3. Passing off leads at the wrong time

Historically in B2B, there's typically a hand-off point at a particular stage of the customer journey, where sales takes over, marketing gives itself a pat on the back, and moves onto the next lead.

However, with the customer journey becoming more complex, modern companies are innovating how they approach content marketing and sales enablement, instead focusing on an overarching customer experience that brings together marketing, sales, and other disparate teams into one unified approach.

As Ethan explains, the biggest benefit to this approach ultimately comes down to the data: "By unifying these departments and sharing data across all teams, forward-thinking brands are taking a much more data-driven approach to lead generation and content marketing," he says. "It means that teams can use historical data to give vital context to a customer or prospect's position. For example, to identify if an existing customer looks like they're about to burn-out, or similarly whether marketing should ease off a little, because it's becoming clear they have no interest in converting."

#### 4. Creating content for content's sake

Another mistake companies are making is setting up a huge content-churning machine, with no real strategic consideration to what that content is actually doing.

As David explains, this often results in a long-winded approach to content marketing, with brands wasting unnecessary time, money and resources creating content that's not really going to benefit them. "I often see companies laboring over a series of blogs to elevate their search on Google, when their product is really only relevant to a 100 or so large enterprises," he says. "They're literally waiting for a senior decision-maker to Google them and stumble across a blog, rather using more proactive and personalized approaches, such as ABM."

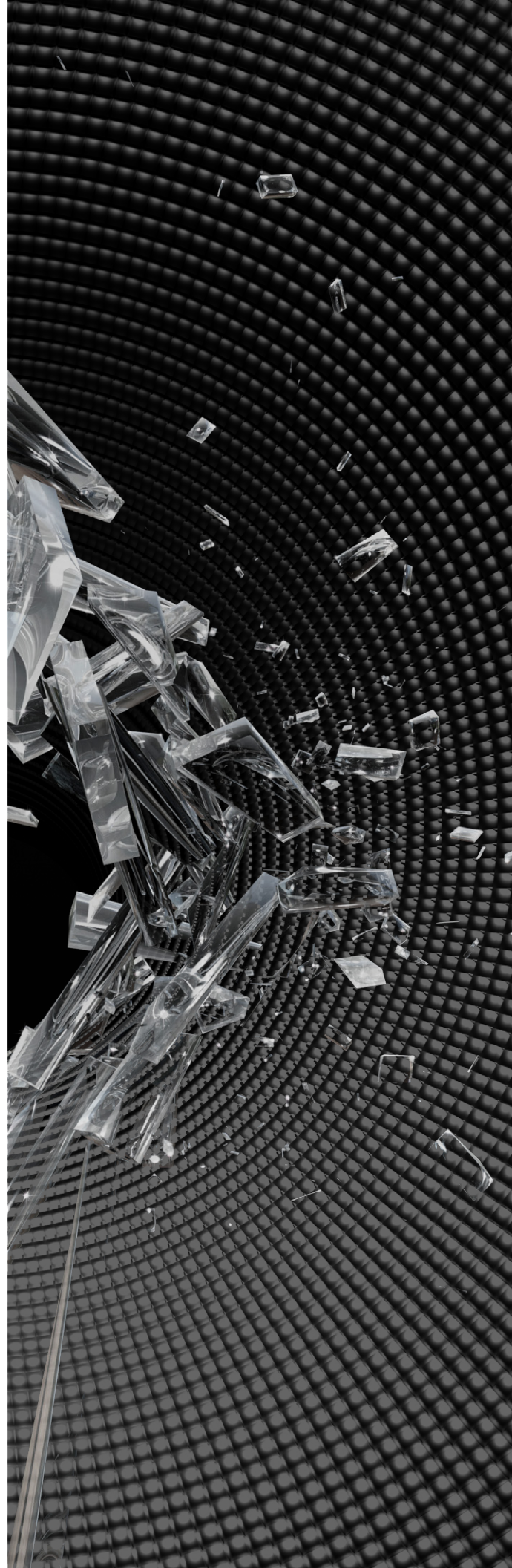
"You have to make sure your content has strategic intent," agrees Steve. "You can't just be about the proposal, or try to cater towards too many people with one single piece of content – be specific, be strategic, and ensure you're constantly measuring the effectiveness of your content."

#### 5. SEO woes

"From a content production perspective, many brands still misunderstand the concept of SEO," David says. "They either obsess too much over keywords, or try to shoehorn irrelevant keywords into their content."

This is a dangerous game to play, as Google often punishes content that's too heavily focused on keywords. With SEO, it's always about the quality of the content – is it providing your readers with true value?

Going further, David points out that brands are all too often focused on creating content to build search engine clout in an area that really isn't going to benefit them. "It's like a fintech start-up offering banking modernization solutions trying to build SEO authority against the keyword 'bank'," he says. "What B2B decision-maker is going to Google the word 'bank' if they're looking to modernize their operations? It's a waste of time to produce content like that."



## SECTION 8

# Everything comes down to trust

If the past two years of adversity and uncertainty have taught us anything, it's the value of trust in business relationships. It's never been more important.

Of course, trust has always been a central tenet in B2B marketing – the face-to-face, personal nature of B2B relationships is why many people entered the industry in the first place.

However, as the relentless march of digital technology continues to blur the lines between B2B and B2C, many have lamented the loss of face-to-face relationships in favor of digital interactions, and its negative affect on the B2B customer experience.

As Dan explains, despite all the recent changes to the buyer journey, it's vital that B2B marketers don't lose sight of what made it so special in the first place – human relationships. "For us in professional services, we're perhaps less transactional than other areas of B2B. We're talking about relationships between the customer and their accountant/financial advisor that will last years or even decades."

That's why, for Dan, one of the most critical components of the mid-funnel is building your prospect's confidence. "You need to prove to them that you're credible, that you've got the right skills, and that they can trust you," he says. "Trust is absolutely vital, and being able to demonstrate thought leadership, to tell stories, and create emotional connections with customers... that all comes to down to your content."

Glenn echoes this point and has advised his clients similarly. "When your content strategy focuses on nurturing relationships with prospects, what you're doing is a setting a foundation to maximize your return: transforming *conversations* today into *conversions* tomorrow."

This is something B2B marketers can often lose sight of. We can become so fixated on the numbers, that we forget the data point we're obsessing over actually represents a real-life human being. David agrees: "What we often see when big enterprises target other big enterprises, is that it becomes hard to actually identify the people," says David. "We need to be aware that our audiences consist of individual human beings, both in terms of the content and how we're marketing to them."

Ultimately, while content can be linked to hard metrics, such as conversion rates, lead generation, and pipeline, marketers must not lose sight of content's impact on human emotion, as Ethan explains. "Yes, content can be measured by KPIs – like conversion rates, lead generation and pipeline – but the actual motivation behind these decisions are harder to track, such as trust, confidence and value. But just because they can't be tangibly proven, doesn't mean they shouldn't underpin everything your content represents."



# Modern content marketing: The journey matters as much as the destination

The customer journey is a long, complex and unpredictable beast. Perfectly aligning your content to each stage of the journey, seamlessly ushering your prospect down the funnel... none of it is easy. If it were, B2B marketing wouldn't be half as interesting.

But as our world continues to evolve, and our habits, behaviors and interests continue to fluctuate, it's becoming increasingly clear that the customer journey is now driven and dictated by the buyer. People want content that speaks to their unique business needs and challenges, but they want control over how they make that purchase.

And that decision is increasingly driven by more emotive and compassionate motivations. People need to trust the brands they buy from, they need to feel respected, and they need to feel confident in the decision they're making.

This means that B2B marketers must channel more focus into ensuring the middle of the funnel is better aligned with the buyer journey. Of course, they mustn't lose sight of the top and bottom funnel, but ensuring the customer journey is mapped from start to finish, and making sure there's always a good raft of quality content to target people at each stage, is absolutely vital.

Long-term, this approach will invariably yield greater business growth and generate more appreciation for the marketing function, as the industry accepts the reality that buyer journeys must align to your content strategy in order to thrive.

*"The idea that 'content is king' has been lauded ad nauseam, so it's shocking how few organizations are currently getting it right. The truth is, content is still the unsung hero. And content does not win until it's high-quality, useful, relevant, and contextualized"*

—  
Glenn Landauer



# About

## B2B Marketing and Propolis

**Powered by the community, for the community.**

Established in 2004, B2B Marketing is now the number one go-to resource for B2B marketers across the globe.

Right from the start, we had a clear mission that remains as strong and clear today: to provide marketers at business brands with the tools, insight and inspiration they need to grow and succeed – as both individuals and businesses.

To do this, we need to continually evolve to make sure we are delivering what you need.

**This is why Propolis was born – our exclusive community for B2B marketers.**

We're proud to serve as the focal point for the B2B marketing sector, and to be a force for greater connectivity, enabling marketers and leaders to share experiences and learn from one another.

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