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The traditional technology marketing model is broken. Actually, it cracked the day the internet connected every buyer on the planet. It cracked even further when the dot-com bubble burst and buyers became hyper-sensitive to old-school marketing hype. Social media was the last straw.

What has happened is a convergence - easy access to knowledge combined with an inherent skepticism of old marketing. The internet along with social media puts a wealth of information, reviews, references and recommendations at the fingertips of those who look. And, everyone looks. Technology companies can no longer control the sales cycle by controlling access to knowledge. Knowledge is power and now, everyone has easy access to it.

What has replaced that old way - the sales cycle - is the buying cycle or what is often called the "Buyer's Journey." The buyer's journey is that process of discovery, evaluation, validation and purchase that occurs every time a buyer needs a solution to a business problem. The main difference today is that the discovery, evaluation and fair amount of the validation activities occur without a salesperson ever being involved. In fact, a salesperson trying to insert themselves too early in the buyer's journey can be detrimental.

With the buyer's journey, what we once knew as the sales cycle has become the small final phase. By the time the buyer gets ready to buy, they have already identified their needs, researched the available solutions, checked references and peers, read reviews, followed bloggers, downloaded whitepapers, watched videos and more. By the time they're ready to talk to your salesperson, they sometimes know more about you than your salesperson does.

We see this at e-Builder, where the buyer's journey is much larger than the sales cycle. Once we're active with a prospect, our sales cycle typically runs about 5 to 6 months. The real story is what happens before. Interviews with our customers identified that they spend 2 to 3 years, sometimes even as much as 5 years researching their available options, clearing internal

hurdles, securing budgets and project champions before engaging directly with any vendor, much less us.

Today's technology marketer must support the buyer's journey. We must freely provide information about our market's issues, our solutions to those issues and stories of how other people solved similar issues. We must make all this information easy to find. We must encourage and engage in the conversation that is happening about us. We must support our buyer's desire to share, opine and learn. The buyer's journey is their journey, we're supplying the fuel, and hopefully, get to catch a ride.

Supporting the buyer's journey requires different tools, tactics and metrics. Luckily, there are good tools available that can help. Marketing Automation Systems provide excellent tools for automating interaction and tracking a buyer's actions as they move through their journey. Based upon what the buyer does, a well-implemented marketing automation system helps tailor the information that is delivered and when. No more one size fits all. It gets you as close to 1-to-1 marketing as you can get without actually talking directly with the buyer.

The key here is a well-implemented marketing automation system. To do it right takes planning and preparation. It's not hard, but requires a thoughtful and thorough approach. You need to know your market and their pain points. You need executive commitment and alignment of your sales methods to the buyer's journey. And, you need really good stories to tell.

At e-Builder, our marketing strategy is what I call "content-driven." In other words, we research, write and publish lots of whitepapers, customer stories, industry trend reports and more to support our buyer's journey. I source that content both in-house and out. I even publish customer generated content as well. We are implementing marketing automation to help us deliver this content to our target buyers when and how they want it. We are integrating marketing automation with our CRM, website, social media and SEO strategies. Marketing automation is the backbone for executing our marketing strategy.

Here are a few lessons we learned along the way...

1. Execute your own buyer's journey. There are several good marketing automation systems available. Research each one for the criteria that is important to your organization. Read the whitepapers and eBooks, attend webinars and read the reviews. Some things to look for include technology fit; integration with your CRM system (a must), content management system and website; ease of use; flexibility; implementation complexity and vendor assistance; online tutorials; customer references like you; and administrative requirements.

2. Talk to your peers. Find out who's using what, how they implemented it and how they're measuring success. Join professional associations, Facebook and LinkedIn groups and participate. Attend tradeshows and conferences. Follow bloggers. There are thousands of companies that have implemented marketing automation and you don't need to reinvent the wheel.

3. Get your CEO onboard. Marketing automation systems do cost, but more fundamentally, they will change the way you engage with your prospects, both marketing and selling. Your CEO will help pave the way with your sales organization and support your budget needs to create compelling content.

4. Align your sales and marketing goals. Marketing programs only work when marketing and sales work together, have a common language and shared goals.

5. Build a large enough database. What is the size of your target market? Do you have enough contacts to make it work? Back into the numbers you need. For example, 1 deal = 3 prospects = 30 suspects = 300 contacts. If your database is too small, buy lists. We found good lists from business contacts services, company research databases and trade magazines. Also, join professional associations for your industry and attend tradeshows. Both will share member and attendee lists if you join or sponsor.

6. Scrub it. Size isn't everything. Once you upload all those purchased lists, you'll find a lot of duplicates, as well as missing, erroneous and out-dated information. You'll need to scrub the data, remove duplicates, fill-in as much missing data as you can. For example, we started with more than 10,000 duplicates and 7% of the records without state or zip codes. After four months, our contact database is now down to less than 1% duplicate records and all addresses are complete. Finally, create a set of reports that will list out records with exceptions so that you can keep the data clean.

7. Create compelling content. If you want to keep people engaged, give them content they care about - lots of content. Most importantly, this content is not all about you, but about your audience instead. You'll need...

- Whitepapers or eBooks on industry trends, best practices, technology directions, industry research, etc.
- Case studies on customers and industry leaders
- Webinars, videos and podcasts on how-to's, customer stories, testimonials, customer and pundit interviews

Now, this doesn't mean you cannot talk about your company or your products. It just means that you have to earn the right. Sure, you'll need content on your company, products, pricing and implementation methods, but this content needs to be concise, easily accessible by your audience and not forced upon them. Make it available on your website. Point to it in your emails secondarily to the primary content you're sharing. Don't push this content. Let your audience pull this content when they're ready.

The goal here is two-fold: 1) demonstrating your industry knowledge; and 2) sharing that knowledge willingly. That will build your credibility and earn your audience's trust. Trust drives sales.

- Know the buyer's journey. Research your market's buyer's journey. Interview your

customers, prospects and lost opportunities. Ask them when they identified their need and started looking. Ask them where they went for information. Ask them about any internal hurdles they had to clear. Ask them which vendors provided the most help and how. Develop your marketing automation workflows and content plan to support the buyer's journey.

- Engage sales in the implementation. Marketing automation systems are intended to generate leads. But, what is a lead? Marketing may have one definition and sales another. Involving sales will drive a common definition of the ideal lead, the right time to pass a lead from marketing to sales, and how to nurture leads to maximize sales results.

- Pay attention to your SEO. Regardless of how big your contact database may be, people you will never know about are searching for the products you provide. Make sure they can find you. Use some of the website SEO evaluation tools that out there and make the changes they recommend. Make sure your keywords and metadata are accurate, relevant and complete. Talk to your customers and prospects to find out what search terms they're using. Constantly test your rankings using the search terms that prospects use.

- Be social. Prospects and customers are talking about you. Do you know what they're saying? You'll never control the conversation, nor should you. But, you should be part of it. Create the forum for the conversation either through FaceBook, LinkedIn or your own online community. Make it the responsibility of someone in either the marketing or customer service department to monitor, mediate and encourage the conversation. Share your content through these forums as well. Pay attention to what people are saying. The best product ideas always come from the people who use the product.

- Set realistic goals. Most marketing automation systems are implemented with the goals of creating more leads, reducing sales cycles and increasing close rates. These are the right measures, but positive impacts take time. Expect at least 1 full quarter before seeing any real measurable results. Be willing to challenge all results, actions and content. See next.

- Wash, rinse and repeat. No matter how much time you spend in design, you will not get it just right the first time. Embrace iteration. Put something out there. Measure the results. Ask questions. Improve and do it again and again and again.

A buyer's journey focused marketing strategy takes work. You'll need to talk with your customers, prospects and lost opportunities. You'll need a large, strong, clean contact database. You'll be writing content all the time. And, you'll need to constantly measure your results and be ready to flex when necessary. But, it's worth it.

Embracing the buyer's journey shifts your marketing from internally focused to externally focused. It's not about you. It's about your market and their needs. Help them. Educate them. This will earn their appreciation, respect and trust. Your stature will elevate from vendor to trusted advisor. People always buy from people they trust.

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