# Is Inbound Marketing Right for B2B?

By Jeffrey L. Josephson

One of the fundamental differences between business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing and business-to-business (B2B) marketing is the consumer's far greater susceptibility to mass marketing.

Driven by his pursuit of leisure, the consumer deliberately positions himself to absorb commercial messages. At the same time, the business decision maker, driven by his pursuit of profits, tends to avoid them, as they are a distinct distraction. So how does that suggest that an inbound marketing strategy – which is typically implemented as a broadcast, mass marketing, process – is right for B2B? We contend that it doesn't.

To be clear, while some of the techniques that are used in inbound marketing can certainly be helpful to the B2B marketer, the fundamental theory that underpins inbound marketing is highly deleterious for the typical B2B marketer. In fact, it's the idea of an "inbound strategy" itself that does the most damage, although employing some of its techniques to support a more traditional outbound strategy can sometimes be worthwhile. This is because by giving your inbound strategy pre-eminence, what you end up with is "the cart leading the horse," or, more accurately, the technology leading the strategy. And that's how you drive off the road to success.

This is not just a matter of semantics. Implementing a fundamentally inbound strategy sets the focus, context and impact (not to mention the processes and metrics) of the techniques in a way different from what they would be if you used them as part of an overall outbound strategy. So you will end up with different results.

Another reason that it's not just a matter of semantics is that the mission that senior management gives to their sales and marketing staffs is either clearly one, or the other; or else it's not clear. You can either have an inbound strategy (perhaps with some outbound elements), or you can have an outbound strategy (perhaps with some inbound elements). And one has to dominate. From our experience with the B2B companies for whom we have worked, the former is not going to be effective. It will either miss its market, it will be too expensive, or both.

One of the inventors of inbound marketing, HubSpot, counters on their Website with the following:

> Since 2006 inbound marketing has been the most effective marketing method for doing business online. Instead of the old outbound marketing methods of buying ads, buying email lists, and praying for leads, inbound marketing focuses on creating quality content that pulls people toward your company and product, where they naturally want to be. By aligning the content you publish with your customer's interests, you naturally attract inbound traffic that you can then convert, close, and delight over time.

Ignoring the lack of proof for the opening statement, it certainly seems as though inbound marketing is the answer to any marketer's prayers. But, notably, no distinction is made between its applicability in the consumer market versus the B2B market, which should raise some concerns. Granting that many consumers spend hours online each day pursuing their "interests," can you really attract traffic by publishing content that is aligned with your business customer's interests?

Obviously, the inbound advocate's answer is "yes." But there are serious problems. First, can you really know what your B2B prospects' interests are without actually talking to them? (Search terms don't tell you what their interests are, assuming they use search, even if they're for your product.) And most importantly, how much time, if any, does a business decision maker spend looking for solutions to needs that he doesn't know he has? It seems unwise to overturn a hundred years of direct selling experience on a belief in mind reading.

Targeting presents a second flaw in the logic. Specifically, if you broadcast your message, you end up with the same waste you had with your old advertising program. But just like before the Internet, the market research needed for narrowcasting always costs more than direct marketing – so why bother? We've seen long-running, supposedly highly targeted email marketing programs where over 95% of the intended recipients don't even recognize the vendor's name. And finding the visitor behind an IP address is futile when the person doesn't want to be identified.

But let's assume that you can create quality content that pulls the right people toward your company and product, don't you then still have a conversion problem? If you've spent all your money on content creation and distribution, what's left to convert visitors to leads? And even if you have the money, what's the difference between buying ads and praying for leads, and publishing content and praying for leads? In our experience ─ nothing.

And not to sound ironic, but the very same processes – telemarketing, direct mail and direct sales – are the exact same ones you would need for conversion as you would use if you pursued an outbound strategy in the first place. So what has inbound bought you?

To be sure, inbound can drive the creation of good content that can be used in an outbound campaign. But that's not the same thing as an inbound campaign. It's putting the cart before the horse.

Ultimately, as compelling as the inbound marketing message sounds on the surface, it simply doesn't stand up to logic in the B2B sector. But advocates for inbound certainly dig in their heels, primarily because they have content marketing services to sell.

For example, many advocates contend that inbound is especially effective for small to mid-sized businesses (SMBs) that deal with high dollar values, long research cycles and knowledge-based products, because in these areas prospects are more likely to get informed, and hire someone who demonstrates expertise (according to Wikipedia).

Assuming that you even have a high dollar value offering (which is uncommon among SMBs in and of itself) what small business can financially withstand the protracted research cycle? Not many.

Other advocates contend that putting content up on the Web is essentially free. And while that may be true if you do it yourself, how likely are you to be noticed when it's equally free for your competitors, and 15 million other businesses? Is this an arms race that you really think you can win? Again, for most, the answer is no.

But there is also a legitimate concern with the tools of outbound marketing. Many trade magazines, trade shows and print publications are no longer produced, seemingly leaving little but online as an outlet. That doesn't say that inbound is the solution, though; it only says that you need to find another way to get your prospect's attention. Telemarketing, direct mail, networking and cold calling are all still highly viable, economical and scalable – even if they're a little less comfortable to do than posting to a blog.

In the end, though, it's the economics that undermine the case for inbound marketing in the B2B market. Hits, visits, downloads, clicks, inquiries, emails and all the other outputs of the inbound program ultimately have to be converted to leads, and those have to be converted to sales. If you really look at your conversion rates, and the cost of conversion, you may find that the numbers don't add up.

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