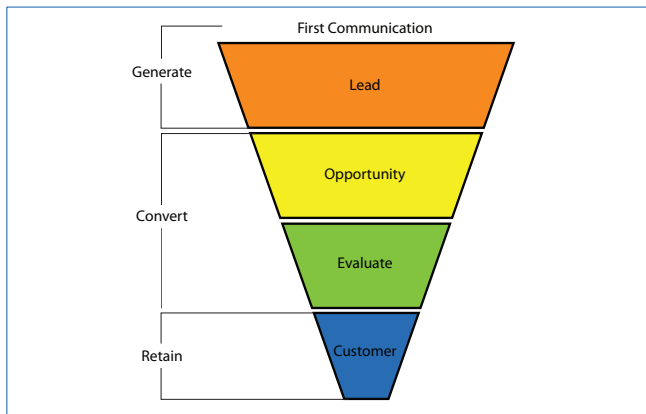


# PR, CONTENT MARKETING AND THE SALES FUNNEL

*Effective marketing involves integrating the different marketing disciplines with sales. The key is ensuring that prospects receive the right marketing materials at the each stage in their progress from prospect to customer.*

The sales funnel is a common model, mapping a customer's progress from a lead to first purchase. A typical sales funnel starts with the generation of leads; moves to conversion into an opportunity and evaluation of the product or service; and finally retention of the resulting customers.



A simplistic approach to sales and marketing might assume that generation of leads is the responsibility of marketing, conversion is a sales role and retention the job of customer service. This is wrong! Marketing can help throughout the sales process by delivering the type of content that meets the needs of individuals at each stage.

Most marketing professionals understand the techniques that stimulate interest: this is the classic function of PR and marketing. They are also aware that wherever possible contact details should be captured when someone shows interest, for example offering valuable content in return for registration on a website. Sophisticated marketers, however, can extend this concept and provide different materials to meet needs at each of the stages of the process from lead to customer.

Generating leads is achieved by scenario-setting content: materials that discuss the situation and problems that might be faced by the potential customer. Application notes, white papers and industry vision articles are all content that will interest a customer who is not yet at the stage of evaluating or buying a product.

A further opportunity occurs once the customer is interested, aware of the potential solutions to challenges and is considering the next steps. At this stage it's important to provide validation of the product or service with relevant case studies that demonstrate that tangible benefits can be achieved.

Once the potential customer decides that they will acquire a product or service, they move to evaluation. In a B2B technology environment, this will typically involve a detailed assessment of different vendors as well as in-depth research about the product or service. Analyst reports and technical information allow for benchmarking, whilst continuing to portray the information in the best possible light to the customer.

There are several different approaches to retention, depending on the product or service being sold. For fast-moving technology products such as semiconductors, it's important to communicate information about upgrades, enhancements and improvements. If a customer continues using a product that is superseded, there is a risk that a competitor will be able to win them over simply because the latest generation of their device surpasses the capabilities of your obsolete product.

Software companies have a different challenge. Whilst the old model of software was to sell upgrades, the emergence of SaaS means the customers always have access to the latest and best tools. SaaS companies need to continually communicate the benefits of the improvements they make to ensure that the customer continues paying a subscription and doesn't look for alternatives.

Word of mouth marketing – customers recommending products and services to friends, colleagues and acquaintances – has always been important. Social media, however, closes the loop publically with reviews and comments from customers influencing people they have never met. Using marketing communications to turn customers into champions who speak publicly about the reasons why they like a particular supplier is now an even more important part of any marketing campaign.

Content marketing is an approach that has been shown to generate great results, particularly in promoting technology products in a B2B context. By understanding how different types of content are most effective when used at different stages of the sales funnel, companies can dramatically increase their lead generation, conversion rates and customer retention without a large increase in sales or marketing costs.

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