

Inbound Marketing: The Key to Building ROI and Lasting Business Success

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Inbound Marketing vs. Outbound Marketing: The Key to Building ROI and Lasting Business Success by Chris Tomlinson

Comparing inbound and outbound marketing is a study in opposites. While both fall under the heading of promotional activities, they're radically different. In order to understand not only the need for, but the value of inbound marketing, you need to know the difference between inbound and outbound methods.

Outbound Marketing: You'll find some pretty familiar activities under this moniker. Most of these are old-school marketing methods, but there are also a few types of digital advertising. Outbound marketing consists of activities like:

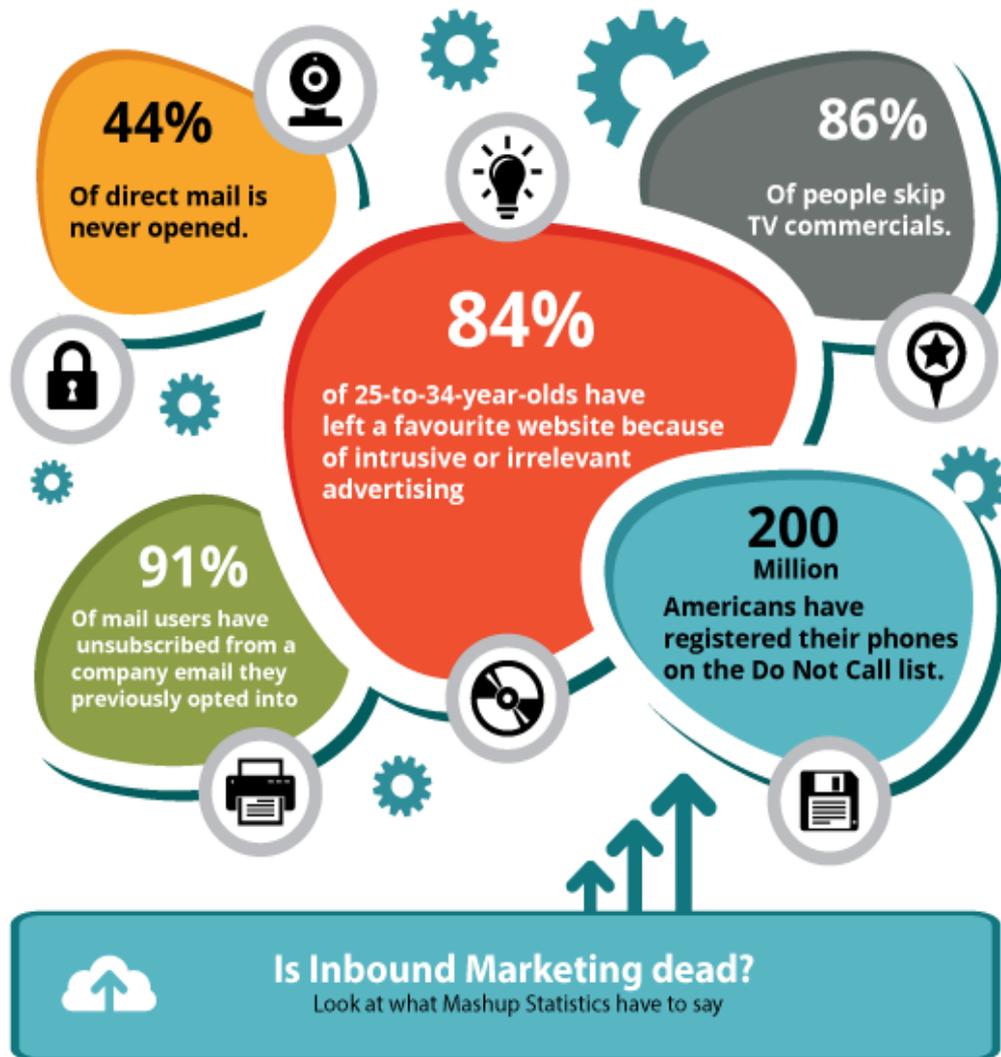
- Telemarketing
- Billboards
- Phonebook ads
- TV commercials
- Radio commercials
- Direct mail marketing

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Inbound Marketing: Inbound marketing comprises some very different options, all of which are geared to bring customers to you after building a relationship through a two-way dialog. A few examples of inbound marketing include:

- Social media marketing
- Content marketing
- SEO optimization of your website
- Podcasting
- Ebook writing and publishing
- Whitepapers and reports
- Blogs and vlogs

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The key difference between the two is this: Outbound marketing is a one-way discourse. You're talking at your customers through your chosen advertising medium. Inbound marketing is a two-way conversation between you and your customers, designed to encourage them to come to you.

Not convinced that outbound marketing is dead? Here are a few stats from Mashable that should illustrate the point very well:

- 84% of 25-to-34-year-olds have left a favourite website because of intrusive or irrelevant advertising.
- 200 million Americans have registered their phones on the Do Not Call list.
- 91% of mail users have unsubscribed from a company email they previously opted into.
- 44% of direct mail is never opened.
- 86% of people skip TV commercials.

So, why has outbound marketing seen such a massive decline? Simply put, the advent of the World Wide Web has empowered consumers – the massive shift in consumer behavior is due to their new ability to control the information they receive, how they receive it, and when they receive it.

Now that we've illustrated not only the difference between inbound and outbound marketing, but why inbound methods are "must have" solutions for today's businesses, let's take a look at the building blocks that go into a successful inbound campaign.

SEO: Search Engine Optimization Explained

The most important building block for any inbound marketing effort is good SEO. Whether you're building a new interactive website, looking to have your PPC ad found, seeking to build more success in social media marketing, or trying to create good content that offers value and brings in traffic, search engine optimization is critical.

Not sure what SEO is? It's actually pretty simple. It's actually pretty simple, although there are two areas of concern: on-page and off-page SEO. For now, let's address on-page.

When a consumer uses Google, Bing, Yahoo! or another search engine to find information online, they enter words into the search bar. These are "keywords." For example, someone looking for a new gardening tool might enter "gardening tools for small gardens." Someone interested in learning more about brewing their own beer at home might enter "home brewing kits and supplies."

It could be anything at all. A keyword is nothing more than a word that relates to the consumer's search. Ideally, it will relate to your company's products or services, as well. Keyword phrases are nothing more than strings of keywords (hint: both of the examples given above are actually keyword phrases).

Search engine optimization is just the process of using relevant keywords and keyword phrases in your content. This applies to all content that you produce, as well, including:

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- Your website
- Your social media profile and pages
- Ebooks
- Whitepapers
- Reports
- PPC/social media ads

Why is it important? Simply put, if your content isn't optimized correctly, then your invisible in the online world. Google has no way of knowing what your company does or sells if you don't tell the search engine (and thus, consumers). By including important keywords and phrases in your content, you tell Google what's what, and the search engine will rank your site or content in the SERPs (search engine results pages).

Of course, you can't just go shoving keywords into your content willy-nilly. That way lies destruction. Google (and all other search engines by extension) has become much more stringent in keyword use requirements. While it was once considered good practice to shove keywords into your website as heavily as possible, that's a death sentence today. Why?

In the past, search engines weren't all that advanced. Companies had to over optimize their content in order to rank. Today, the technology underpinning search engines has evolved by light years. It's no longer necessary to cram keywords into your content every which way. In fact, Google will now penalize you for this – knocking your page rank down significantly, or even blacklisting your site.

So, what are the industry best practices for SEO today? Here's a quick rundown:

- **Keyword Density** (how heavily keywords are used in your content): Natural density, or around 1%. This boils down to 1 keyword per 100 words or so.
- **Placement Matters**: Where you use your keywords is now more important than density (use them in titles and headers, as well as in site tags).
- **Optimize for Meaning, not Keywords**: In the past, Google had to be told exactly what you meant with a keyword. Today, Google can determine context. Optimize for meaning, not a specific keyword.
- **Semantic Search**: Google now interprets the intent behind a consumer's search and returns relevant results that may not have anything to do with the exact phrase used in the search query.

To sum up, it's important that you use keywords lightly in all of your content – don't over-optimize. Second, make sure you're using them where it matters most, and always optimize for meaning, not for a specific keyword or phrase (“auto repair shop” and “vehicle repair center” have the same meaning to Google, and can both offer value to your SEO efforts). Meaning is becoming increasingly important, and that applies to consumer searches, not just your website content.

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Now, let's address off-page SEO. It's a different beast entirely.

According to Search Engine Land, off-page SEO is based on, "ranking factors that publishers do not directly control. Search engines use these because they learned early on that relying on publisher-controlled signals alone didn't always yield the best results. For instance, some publishers may try to make themselves seem more relevant than they are in reality. With billions of webpages to sort through, looking only at on page clues isn't enough. More signals are needed to return the best pages for any particular search."

There are many different elements that play into off-page SEO. Technically, anything you do off of your site that ultimately leads back there falls under this heading. Some of these are mixed areas - social media marketing can be considered both off-page SEO and a separate form of marketing, depending on how you want to look at it. However, there are a few core areas that you should focus on. These include the following:

Link Building: Ok, first, understand that this is not link building in the old-school sense, where all links were created equal, and the philosophy was "the more, the merrier". Things have changed today. Google still uses back links to help rank your site, but it does so differently.

Today, links are valued on the authority of the site linking back to yours, as well as the veracity of the link. For instance, if you ran an online shoe store, and a company selling toilets linked back to you, Google wouldn't give it that much weight. However, if you managed to get a link from a footwear manufacturer, an accessory manufacturer, or even influential blogger concerned with footwear, it would be a valuable addition.

In a nutshell, each link to your site is considered a vote in favor of your company. Not all votes have the same value, though. The higher the authority and relevance of the linking site, the more value to yours.

Directory Submissions: Online directories had their heyday back in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many people say they're dead today, but that's not the case. Really, it boils down to ensuring that you're choosing the directories to which you submit with care. It's a lot like link building. Just as not all websites linking back to you are worth your time, not all directories are worth the effort.

Even with those directories that are worth submitting to, you have to ensure that you're doing so efficiently, and that you're choosing your category correctly. With this being said, directory submission isn't the fast track to better online visibility and optimization. It's a slow-growth method, but it still deserves a place in your toolbox.

On a related note, make sure you're submitting your website to local listing websites and the yellow pages. This lets you capitalize on two things. First, Google loves "local" results, and you can get a boost in both SEO and in views from local consumers searching for products and/or services you offer. Second, Google still ranks these as pretty authoritative, giving you a boost in link juice.

Guest Blogging: Yes, Google did knock down the value of guest blogging, but only certain types. It's still an important tool for SEO, and can yield some very good results as long as you go about it the right way. Not sure what guest blogging is? It's simple enough. You find a blog that's relevant to your business.

You ask about the possibility of submitting a guest blog on something that relates to both your business

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and the blog's audience. Once you get the green light, you pen a blog post, and the owner publishes it. In the blog (generally at the end, in your "about me" section) is a link back to your site.

Now, if you were paying attention when we talked about the value of relevant, authoritative websites to link building, you should be making a connection here. That's exactly what you're doing, but you're combining it with content marketing. The blog's audience will read your post, and click through the link if they're interested in learning more. However, the real benefit here is the "juice" you get from the link's value to Google.

Social Media Profiles: Google has an on again/off again relationship with actual social network content, but your profile on those sites is an important asset in off-page SEO. Make sure you fill the profile out completely, and include a link to your website. Social Media Today reports that, "Search engines like Google take social signal as an important metric for ranking webpages."

Add to this the relationships you'll form with your followers and you have a powerful combination (particularly when you share content published on your site with your followers, who will then re-share it with their own followers).

PPC: Pay-Per-Click

Ok, let's get something off the table really quickly: you'll find different authorities out there defining PPC as both inbound and outbound marketing. Why is that? Simply put, it can be both. For our purposes, we're going to define it as inbound marketing because it shares a lot of similarities with other methods.

What is PPC marketing? Chances are good you're familiar with it, even if you don't know the name. Type a search into Google, and hit enter. You'll notice that the first few results are marked with a yellow "Ad" label. These are pay-per-click ads. They're relevant to your search query, and they lead you back to a company's page. You'll find similar ads on Facebook, as well as other social media sites.

How do they work? They operate based on keywords. For example, a search for "men's running shoes" on Google lists the first three results (all PPC) as Zappos.com, Kohls.com, and Reebok.com. Beneath those three results, you'll find organic search results. In this case, they're for Footlocker, Dick's Sporting Goods, The Finish Line, and other stores.

With PPC ads, you create an advertisement based on targeted keywords. You submit your ad to the platform you're using (Google AdWords, Facebook Ads, etc.) and then choose your budget. Here's the thing. With PPC, you pay for each click. Every time a consumer clicks through your ad to your destination site, you owe money. The amount of money you owe depends on a couple of factors, including the level of competition surrounding your targeted keyword and your bid per click.

The reasons that businesses don't go broke using this method are manifold, but Entrepreneur does a great job of breaking them down.

First, you target your audience very carefully, which means that you're not attracting tons of clicks that won't translate into buyers. Second, you use highly relevant keywords to ensure accurate matching. Third, the right messaging in your ad will incite curiosity in your target audience (but won't in consumers that you don't really want to target).

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As mentioned, PPC ads are run on several different platforms today. Think of it sort of like putting an ad in the newspaper. The right paper will get your ad in front of the audience you need. What platforms are out there? Here's a look:

- Google AdWords (the granddaddy of them all)
- Bing Ads
- Facebook
- Advertising.com
- AdRoll (works on Facebook)
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- YouTube

There are plenty of others out there as well, but you get the picture.

As with SEO, there are best practices that must be used with any PPC campaign to ensure that you're maximizing your marketing budget while reaching your target audience.

First and foremost, accurate keyword research is vital. Don't target a highly competitive keyword or phrase when a lesser used one will offer almost the same value and reach. You also need to ensure that you test multiple messages before you launch the campaign. The more effective your message, the more effective your campaign will be. When it comes to your messaging, remember that you're not selling. You simply don't have the space. Your job is to create interest and incite curiosity. You have to make your audience want to click through to learn more - don't try to give it all away in your ad.

Content Marketing

Content marketing is perhaps the embodiment of inbound marketing. It technically covers everything you'll do online, from social media to ebook promotion and anything in between. However, it's come to mean something different these days.

According to Forbes, content marketing is "a marketing technique of creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience with the objective of driving profitable customer action."

Given that definition, we can take some of the content you produce off the table. PPC ads, for instance - they're valuable, sure. However, they don't fall under the heading of content marketing simply because they're too brief to provide value. They're curiosity inciters, not value providers.

So, what does fall under this heading? A lot, actually:

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- Ebooks
- Whitepapers
- Podcasts
- Reports
- YouTube videos
- Infographics

In fact, some types of content can play multiple roles. Forbes cites the example of Volkswagen's Game Day commercial from 2014. It was incredibly popular, with 18 million views on YouTube. However, it was still a commercial. How does it rank as both an ad and as content marketing? It's all about the audience. Forbes says it, "depends on how it's received by each individual who is exposed to it. The same will apply to any piece of content marketing you create, depending on whether the recipient received value from it or not."

The most important defining factor here is value - whatever content you create, it **MUST** offer value to your audience. Moreover, it needs to offer as much value to as much of your audience as possible. Of course, it's impossible to be all things to all people, but it **IS** possible to create valuable content that speaks to your core audience.

Ok, so now you're probably wondering why content marketing matters (and it matters a great deal). There are several reasons for this, but some of the most important are as follows:

- **Awareness:** Consumers won't buy from you if they don't know you exist, or what products you offer. Content marketing gives you the means to build awareness of your company, your products/services, and to do so in a way that is not direct selling. Remember - consumers actively avoid direct selling these days.
- **Positioning:** In addition to building awareness, content marketing allows you to position your company as the go-to solution for your customers' needs. You don't do this by telling them flat out that you're the answer. Instead, you do it by creating content that offers value and shows that you're the best choice for their specific situation (it's the whole, "show, don't tell" thing).
- **Education:** While your content may have some overtones of promotion to it, it should primarily educate and inform. It should make your audience aware of a problem, and the solutions to that problem. By educating your audience, you deliver immense value while cementing your company's name in their minds, as well as introducing them to what your firm has to offer.

That's great, you say, but where can I use the content I create? Really, the sky's the limit here, although it does depend on the type of content you're creating. For example, whitepapers and reports can be offered as free downloads from your site, or in exchange for a sign up to your mailing list. Videos can be hosted on YouTube, on your website, a blog and more. Ebooks can be offered as downloads or purchases (free is still better here) on your site, or you can publish through Amazon if you want. They can also be used as lead generators in your mailing list building efforts. Podcasts can be hosted on your site or blog, but they

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can also be distributed through iTunes and myriad other options to further spread your content around.

Of course, you have to create the right content in order for this to be effective. While quality content will result in significant ROI, the wrong content can backfire, leading to a drop in profitability and success. Follow best practices during content creation to ensure that you enjoy the benefits you want.

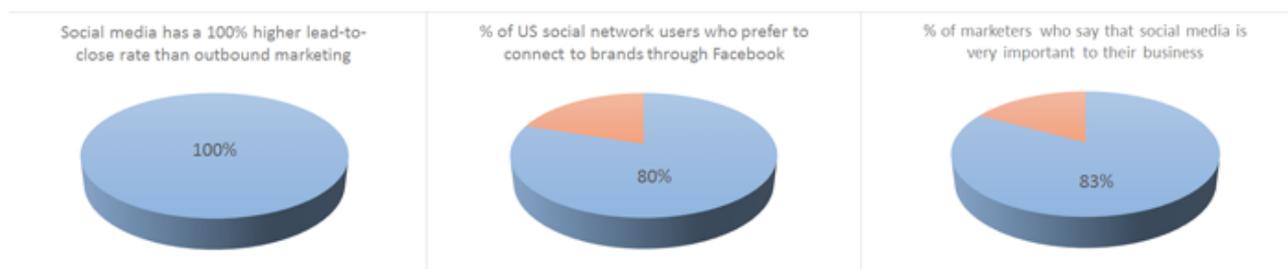
First and foremost:

- Your content must provide immediate, obvious value
- It cannot be a direct sales pitch
- It must be engaging
- It must be tailored for your specific audience

There's more to the situation, as well. Oracle points out that your content must, "bring something new to the table." It can't just be a rehashing of what's gone before. It should also be delivered in context to ensure that you're reaching the right people at the right time.

It should go without saying, but your content also has to be original. You can't simply "rebrand" a report you found online and pretend it's your own. Content creation takes time and money, but it's well worth the investment.

Social Media Marketing



Social media marketing has become a powerhouse – if you're not a member of at least the three big social networks, you're missing a key tool in your efforts. If you're still on the fence about social media and your business, here are some eye-opening statistics, as reported by HubSpot:

- Social media has a 100% higher lead-to-close rate than outbound marketing.
- 80% of US social network users prefer to connect to brands through Facebook.
- 83% of marketers say that social media is very important to their business.

Social media marketing can be somewhat confusing, of course. How do you use it effectively? The key

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thing to remember is that social media is about generating conversation. If you're attempting to use it as an outbound marketing platform, you're going to fail. There's no two ways about it. Social media **MUST** be used to generate conversation and interaction. You cannot limit your efforts to promotional activities alone.

While that might sound difficult to achieve, it's simple when you follow the 80/20 rule (the Pareto Principle). This means that 80% of the content you post on social networks should be only obliquely related to your company, while 20% can be direct marketing (announcements about discounts or sales, developments within your company, new product announcements, etc.).

Really, it's pretty similar to content marketing. You have to provide value to your audience. Providing information about your products or services, whilst interesting and valuable to you, is not the best way to provide value to a potential client. What should you share, then? Again, take a cue from your content marketing efforts. Share content that:

- Informs
- Amuses
- Educates
- Relates to a problem/situation your audience faces

You also need to pay close attention to the social networks you use. They're not all created equal, and you can't afford to waste time engaging on a platform that's not going to deliver the return on investment you need to see. How do you choose the right platform, though?

First, determine where your audience lives. Different platforms have varying user base makeups. For instance, Facebook is generally more family-oriented, while G+ has a very high percentage of tech users. Twitter users are more likely to be liberal and younger, while Pinterest users are more likely to be women. Pew Research has done a very good job of summing up the various platforms for you. According to Pew:

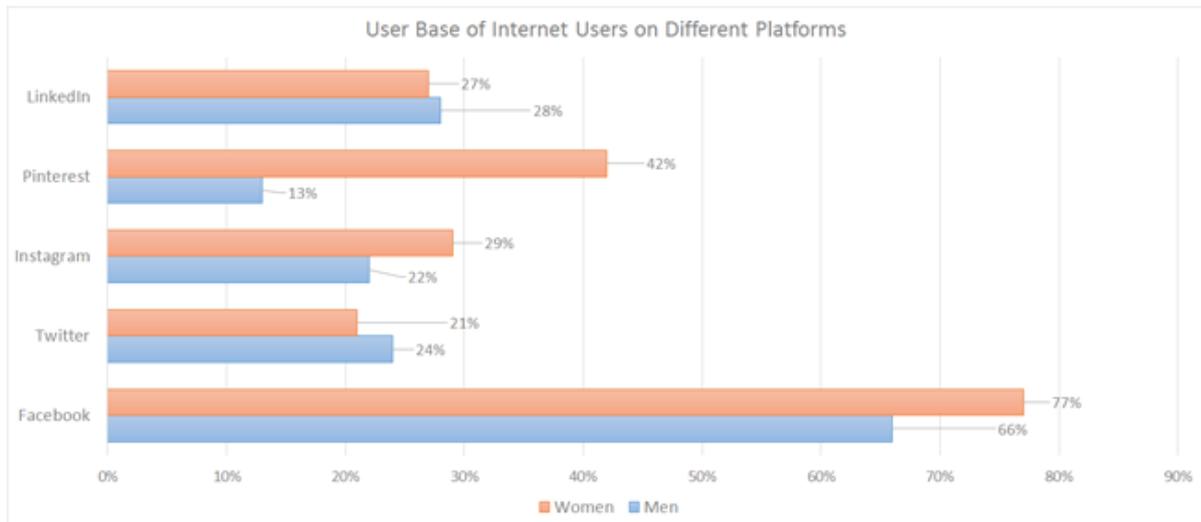
- Facebook: 66% men, 77% women (percentage of all Internet users)
- Twitter: 24% men, 21% women (percentage of all Internet users)
- Instagram: 22% men, 29% women (percentage of all Internet users)
- Pinterest: 13% men, 42% women (percentage of all Internet users)
- LinkedIn: 28% men, 27% women (percentage of all Internet users)

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From the statistics above, you can clearly see that Facebook is the most popular social network, and both male and female users are present in significant amounts. That might not mean it's right for you, though. Depending on your business, your products/services, and the audience you're attempting to reach, Pinterest might actually be a better option.

The point is this: find out where your audience lives online, and make that the cornerstone of your social media marketing efforts. You can explore other options after that, branching out to other sites where your audience has a significant presence. However, there's no point in building a social media profile and presence on a network where your audience is largely nonexistent. Finding the right platforms will take time, effort and research, but that will pay off in the end.

Once you've chosen the platform(s) you'll be using, you must ensure that you're following social media best practices. A wrong step here could derail your entire SMM efforts. Since this is one area where so many businesses, particularly SMBs, struggle, we'll go into some detail.

Build Loyalty: The size of your audience matters, but that pales in comparison to the value of a truly loyal, engaged number of followers. Sure, you may have fewer followers, but if they're loyal, you'll find that you get far more ROI out of your efforts.

Engage: As mentioned, DO NOT use social media marketing in an outbound marketing capacity. That's a sure way to destroy any ROI you might see. You MUST engage with your audience. Share interesting posts. Reply to comments. Answer questions. Be a "real" person.

Leverage Existing Content: Invested in content for your other marketing methods? Use it to your advantage and share it via your social media outlets. You can also share content that others have created (remember the 80/20 rule).

Provide Value: This point has been made before, but it bears repeating. You must find a way to provide value to your social media followers, and that goes far beyond discounts, coupons and announcements about sales. Become a valuable part of the wider community.

Make the Most of Local: Social media might give you access to an international audience, but for SMBs,

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local is still the key to success. Use your profile correctly to ensure you're branding yourself locally, and take steps to build your following with local users. Reward customers who check into your location via social media as well.

Respond Quickly to Complaints and Negativity: Hopefully, you'll have plenty of positive interactions with your followers, but there will be some negativity, too. Respond quickly and correctly in these situations. Find out what you can do to make the situation right for the customer. Show them that you value their feedback and their loyalty. By responding quickly and conscientiously, you can build a reputation as a business that actually cares about its customer base.

Be Authentic: It's important that you give your business character in your social media efforts. You can't afford to be a faceless company or, "just another" business. You need your own character and persona. Let your company's culture shine through in your social media marketing. Be authentic. Be real.

Context and Analytics

Inbound marketing requires forethought, planning, and the right tools. It's not a "set it and forget it" practice. It's not something you can release into the wild and then kick back while money flows in. Things have changed dramatically, and today, businesses need to take a proactive stance to their marketing efforts. Understanding the context of your marketing results, as well as having the right analytics tools on hand will ensure that you're able to reap rich rewards.

What Works and Why?

All too often, businesses see some success with their marketing efforts but fail to understand why it works. Then they attempt to duplicate that success, and are stymied when their efforts result in failure. Thankfully, there are several things you can do to drill down into the situation and determine not only what happened in successful instances, but how to duplicate those results in subsequent campaigns and activities.

The most important thing to do is to analyze what content is working, and why it's working. For instance, if an ebook saw particularly high numbers of downloads, you could easily dig into the data to determine several things (assuming you have access to this information, which you should). You should be able to determine:

- Who downloaded the book? Was it primarily men or women? Was it more successful with a younger audience? Was it successful with the audience it was created for? Did the downloads originate from a social network? Did traffic come from Google SERPs, or were there a high number of referrals from other sources?
- Why was the book so successful? Did it offer insight and vital information? Did it contain specific discounts or access to trial programs? Did it deliver how-to information that offered value to a specific segment of your audience?

By analyzing what content works and why it worked, you're able to do a couple of things. First and foremost, it gives you a significant amount of insight into what your audience wants. It tells you about

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their interests, their needs, and the challenges they face.

Second, it tells you more about the content format they prefer. You might find that your audience prefers podcasts to ebooks, or whitepapers to blog posts. You might find that your message resonates more with a particular segment of your audience, allowing you to hone your targeting and reap the benefits.

Personalization - The Key to 21st Century Marketing Success

Take a look at the online world. What's one of the first things that you notice? Is it all about anonymity? No. It's about personalization. More and more, consumers are demanding that they be recognized for their own personalities, wants, needs and individuality. They don't want a one-size-fits-all solution to their problems. They want a "this fits me perfectly" solution.

Personalization is the key to inbound marketing success, and you can achieve it in any number of ways. However, they all require that you have access to analytics information - you have to know your audience in order to personalize your messages and content.

Social Media Content: It's tempting to "automate" your social media content production and sharing, but it's vital that you avoid this, as it's impossible to personalize automated content. Instead, take the time necessary to customize social media interaction. This is important for general sharing, but it's also essential for delivering personalized responses.

Email: Email is perhaps the simplest way to customize your inbound marketing. It's important to distinguish between direct email marketing (outbound) and inbound email marketing. In an inbound-oriented situation, users would have signed up for your email list voluntarily (messages are not spam), and the emails should deliver valuable content targeted to their interests. It's very easy to customize emails today with the person's name, as well as where they are in the buying lifecycle.

Buyer Personas: Not sure what a "buyer persona" is? HubSpot defines this as, "a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers. When creating your buyer personas, consider including customer demographics, behavior patterns, motivations, and goals." By developing buyer personas and applying them to your inbound marketing efforts, you'll be able to attract the most valuable visitors and translate leads into customers.

Buyer Journey: Personalization goes further than knowing and using someone's actual name. It also requires that you know where they are in the buyer journey. Are they an initial website visitor? Have they subscribed? Are they a qualified lead? Are they an existing customer, or perhaps a former customer? By personalizing your inbound marketing based on where an individual customer is within the overall buyer journey, you ensure content relevance and increase the value of your content to that customer, as well as increasing the ROI you'll see from these efforts.

Device Personalization: The days when you could count on someone visiting your website or reading your content on a PC are long gone. Mobile has eclipsed desktop access, and you need to ensure that you're personalizing your efforts to devices, as well as to individuals. One excellent way to do this is through responsive website design. However, you should also ensure that you're not using Flash video (it doesn't work on iOS devices).

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Registered in England and Wales 11th August 2009, Registered Number 6997254, VAT Number 981 3013 36

Conclusion

Outbound marketing isn't dead, but it's definitely dying. The digital age has ushered in new capabilities and new features, allowing consumers an immense degree of control over the content to which they're exposed, when they're exposed to it, the channels through which it is delivered and a great deal more. Inbound marketing is the only way to ensure that you're actually reaching your audience and that they're not tuning out immediately.

Think about it - would you rather read an interesting, compelling, useful ebook, or have someone call you at home while you're sitting down to family dinner trying to sell you something? When was the last time you actually paid attention to newspaper or magazine ads? When was the last time you bought something based on a radio commercial, or because you saw a billboard?

Inbound marketing, in all of its various guises, provides businesses with the ability to achieve their marketing goals while providing value to the customers and prospects. In the end, that's really what it's all about - delivering value and being an integral member of the greater community. No longer can businesses afford to be faceless entities. You must be a member of the community. You must engage with your audience, and you can't do that through outbound marketing.

Search engine optimization ensures that your business is visible online through organic search results, but it also helps build visibility for the content you create in your inbound marketing efforts. Blog posts, whitepapers, ebooks - Google can and will index all of these, building greater visibility and helping attract targeted traffic to your content. If the content actually delivers value, then you can count on them taking the next step - contacting your company.

PPC campaigns can further extend your reach, driving targeted, interested visitors where you want them, whether that's a product page on your website, your blog, a sales page on Amazon

Works Cited:

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About Peppersack

Peppersack is a leading digital marketing agency providing SEO and content marketing services that deliver results. Our search engine optimisation services will help to raise your page rank. We deliver proven results in the form of traffic to websites and sales inquiries through integrated inbound marketing campaigns. We make it easy for your potential clients to find you. These services are based on a disciplined approach to research, analysis, business planning and reporting. Support services include content development, social media management and creative design and development.

Contact Peppersack

Please contact us for help and advice with your digital marketing and communications

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