Content and the customer: inbound ad strategies gain traction

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Introduction

Customer-centric pull strategies and inbound marketing are not new. However, with the advent of inbound powerhouses such as HubSpot and the development of search technologies that allow customers greater access to information and content, inbound marketing has become a "go to" strategy for those looking to actively engage customers and millennials who have vastly increased resources and knowledge available at their fingertips. Inbound marketing differs from traditional marketing in the sense that it pulls customers to the business, as opposed to the company reaching out through traditional advertising such as print ads or mass media. While inbound marketing is an outgrowth of permission marketing, where the intended audience has the choice of receiving promotional messages, it has developed and grown into a unique strategy.

The main feature of inbound marketing is content creation. Through the use of educational, innovative and informative content, inbound marketing is able to draw the customer into the firm voluntarily. As customers view the marketing message, they are more engaged, more active and more likely to support the message being presented to them (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). With the oversaturation of traditional advertising and media, many consumers have developed the ability to consciously or subconsciously ignore ads. By using inbound marketing, businesses have a better chance of expanding customer engagement and earning the purchase.

This paper addresses broad components of inbound marketing: digital, social media and content marketing. Digital marketing "is an inbound marketing technique, effected through webpage, social media and value-add content" (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Social media marketing is a more detailed form of digital, with marketing occurring through any of the myriad of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Content marketing is highly specific and refers to marketing that occurs through sharing content creation to address customer needs and concerns. Within each of these domains, firms must understand customer challenges, address their concerns and offer solutions (vs traditional marketing, which usually focuses on features, price and brand).

Definition of inbound marketing

Inbound marketing has its roots in the service-dominant logic framework, where value is co-created between the firm and the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Lusch and Vargo, 2006). When the firm provides value to the customer, the customer will in turn co-create value for both the firm and the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). This gets at the heart of inbound marketing, which is focused on pulling the customer in with original content, instead of pushing advertisements out to a large group.

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Let us contrast the term "inbound marketing" with its opposite "outbound marketing" or interruption marketing (Krugman, 1983). Outbound marketing is used to describe any marketing that is pushed out to the consumer, such as TV advertisements or billboards. This type of "interruptive marketing" is placed directly in front of the consumer, with the goal to make it hard to ignore. The customer cannot respond or interact with the ad. The goal is not to foster communication or dialogue but instead bombard consumers until they give in.

Another detractor of interruption marketing is the oversaturation of the market for ads. Traditional advertising is oversaturated, with hundreds of businesses vying for customer attention. It is hard to stand out among the masses and greatly decrease the odds of turning the money spent on marketing into income. Because of oversaturation, it is difficult to determine and measure the effectiveness of interruption marketing. This is contrasted with inbound marketing, which can be measured and tailored to the specific needs and concerns of the consumer persona. Thinking in relative terms, that one person found through mass marketing is less efficient and costlier than the smaller group of strongly engaged people earned through inbound. When done properly, inbound marketing is aware of the target audience because the basis of inbound marketing is focusing on the network where the business can be the expert alongside their customers. A strong inbound strategy focuses on the problems and needs of the consumer. The differences between inbound and outbound marketing techniques are summed up in Table 1.

Implementation of inbound marketing

Inbound marketing is dedicated to a goal, whether to increase the number of readers or sales, that is feasible for every marketing strategy. A first step in grounding an inbound marketing strategy is to develop a functioning and realistic buyer persona. Companies aiming at a larger group of consumers may need to develop several personas to be able to specify the nuances between the different personalities and opinions of their target audience.

The buyer persona, the fictional representation of the consumer base, is essential in communicating to the target audience. It is a character that has the common traits and interests of those potential customers most likely to engage with the firm. While grounded in traditional segmentation, the persona takes on characteristics of the target audience. It looks to understand not just demographic and professional components but also the goals and challenges they face. The buyer persona looks to understand their values and how they get their information and the challenges they face with achieving their goals (either personally or strategically). Understanding the buyer persona means understanding the motivations, concerns, resistance to purchases, pains and anxieties of the target audience.

To discover this buyer persona, the firm needs to spend time to understand the emotions that compel the consumer to act and search out a solution to the problem. To accomplish this, there are a number of questions to answer to develop a useful and accurate profile of each persona. While there are several templates available to help understand the buyer

Table 1	Formalized differences between inbound and outbound marketing	
	(Digital) Inbound marketing	*Outbound marketing*
Basis	Permission based/organic	Interruption based
Focus	Pull tactics/customers come to firm	Push tactics/firm seeks customers
Target	Two-way communication with interested audience	One-way communication to large audiences
Aim	Co-creation of value, long-lasting relationships	Unidirectional, goal to increase sales
Tactics	Channels: SEO, WOM, social media, digital disintermediation	Channels: traditional, print, TV, radio, etc.

Source: Adapted from Yuan (2015) and Opreana and Vinerean (2015)

persona, we recommend the following five categories: personal/professional demographics; values and emotions; motivations and intentions; concerns; and communication/search styles.

Personal and professional demographic information grounds the personality. Demographics can help marketers think about solutions the persona might appreciate in his career as well as in his career stage and industry. For example, a home office supply firm can create customized products and services that solve issues in an office workplace for a variety of different support and managerial levels. Understanding the professional stage of the persona can guide content to suit the concerns and issues of the target audience in that stage.

Understanding the values and emotions of the persona will help overcome barriers to acquiring the target consumers. These are reasons that the persona might not be interested in the marketed solution. The values and fears, along with goals and challenges, extend the professional demographics into the true personality of the persona. They allow the firm to see the essential components of the business and the goals.
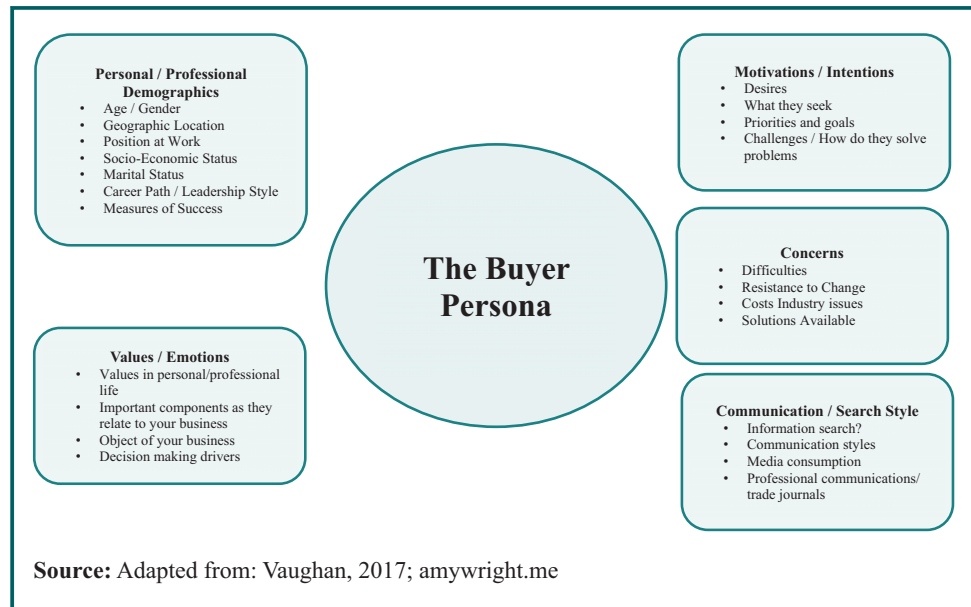
Motivations/intentions relate to the overall desires sought by the persona. It asks what the specific priorities and goals are relating to the concerns what is causing their search. What is driving them and how do they approach their challenges? By understanding both the personal values and motivations and intentions, the business can differentiate and understand the value of its content for the particular target addressing customer needs beyond (but also including) profits.

The next step is understanding the concerns of the persona. This means investigating the barriers the persona may have to solving a problem. It may be internal resistance to change, industry barriers, internal costs or a lack of solutions. It is not enough to understand the goals and issues the persona faces, but the barriers and concerns in fulfilling those.

Finally, understanding the communication/information styles and negatives that impact the persona can affect how the business addresses potential biases, as well as how to reach out and communicate with the persona. Understanding how to communicate with the persona is paramount. Some personas desire face-to-face communications, and others prefer electronic communication. Knowing how to address and solve the personas' problems within a language and method they understand allows the firm to ensure their communications styles align with the audience Figure 1.

After developing the persona, the next step is to determine what that persona needs in terms of the problems, activities and outcomes they are seeking. We identify this step as "trigger-based marketing," with the marketer identifying the key event that initiated the problem or activity that caused the persona his challenge. The main challenge with this stage of implementation is figuring out what events could cause a customer to search for relief from their pain before knowing the persona's strategic challenge. Having a well thought-out buyer persona can answer this question. By having a specific idea of the buyer persona and his/her problems and preferences, the closer the content will be to the persona's needs and challenges. Through that content, the marketer can draw the persona into the emotional solution to the problem that the firm is now able to provide.

Personal / Professional Demographics
- Age / Gender
- Geographic Location
- Position at Work
- Socio-Economic Status
- Marital Status
- Career Path / Leadership Style
- Measures of Success

Motivations / Intentions
- Desires
- What they seek
- Priorities and goals
- Challenges / How do they solve problems

The Buyer Persona

Concerns
- Difficulties
- Resistance to Change
- Costs Industry issues
- Solutions Available

Values / Emotions
- Values in personal/professional life
- Important components as they relate to your business
- Object of your business
- Decision making drivers

Communication / Search Style
- Information search?
- Communication styles
- Media consumption
- Professional communications/ trade journals

Source: Adapted from: Vaughan, 2017; amywright.me

One way to identify the issues is to picture a day in the life of the persona. Creating a narrative around the daily struggles and relationships the persona has can help marketers gain insight into their target base. If there are other personas that naturally occur during this process, then they should also be developed. This approach must necessarily be well thought-out as it may run the risk of being either too broad, or conversely too methodical and narrow. As such, the inbound marketer must strike a careful balance between being detailed enough about common traits without becoming blinded to new characteristics that might occur and attract more customers.

A third step is to address the methods that the persona uses to search for their solution. In the past, the role of providing information was based on the marketers thrusting information out through mass media. Today, the persona has a wide array of resources available as well as a host of information already collected. To facilitate this search, firms must understand the mechanisms that personas use and develop search engine optimization (SEO) to guide their paths to the solution provided by the firm. SEO helps a company's content have a better change of being viewed by those not familiar to the brand. Firms want to ensure that their content speaks the same language as their personas, highlighting their needs and speaking to the problems as personas see them. This helps drive the content and development of a search pathway to the firm.

While inbound marketing requires new skills, the steps above show that it can be done by anyone as long as firms have the motivation to do so. Developing a buyer persona, finding the trigger events and learning about the pathways that customers use to find their solutions can be daunting but worthwhile. From here, the content can be created regularly and readers and viewers can be converted into leads for new sales.

Types of inbound marketing

Digital marketing

While there are several types of inbound marketing, we focus on three broad areas: digital, social media and content marketing. Digital marketing is "the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs directly

persuading customers to purchase" (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019. p. 32). The difference between digital and traditional marketing is not only in the concept but also in the method used to reach a consumer base.

Marketing used to work best when produced to get the attention of many customers, but only sell to a few. Consumer expectations are changing, with solutions needing to be immediately accessible. With the elements of Web 3.0, machine learning, artificial intelligence and 3D and virtual interfaces, consumer interactions have never been more integrated. Through their cell phones and tables, customers shop and experience brands virtually and on-the-go. It is easy for consumers to block out ads with adblockers and selective banner blindness. Print advertisements are easily thrown away, cold calls are ignored and nearly 90% of Americans skip commercials in recorded television (Plunkett, 2010).

Digital marketing is proven to be more cost-efficient, more interactive and more adaptive than traditional marketing (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). It is a way for marketers to reach this target group and develop a successful relationship with the individual consumers. Unlike traditional outbound marketing, where it is foggy at best to estimate the impressions, views and amount of business a certain tactic brought, digital marketing can quantify the number of views, clicks and level of engagement by each consumer. It allows the firm to know the pathway of that engagement and identify what mechanisms were used to reach the content.

Digital marketing does have its downside. Building customer trust is challenging. Customers are often skeptical about information found online. Establishing credibility is an issue due in part to bad agents who create false brand images, thus eroding trust in the system. As evidenced by the fake reviews on Amazon, customers are wary of online messaging. While digital marketing may be surpassing traditional marketing (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019), it is a blend of both that produces the most success. By implementing digital marketing to enhance traditional marketing, or vice versa, a company can take advantage of the cost-efficiency and individualization of digital platforms while retaining the benefits of longevity.

Social media marketing

Social media marketing is a more specific form of digital marketing. While digital marketing encompasses all forms of marketing that take place on a digital platform, social media marketing reflects efforts spent through socially interactive mechanisms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. This can have different effects on a business; consumers can express their opinions, share their concerns and ask for support and information to solve their problems faster than ever. A social media presence can authenticate a company as well as provide another platform for interacting with consumers.

There are several ways to communicate via social media. Ads can pop up on the desktop computer screen or at the bottom of a mobile screen and they are customizable to the needs of the persona. While these pop-ups have varying amounts of success, most consumers have begun to develop banner blindness for these just as for traditional marketing methods. To overcome this, firms must use their developed brand persona to ensure their messaging reaches the target's needs and speaks his/her language.

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Word-of-mouth (WOM) is a reliable tool for companies to exploit for attention, both good and bad. A recommendation from an acquaintance is one of the most efficient and credible forms of advertising, as it builds upon shared relationships. In the past, word-of-mouth advertising used to be literal, with the happy consumer telling an audience of 10 or 15 friends about the product. Today, the happy consumer is typing out his thoughts to an audience of 10 or 15,000 people. This electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is more powerful and "marketers should focus on stimulating interactivity and eWOM by adopting a proactive endorsement of sharing…content created by consumers (also known as user-generated content)" (Vinerean, 2017).

One way to market social media sites is by creating a profile on the site and behaving like a real person, taking on the buyer persona with meaningful posts that are interesting for the viewer and not directly advertising a product. If the customer chooses to follow a firm and posts a picture of the brand, this earns attention without any ill will. The water firm, Boxed Water is Better, exemplifies this strategy (Boxed Water is Better, 2019) by encouraging customers to share their concern for the environment by sending a picture of their Boxed Water with the hashtag #betterplanet. For each share, Boxed Water is Better has pledged to plant two trees on behalf of the poster. By aligning their cause-related marketing with customer desires, they are able to satisfy customer concerns for the environment and share content.

Content marketing

If digital marketing is very broad, and social media marketing is a secondary category of digital, then content marketing is the precise focus of inbound marketing. Content marketing is best described as creating information and interactive content that addresses the needs of the customer. It builds on the created consumer persona to answer the questions of the customer and provide a path to solve their problems. The focus is on how the consumer will relate to the content and uses different formats of content to create loyalty.

Effective content builds on the brand and communicates the value within the content. Like a story, content is most effective when it is (Aaker, 2018) as follows:

- authentic – true and trusted;
- involving – draws one into the content, engages and addresses customer needs;
- intriguing – tells a story that people understand, grabs attention and creates a response; and
- strategic – is meaningful to its target audience; has substance and value.

Most user-generated content only hits one or two of the notes above. Content written specifically by the company needs to blend all five to make sure that it is resonating with the audience and capitalizing on the attention.

Consider the following, Under Armour, the originator of performance apparel (gear engineered to keep athletes cool, dry and light), purchased the veteran mobile fitness company "Map My Fitness" in 2013. This tool allows fitness novices and enthusiasts alike to track and store their running, cycling and hiking activity. Over the years, they have increased the value of the app by adding a bevy of complementary services such as route planning, nutrition tracking, fitness calculators, event planning and by integrating with over 400 trackers, devices and wearables. This acquisition immediately provided a suite of tools which have become an invaluable resource to those individuals interested in improving their health and performance. This was

also an opportunity for Under Armour to build an enormous platform where they have opportunities to get their brand in front of the perfect audience.

Conclusion and recommendations

While technologies may change what is rapidly becoming traditional inbound marketing, the strategies surrounding it remain the same. Inbound marketing requires a thorough forethought before it can accurately be used to attract consumers and increase sales. By developing a buyer persona, creating valuable content and using SEO to reach as many consumers as possible, businesses can increase the efficiency of their advertising budget. Inbound marketing allows consumers to choose to be targeted, whereas outbound marketing forces the advertisements upon the consumer. This creates a difference in the value provided for the consumer, where there is greater value with inbound marketing. For the content to be considered valuable, however, the business needs to know whom they are marketing to. Creating a buyer persona can help a business narrow down their target audience and specify what it is that attracts that type of consumers to their products or services. As firms develop and grow their inbound strategy, they may:

- develop a buyer persona to clearly define the target audience;

- use a blend of inbound and outbound marketing that will have the greatest impact; and

- create valuable content that the consumer will voluntarily give their attention to and enable metrics that will accurately measure the amount of traffic that the marketing efforts bring in, both in visitors and purchasers.

Developing a buyer persona

For the buyer persona to be useful and accurate, the marketer needs personal and professional information as well as the persona's goals, challenges, fears and values. The following criteria should be considered when creating an effective buyer persona:

- answer key questions related to the persona's demographics, the position within the company, education level and the influencers within the decision-making journey;

- spend time evaluating persona motivations, concerns, resistance to purchase and the questions asked at different funnel positions to gain a clear understanding of the emotional factors of the buying journey;

- develop buyer personas that are detailed but not so narrow that other subsets of a similar persona become alienated;

- decide what trigger events occur which cause the persona to turn to the internet to seek an answer, and what outcomes the persona is seeking;

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- create a marketing strategy that will attract consumers at the moment their want or need is triggered and ultimately build confidence that the marketer has the knowledge and expertise to help achieve the desired outcomes; and

- personas are fluid and should be revisited as circumstances change.

For example, a buyer persona for a coffeehouse could be between 16 and 65 years of age, employed and value quality over price. Within these criteria, however, there are a range of nuances that could require the coffeehouse to develop two dozen or more buyer personas. Once the buyer personas are created and detailed, then the corporation has to think about what triggers the consumer to want or need its product or service.

Continuing with this example, there are several triggers. Possibly one persona buys coffee every morning. Another persona has a large report due at work and stayed up late finishing it and therefore needs the boost of caffeine. Perhaps, the third persona needs a place to study and will buy a coffee while sitting on site. The coffeehouse needs to look at all the variations of these triggers, how they relate to the specific buyer personas and create a strategy for attracting consumers when these triggers occur.

For the first persona who buys coffee every morning, the coffeehouse could create a rewards program that will incentivize the consumer for coming five times in a row. The second persona might be attracted by the ease of purchasing a coffee, i.e. if a store is in their vicinity or if it only takes minutes for them to pick up the coffee. Finally, the third persona might choose that particular coffeehouse that had plugs for charging their electronics and a comfortable atmosphere for studying.

This is a rolling process. Firms should look at their target base on a set schedule and see if there are any new niches that they are overlooking, or if any of their current target audience should be eliminated. If they find they are not connecting with one market because of high prices, for example, then that buyer persona should be removed.

Blending inbound and outbound marketing

There are some industries that benefit from a strategy that is mostly inbound marketing, whereas some industries should use mostly outbound marketing. However, for the majority of businesses, the most effective strategy has a balanced mix of both. Buyer personas help with developing a marketing strategy. The first step should be to answer how the different personas are receiving their information.

Take the car dealership industry, for example, where there are a variety of ways for consumers to learn about the newest models. Television and radio ads have always been popular options. Most of the personas in the market for purchasing a new car are from 30 to 70 years old with disposable income. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the personas may learn about new cars through social media and eWOM as well as the traditional methods.

The next step is to compare these findings with how competitors are marketing their products. If one social media site or traditional marketing method is oversaturated with competitors' ads, then that may not be the most effective place to spend an advertising budget. For example, as the majority of car brands are advertised on television, a marketing campaign on Facebook might attract more customers where there is less competition in a localized context.

The current marketing plan should be examined to determine what updates need to be made. This could mean adding either inbound or outbound marketing methods. If the car dealership has a good online presence but notices that other dealerships are garnering sales from the television ads, then more time should be spent on adding outbound marketing. We recommend the following:

■ Figuring out where the majority of the buyer personas learn about solutions to their issues. Explore and understand the pathways to solutions that personas pursue. Understand the different communication styles, concerns and challenges that personas face in addressing their problems.

■ Compare competitors' marketing strategies to avoid oversaturated markets.

■ Decide which parts of the current marketing strategy have been effective and which need to be replaced.

■ Create a plan for implementing inbound or outbound marketing that works seamlessly with the marketing strategy already in place.

Creating valuable content and metrics to guide the content

The first step of creating valuable content is making sure that it will not be subject to banner blindness. Even certain types of digital marketing are succumbing to this, which is a direct result of the oversaturation of a market. For example, hypothetically, a hardware store may gain a lot of views of their how-to videos on YouTube but have all of their Facebook posts bypassed. This could be a sign that videos are more instructional and useful than the written posts. Therefore, the hardware store could focus on creating more videos, and then link that back to their other social media sites. When creating valuable content, the marketer needs to do the following:

■ discover what types of ads are easily ignored by consumers and which are often shared on social media;

■ decide the media type that is the most valuable to consumers and create appropriate content;

■ choose a social media site that best fits this type of content, i.e. YouTube for videos, or Instagram for pictures; and

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- develop and understand the metrics to determine the success of the content, whether that includes clicks, views, time or conversions. Each set of content has its own goals and deliverables, and these should be measured.

These recommendations are designed to provide an outline for a business that is looking to bolster its marketing strategy. A business should keep as much of the current marketing strategy that is viable as possible because that is a sunk cost and cannot be recovered. When adding to the marketing strategy, businesses should make sure everything blends and not have elements that work against each other.

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