

How to Create a Content Strategy for B2B Nurturing Campaigns



The Sales Cycle Has Become the Buying Cycle

B2B marketers have come to understand the need for content very well—so much so that they find themselves in the role of publisher for their own brand, creating a steady stream of new information, and participating in virtual conversations. Yet it is no secret that B2B marketing content is still falling short. For example, in a recent survey by spiceworks.com, a full 75% of IT professionals say they no longer register for white papers and other content that is pushed to them. More than likely, this audience has been inured to the deluge of boring, hard-selling content awaiting them behind the form.

So, if you are like many B2B marketers today you find yourself with great content delivery tools—in the form of marketing automation or campaign management software—but a short supply of effective content to push to the market. What are the reasons, and what can you do about it?

Reason #1: Marketing Myopia

Many marketing departments are driven by their own internal events; new product launches, user conferences, the CEO's latest initiative are often reasons to launch a flurry of marketing activities.

Here's the painful truth: your prospects couldn't care less about your CEO's latest initiative. Due to the web and social media, they move through the sales cycle at their own pace, based on their own needs and pressures. If your company ignores this fact, you risk "marketing myopia," the condition of becoming so narrowly focused on your own agenda that you forget to communicate with your buyers.

*In fact, it is not even accurate to call it a sales cycle anymore. It is really a **buying cycle**—and the buyer is in control. Therefore, the most effective content, and thus the most effective marketing, must meet the buyer's needs, not yours! Your CEO may have internal pet projects, but he will love you at the end of the day if you bring in a slew of new prospects.*

→ 2

Reason #2: Underestimating How Buyers Use Content

The second reason, and the one that is covered most extensively in this paper, is marketing's lack of understanding about the buying cycle, and how buyers use content throughout that cycle.

Buyers now have access to any information they need in the buying process. As a marketer, your best odds of guiding them towards considering your solutions is through creating great content that connects with them at each stage of their buying process. Failing to make that investment in top quality content means that your competitors are that much more likely to attract the attention of potential buyers.

*Steven Woods
CTO, Eloqua*

A few years ago, marketing handled brand image and awareness. A few marketing departments would handle the tougher tasks of lead generation, and then throw the "leads" over to sales.

But now that the buyer—not your sales team—is in charge of the buying cycle, marketing has a much more important role. With the advent of social media and marketing automation software, B2B marketing is finally becoming what many have felt it should be: sales in large numbers. While the sales department manages a few dozen active prospects at any one time, marketing juggles hundreds or thousands. And matching the right digital content to each of those prospects, at the right phase of the buying cycle, is critical.

Content is the New Fuel that Drives Decisions

→ 3

First, acknowledge that your prospects' agendas are not the same as your corporate agenda. Second, understand how the B2B customer moves through the buying cycle. Then, you are free to develop an intelligent content strategy that will drive more leads and convert more sales. Your content strategy becomes your marketing fuel. It forms the foundation of your planning and budgeting, and drives your decisions and priorities.

Many B2B companies still spend a great deal of money on content but don't get close to their money's worth because they accept inconsistent and disconnected editorial standards rather than putting the time in up front to build a customer-focused strategy on the types of content that matter most.

*Rob Leavitt
Reputation to Revenue*

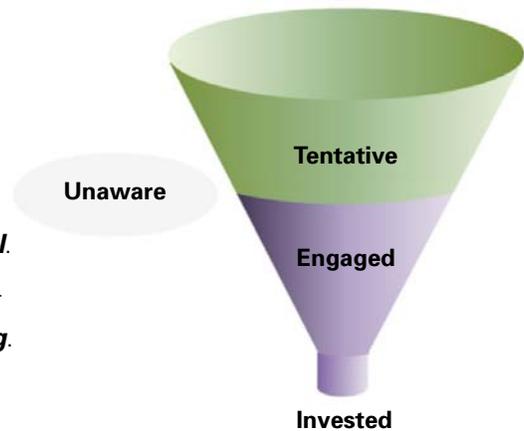
One of the keys, as Brian Halligan of HubSpot says, is to "think like a magazine publisher." Give them the content they want!

We go one step further: give them the content they want *at each phase of the buying cycle*.

The Four Stages of the Buying Cycle

Like the B2B sales cycle that preceded it, the B2B buying cycle has recognizable stages and milestones. Each of these four stages requires a wholly different content approach. In this white paper, we will describe the four stages in detail, and provide examples of the types of marketing content that are effective in each stage.

1. **Unaware:** Buyer is not explicitly in the market, but should be. Content should be **interruptive**.
2. **Tentative:** Buyer is standing at the edge, or quietly wading into the market. Content should be **educational**.
3. **Engaged:** Buyer is in a dialog with your company. Content should be **validating**.
4. **Invested:** Buyer is a customer. Content should be **exclusive**.



While your specific content depends heavily on your industry and competitive environment, these four stages provide a useful wireframe that helps B2B marketers answer the question, “What makes buyers buy?” and guides their production of the content buyers demand.

→ 4

B2B Buying Stage 1: The Unaware Buyer



Does this prospect need a whack on the head? If he is an Unaware Buyer, he doesn't care about your product, even if he does need it. And he certainly doesn't care about your webinar or your trade show booth.

The challenge with the Unaware Buyer is that he goes out of his way to avoid any sales pitch, because he doesn't think he needs to buy *anything*. He easily ignores banner ads and white papers with your product's name in the heading.

Content for the Unaware Buyer must be interruptive. It has to light a new spark, and cause the would-be prospect to do a double-take and change his mind about what you have to say. It has to be about *him*, not about you.

How do you arrest attention from an Unaware Buyer?

- **Speak loudly to the pain.** If the traditional solution has a flaw that prospects are tolerating, turn that toleration into unbearable pain. High failure rates? Lost shipments? Excessive IT maintenance costs? Remind your buyers that their needs are too great, and their standards are too high, to live with that pain.
- **Make it news.** A new research finding is news; your product launch press release is not. A tie-in to current events or alarming statistic will stick in the buyer's mind. To be interruptive, the information must be original from your company, and new, not rehashed.
- **Make it emotional.** There is an old saying in B2B marketing that "companies don't buy things, people do." The ads people talk about at the water cooler—for beer, sports gear, cigarettes, car, and sodas—are the ones designed to interrupt an Unaware Buyer with an emotional or entertaining theme. Although not every campaign can have a breakthrough idea, the use of humor, fear, and storytelling are proven to work. Don't be boring with the Unaware Buyer.
- **Know your persona.** Develop solid personas for the Unaware Buyers to be sure your content not only speaks to them, but gets distributed through the media he already uses, whether that's a high-end webinar series or a Facebook page.

→ 5

UNAWARE Buyer Case Study

PointClear is in the business of creating more leads for its clients. So we titled their white paper: "The Last Thing Your Salesforce Needs is More Leads." The contrarian approach caused potential readers to take a second look, and increased the open rate significantly. It also played to the emotion of the buyer, and to PointClear's value proposition that companies don't need more leads but fewer, better qualified leads.

B2B Buying Stage 2: The Tentative Buyer



Is your buyer standing quietly on the edge of the market, trying not to be noticed? Research shows that most B2B projects start without a budget or purchase authority—when the potential buyer does a web search to solve a problem. This is the Tentative Buyer, and she wants to learn as much as possible about the best solution—without being sold anything. Your content has to serve as one of her most helpful resources, minus the pitch.

Content for the Tentative Buyer must be educational. It has to give the buyer a feeling of control over the research process, while gently, almost subliminally guiding her to your solution. It has to be about her problem and how to solve it—not your solution and how great it is.

Because the Tentative Buyer must feel she has done her due diligence, she won't get on board with *your* product before she has researched all the alternatives—so don't expect her to. Help her learn, compare, and self-qualify to be your customer.

The blessing and curse of the web in B2B marketing is that the buyer has taken control of the research leading up to the buying decision. The curse: she has fast access to a virtual conversation that you can't control, featuring others in the market, your customers, your competitors, and your competitors' customers. The blessing: she insists on doing the research herself—so let her self-qualify, using the content you provide.

How do you provide content that educates, and preserves the buyer's feeling of control?

- **Make the shift internally.** Is your marketing department operating on pre-Web 2.0 assumptions? Here's a simple test: look at your search keywords. Do they describe the buyer's problem, or your solution? If the latter, root out those assumptions in your search campaigns and copy. Provide knowledge first, solutions second.
- **Make your web site a self-qualification tool.** It's not difficult to add a little interactivity that gives your web site visitors a feeling of control on your web site—and it lets them do the work. Let the buyer choose paths into your web content, using questions such as, "Are your stores in one city, or multiple cities?" Interface with your analytics or marketing automation system, and capture valuable lead information even while the buyer takes charge. (One of our favorite examples is [this interactive presentation from Eloqua](#). It does include the sales pitch, but it makes it fun.)

→ 6

- **Be guided by a spirit of generosity.** Develop an educational series that is truly educational. White papers and webinars are effective, but notorious for their marketing pitches. To attract Tentative Buyers, lead with learning, and ditch the pitch. The title “What Financial Regulation Means for Main Street Bankers” has more educational appeal than “Streamline Banking Customer Care with the XYZ Solution.”
- **Don’t talk about babies on the first date.** Long registration forms for white papers, overzealous email drips, and too many commands to “Call us now!” conspire to make a Tentative Buyer feel less in control of the buying cycle. Don’t push for the lead. Let her get to know you. This was confirmed by the American Institute of CPAs in a survey of members. The survey found that substance is more important than style. CPAs, like other consumers of products and services, want content that is understandable, believable and memorable.

TENTATIVE Buyer Case Study

Computer designers are more comfortable with bits and bytes than the chemistry of the batteries that go into their devices. When our client was challenged to break through to electronics designers with a new battery technology, we developed a “primer” that explained the chemical processes inside a battery, including the function of basic elements such as a cathode and anode. The primer was a huge success spawning hundreds of media articles and significantly increasing interest in the company. Most importantly, it positioned them in the prospects’ minds as an expert in the industry and a resource they could depend on for useful information.

→ 7

B2B Buying Stage 3: The Engaged Buyer



Your suspects have become prospects, and then qualified prospects. They have landed smack in the middle of your sales funnel. They have even met with your account rep and senior executives. You're on their short list. Does that mean that your work providing marketing content is done?

Hardly.

Your buyer is Engaged. He already knows about your company, your industry, and your competition. But he still needs plenty of information.

Content for the Engaged Buyer must be *validating*. Now is the time to confirm the Engaged Buyer's good impression, answer questions and objections, make your offering compelling, and most of all, help him feel safe.

How can you provide content specifically for the Engaged Buyer? Here are a few examples of content that works well at this stage:

- **Case studies.** Help the buyer relate to your current customer—one in their industry, for whom you've done a good job. By describing your established success, you relieve feelings of risk the buyer might have.
- **Third party articles.** Outside influencers, such as journalists and analysts, carry more weight than you do. Although many of these materials may be generated by Corporate Communications or PR, there is no reason not to use them for demand generation. Even if an article's focus is more "corporate" than "solution" based, remember that the Engaged Buyer is researching your company's vision as well as your product.
- **Competitive comparisons.** This is a good time to break out the detailed spreadsheet comparing speeds and feeds, product features and price/performance versus the competition. Fight the old-fashioned reticence to discuss a competitor's strengths; your Engaged Buyer will appreciate your candor and confidence.
- **Customer-friendly legal documents.** Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? But it doesn't have to be. Plain English agreements eliminate the win/lose mentality of the typical contract. Doing business well and being easy to do business with don't have to be mutually exclusive.

→ 8

ENGAGED Buyer Case Study

Manhattan Associates, a world leader in supply chain solutions, has a profitable customer reference and case study program that closes sales. What makes it successful? It's a process, not a project. They employ fulltime staff to enroll existing customers in the reference program, and they get participation by showing customers "what's in it for them" to serve as references. And, they have a full suite of convincing case studies that we developed with them. Unlike many companies that scramble for referenceable customers and case studies, Manhattan Associates has hundreds. Both marketing and sales use these resources to validate their claims, establish credibility in practice, and move buyers through the buying funnel.

Some companies make the mistake of using validating content too early in the cycle, when the buyer is Tentative and not yet Engaged. But validating the company and the offering too early is akin to a sales pitch. The Tentative Buyer has her own problems to solve. Assume that she doesn't care about your company until she suspects you might help solve her problem. Then she is Engaged, and seeks content that portrays you as the safe choice.

→ 9

B2B Buying Stage 4: The Invested Buyer



If you have ever been solicited by a company you already do business with, you know what it feels like to be taken for granted. Don't let this happen to your customers. Like your prospects, your customers are also buyers in a buying cycle. The important distinction is that they have made an investment in your company. As such, they are your Invested Buyers. They have educated themselves, performed all the due diligence, and have now become

stakeholders—so they must be treated as such. Give them their rightful place in your value chain.

Content for the Invested Buyer must be *exclusive*. It should give the buyer a sense of being a member of a select group. The same new information you use for the previous three buyer stages will help her be your sponsor for additional purchases, and it will continue to validate her role in the original buying decision. But it must be framed for the customer relationship. Just as a parent doesn't talk to a teenager the same way he talks to a toddler, you can't afford marketing materials that talk down to your customers.

How can your content foster the stakeholder relationship with your Invested Buyers?

- **Inform, don't educate.** Having performed discovery, education, and validation in the previous stages of the buying cycle, your customer has "graduated." The Invested Buyer is now your peer, not your pupil. Content should be informative, like a newspaper, not educational like a textbook. Send customers new research that impacts them. (If they need education, let them find "ABCs of the Industry" on your website.)
- **Treat customers as members.** Marketing content for customers should communicate exclusivity and the elevated status you give your customers. Sneak previews of new information, and "insider" tips that don't upsell, set the right tone. Customers expect you to know them, so personalization of their emails and web content is always appropriate.
- **Use an informal and conversational style.** Remember, these people are part of your family. Communicate with them in a slightly more informal and conversational style. They have given you permission to do that.
- **Don't take the customer for granted.** Although B2B marketers are aware that their existing customers experience their brand, many take the customers' positive perception of that brand as a given. They expend too little effort to support the ongoing relationship. Don't let customers leak out of the end of the sales funnel, only to get swept up by a competitor. Analyze your overall marketing plan for an appropriate proportion of effort for marketing to customers.

→ 10

INVESTED Buyer Case Study

Everyone loves to be asked for their opinion, and one of the tactics we like to employ with clients' customers is to regularly survey them and ask them what they think. But we are not talking about service levels or customer satisfaction data. Rather, we ask about industry trends, direction and expectations. Customers are flattered when they know that you value their opinion and insight. In addition, the results usually have a benefit that goes beyond showing your customers that you value them. For PCI compliance provider ControlScan, we asked their customers what they thought of industry efforts to help small merchants better understand PCI compliance. We published the interesting findings in survey that fed the company's lead generation efforts and also resulted in more than thirty editorial mentions.

Most importantly, remember that your customer is still in a buying cycle in which she has claimed control. Allow the customer to retain that sense of control in a peer relationship. It's been a long and hopefully rewarding journey for both of you. Give your Invested Buyer the special status she has earned.

Your Next Step: Map Out Your Content Strategy

Marketing myopia is curable, once a marketing organization commits to communicating with its buyers, first and foremost. With the four stages in mind, it becomes much easier to brainstorm topics for new content, and ways to reuse and repurpose existing content. Simply ask:

- Of the prospects we know, through analytics, marketing automation, and the sales pipeline, what stage of the buying cycle are they in?
- What do the buyers in each stage want?
- Through what channels do they get their information?
- What value can we provide to those buyers, through those channels?
- What content do we already have to meet these needs?
- What new content do we need to develop?

Answer these questions for all four stages, compromising nothing to internal drivers like the product release schedule, sales meeting, or executive pet project. Concentrate on the buyer. Give the buyer credit for owning the buying cycle. The result will be a comprehensive, multi-touch content program that drives business and gets results.

→ 11

About The Content Factor.

The Content Factor is a team of experienced, Web-literate content creators. Our goal is to help our clients do better marketing through better content. We can be reached at www.contentfactor.com or 770-457-2489, ext. 227

If you would like an outside opinion of any part of your Web content, give The Content Factor a call. We can help you evaluate the quality of the existing content—and suggest how to improve it.

→ 12