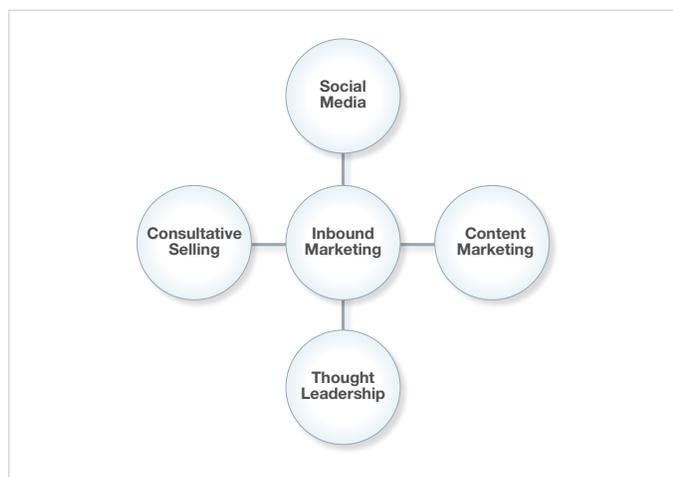


Best practices for content marketers and salespeople in the social era

A white paper about marketing and selling in the social age from social marketing expert Brian Carter

What works for the sales professional has changed in the last 10-15 years. This is a review of what's changed, what the current sales obstacles are and what best practices we should follow in 2014. It's bolstered by quotes from salespeople divulging the effective techniques they're using right now.

How sales and marketing have changed



Both sales and marketing have changed. Your company's ability to adapt, improve key sales skills and respond to what today's prospects want will determine your success or failure.

Sales has changed in five major ways:

- The dominance of inbound marketing
- The shift to consultative selling
- The ubiquity of social media
- The growth of thought leadership
- The emergence of content marketing

The dominance of inbound marketing

Most modern consumers are heavy users of the Internet – particularly of search engines and social media. Today's prospects are much less responsive to cold calls and emails. Spam and telemarketing have galvanized a disdain toward unsolicited pitches. Fortunately, CRM and marketing automation technologies

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have evolved and become more efficient, giving marketers more power than ever. Marketers can now drive a higher volume of leads for salespeople to contact. Marketing automation's use of your company's content marketing pieces ensures that these new leads develop into higher quality leads before sales needs to contact them. That means that, as a marketing professional, you should be sending better leads to sales, and as a sales professional, you should be talking to prospects who are more qualified than they were 10 years ago.

The shift to consultative selling

Salespeople have become knowledgeable consultants who guide prospects through the maze of options to the right purchase that solves their problems. Content marketing pieces help, but prospects need more than marketing. They need a trusted guide who can answer prospect questions, and your company needs a salesperson who can tactfully close the sale and secure the contract. Moving to a consultative perspective means becoming more objective. If your company and your prospect aren't a good mutual fit, you must be ready to walk away from the deal and refer it to another company.

Revolutionary? Yes. Your key differentiators as a winning salesperson lie not in your ability to manipulate prospects, but in your knowledge of the space and the unique advantages of your products and services.

The ubiquity of social media

Social media has even permeated sales and marketing, perhaps more so than any other area of business. Most consumers are using LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter. A lot of the sales trends discussed in this report are centered in social media. Content marketing can be distributed on social media by marketing departments (organically or via advertising) or distributed one-to-one by salespeople to prospects. LinkedIn and Facebook groups are the ideal place for a salesperson to establish their thought leadership, either by sharing content or creating/contributing to discussions. That thought leadership and the content you share with prospects strengthen your consultative selling approach.

The growth of thought leadership

Thought leadership isn't totally new, because there have always been experts and authors in every niche. But in the last decade, with content marketing, inbound marketing and social media, some salespeople have established themselves as a new hybrid of salesperson and expert. These thought leaders blog, tweet, post and engage in public discussions and Q&A that demonstrate their niche expertise. This strategy helps salespeople attract new prospects, get them in the door (turn a cold call into a warm lead), increase your trustworthiness during the (consultative) sales process and boost your overall sales. As this practice has grown, so has the importance that salespeople develop clear and effective writing skills.

The emergence of content marketing

Inbound marketing and the sales process often require informative and persuasive marketing pieces. There are many other types of content that marketing

departments produce or commission, including webinars, recorded webcasts, pre-recorded videos, podcasts, infographics, case studies and research reports. Salespeople can send these pieces to prospects and post them in social groups. As social media use has grown, the amount of content being created, distributed, liked and shared has skyrocketed.

Your prospects are more informed than ever, but they still have questions and problems, which now include dealing with information overload. Live webinars via GoToWebinar are a great way to combat this. Not only are webinars great for marketing because of the rich prospect data that they provide, but they also offer an opportunity for prospects to connect with your company in a live, low-pressure environment. Live Q&A with product experts can help move your prospects down the sales funnel.

Your sales and marketing departments need to work together to identify new content marketing opportunities that can shorten the sales cycle and overcome common misunderstandings and sales obstacles.

What *hasn't* changed in sales?

While marketing has become a stronger partner to sales and prospects are more educated, there remain very important functions and skills for salespeople to contribute. What's still important and hasn't changed is:

- **Quality.** More than ever, you need to be selling a quality product or service.
- **Directness.** Phone calls are more powerful than emails.
- **Rapport.** People still buy from people they like; relationship- and rapport-building are critical.
- **Will.** Aggressive action-takers win, because sales is still a numbers game.
- **Process.** Organizational skills and repeatable sales processes yield better results.

Sales obstacles

Given all of the trends above, what are the biggest obstacles salespeople are facing now?

Attention and signal vs. noise

Consumers and buyers are lost in a sea of more information, advertising, entertainment and messages than ever before. Your marketing and sales efforts must be strong signals above the noise and affect your prospect's plans and desires. Mindshare and being "top of mind" have never been more prized than they are now. You want to be sure that when your prospect is ready to buy what you sell, your company and its offerings are the first that come to mind.

Differentiation from your competitors

More niches are crowded with more competitors. In digital spaces, the biggest companies command a larger share of the customers than offline niches (Google

in search, Apple in music, Amazon in books and Facebook in social media each leave only 10-30% of the market for competitors; compare this to how many automotive companies share a good piece of the consumer pie). You must have an elevator pitch: be able to say in 15-20 words how your company is unique, and how its products and services are different than your competitors. In consultative selling, it's not about winning all the business. It's about having an offering that wins the right business, and having a business model that works with that amount of business.

Competitors who are quicker to adapt to change

The marketing and sales strategies discussed earlier in this report, like content marketing and consultative sales, make companies stand out. If your company isn't doing them yet but your competitors are, you're in trouble. Send your marketing people this report and have them emulate the frontrunners. Some great examples of companies who have embraced these strategies, captured major mindshare and grown their sales volume are Marketo, Hubspot, Salesforce, Red Bull, Nike, Magnolia, CorePower, ADP, DemandBase, Xerox, Sephora and DollarShaveClub. You can find more examples within [InfiniGraph's free Industry Reports](#), which reveal companies that are getting the most social media engagement on their content. The companies getting the most interaction are the ones resonating best with what their consumers care about.

Keeping employees up with the speed of innovation

The strategies in this report have each continued to evolve monthly. Tactics evolve and opportunities emerge. You'll need people who understand and are keeping up with content marketing, prospecting via social media, advertising, CRM, marketing automation and other functions if you want your company to continually leverage the most up-to-date best practices. This means that on-the-job continuing education is critical. Employees need time to read blog posts and attend webinars to ensure your company is on the right track. One way to encourage departments to stay up to date is to schedule a monthly tactics meeting where the sales, marketing and customer service departments can share new ideas and brainstorm.

Neglect of personal rapport

The caricature of a successful salesperson is one who goes golfing or takes a client to dinner to build rapport. But, the newer consultative selling is techier than previous forms of selling. The expert persona a salesperson might adopt can be less extroverted than the typical salesperson's. That means there's a risk that sales conversations can become overly technical and salespeople may neglect the "human touch" (niceties like courtesy, flattery, enthusiasm and inquisitiveness), especially if they're introverted by nature. Technical buyers are people, too, and, like anyone else, can be vulnerable to the personal touch, flattery and humor. If you neglect these elements of the sales call, your competition may create more of a connection and beat you to the sale.

It's not all about intelligence. Some salespeople have higher emotional IQ's than others. Keep in mind that the needed amount of extroversion will depend on your niche and the psychographic of your buyers. For example, the average tech company salesperson will be geekier than the average high-end real estate salesperson.

Introverts may thrive in inside sales efforts, especially when the product or service is highly technical, but your sales team still needs extroverts who love people, and introverts still need to push themselves to improve their people skills. Garrison Wynn says, "You still have to be willing to pick up the phone and call people to be a top salesperson. An 8 minute phone call might beat 375 emails." Better yet, some salespeople are adopting video conferences in place of phone calls to great success. Read [this report](#) for more on that.

The more introverted your sales force is, the more important it is that you coach them on rapport and warmth. Get them out from behind their cubicles and take them to lunch. Bring in an improv trainer to teach them rapport skills and to help orient them outwards.

Focusing on marketing to the exclusion of sales

Because of inbound marketing's effectiveness, the stigma of spam and telemarketing, cold calling phobia and valuing marketing over sales, many people and even some entire companies shy away from all traditional sales approaches. In fact, some pure-play e-commerce companies (like Amazon and Zappos) are able to thrive without a sales department. As a result, many no longer believe in sales. In many companies, a de-emphasis of sales is limiting their potential growth. Still, in many niches the highest revenue companies have a strong salesforce, and more effective salespeople are desperately needed by many companies. Unless you're purely e-commerce, your company needs to have strong sales best practices in place, and you need to value and fund your sales efforts.

Solutions & best practices

In this section we'll cover the strategies that work for sales professionals in 2014, some dos and don'ts and how effective and modern salespeople view sales today. In this section, I quote a number of salespeople I've surveyed. Here are the bios of the salespeople quoted in the remainder of this report:

- Garrison Wynn is the bestselling author of *The Real Truth about Success* and a popular motivational speaker and trainer on the topics of sales, leadership, customer service, innovation and change management.
- Doug Theis is senior vice president of Lifeline Data Centers and has been selling, supporting and managing IT infrastructures for over 30 years.
- Bill Waterhouse is a regional director for Technical Innovation, a company that provides audio visual products and services, digital signage, streaming media and video conferencing.

- Jim Reynolds is a strategic account executive with Brandwatch, and has worked with Microsoft, Google, Nokia, NASA, Warner Brothers, Chevron, Mars Global and agency families including WPP, Omnicom and Interpublic Group.
- Brendan Mark is the sales marketing director of The Heliconia Press, a leading production company in the outdoor industry that produces five television series and runs nine YouTube channels that have gained over 14 million views and 40,000 subscribers.
- Natalie Petouhoff, author of *Like My Stuff: How to Monetize Facebook*, was an analyst for Forrester Research and now conducts corporate social media workshops and teaches at UCLA Anderson and UCLA extension.

Social sales

Because overall responses from prospects to cold calls and cold emails have decreased, it makes sense to leverage social media and social networking to get referred to prospects and warm them up before contacting them directly. Here some of our industry leaders weigh in on the cadence of social media connection and engagement.

Garrison Wynn says, “Buyers want selection and more power in the buying process. Buyers want to see how [a solution] solves their specific problems. A guy selling \$3,000 suits, instead of telling you about the suit itself, will now ask, ‘What are you doing in this suit? We’ll customize this suit to how you’re using it.’”

Doug Theis says, “Always provide value first. Give just enough knowledge away to make them want a call. Keep social media comments simple and short, one idea at a time. Be positive. Always. I believe it’s better not to mix your personal and business personas on social media. Many prospects want to see that you’re a decent human being as well as an industry expert. No sales pitches. Stop telling people how wonderful you are. Prove it instead. Don’t be negative. Don’t be a troll.”

Jill Rowley advises, “Provide value in everything you do. Don’t ever be self-promotional; people hate it.”

Success stories

Bill Waterhouse of Technical Innovation was the first person in his company to investigate LinkedIn for its sales potential. It paid off almost immediately. Shortly after using his email contact database to grow LinkedIn connections, he was messaged on LinkedIn by someone he’d tried to get business from before. They invited his response to a new RFP which led to a \$450,000 contract. Bill was only considered because he popped up on LinkedIn. One of Technical Innovation’s employees simply joining LinkedIn was worth nearly a half-million dollars to his company.

Hubspot hit \$2.2M in sales after two years in business and then hit \$52M four years later, mainly using blogging and social to generate leads and salespeople to close them.

Furthering the point, keynote speaker Garrison Wynn says, “I post in LinkedIn groups, and we’ve gotten 3 deals out of one of those groups.”

Proactive vs. reactive

Sales professionals tend to be more aggressive. They reach out. The social media marketing that supports them can also be proactive, if they choose, but some social media pros come from a PR background and may need to be pushed toward and educated about a more direct marketing approach.

The best, most proven ways to generate leads on LinkedIn

Leadformix surveyed companies that use LinkedIn to market and found that the two most effective strategies for lead gen were advertising and groups. Note that company pages were less effective at lead gen than these two. This isn’t surprising because, as anyone can confirm in their company page stats, company followers don’t come back to the company pages much. The biggest obstacle to LinkedIn marketing is that people don’t spend a lot of time on LinkedIn. Salespeople are less subject to this limitation because they can actively prospect and then inmail or email these prospects. But it still comes into play with groups—when salespeople are trying to create or participate in discussions, only a fraction of the group members will see and interact with the posts.

LinkedIn Groups

LinkedIn groups are a great place to reach captive, already-organized consumer segments. You can engage in discussions other people start or start your own. And you can create your own group to attract prospects to a place you moderate and control. Both can generate more leads.

Starting discussions in other people’s groups

When posting to LinkedIn groups that you don’t manage, keep in mind that this isn’t your group. What are the policies on posting content there? Look for them or ask for them, then read and follow them. You want to get to know the moderator and make them an ally. Help them out. Don’t start off on the wrong foot by violating their policies.

Garrison Wynn recommends, “Find a group where the people in the group are potential customers or a good referral source. Don’t go in and sell stuff. Participate in discussions. Ask questions. One time this smart guy shot me down and I backed off, and he ended up looking bad. All these people jumped on my side and I got a speaking gig out of it.”

Jim Reynolds says, “Be Interesting. People want to buy from people that are interesting and dynamic. If you have a social presence, don’t just post company content. Share competitors’ content. Share funny things. Share things you are interested in, and, if you want, it’s okay to post about your personal life too, including children, sports and PG-13 content. Don’t curse. Don’t talk politics. Don’t be a racist. Don’t hate on the competition. That is, don’t be a jerk.”

Starting your own group

There are many benefits to creating your own group on LinkedIn. LinkedIn groups allow you to:

- Grow contacts and prospects
- Grow an email list
- Be at the center of the conversation and lead discussions
- Get more visibility for your company
- Lead your niche by distributing content and controlling what's posted

Most importantly, your group can be a place to attract business prospects. Much like someone who runs a conference, once you have attendees, you have control over opportunities. You choose who gets to post and what gets posted. You can send an announcement once a week to group members that actually sends an email to each one of them. Some of the group members may have opted out of these, but this is rare. What that means is that your LinkedIn group is also an email list.

How to find new buyers on LinkedIn

Advanced People Search is a prospecting search engine within LinkedIn. If you buy into one of the paid membership levels, and you should, you get more criteria to search by. Jeff Thacker recommends you vet your prospect contact information from multiple sources: "There's a lot of conflicting information in this 'Information Age.' Then I can understand how these companies are built and where the buyers are, and how the info fits their org chart."

How to warm up leads on LinkedIn

Natalie Petouhoff says, "Social can be the easier way to get someone's attention than by traditional methods, because the traditional methods are overused. Oftentimes I can get to someone that would not take my call but will respond to a tweet or post. Social is the new way to get access to a large, potential client base."

Brendan Mark says, "I research online about all my prospects. From individual contacts to businesses as a whole. Social media sites like LinkedIn provide great background information that can help me understand my contact. I'll connect with the contact on LinkedIn, but I avoid doing any friend request via Facebook. Twitter can provide some interesting insight as well."

Jill Rowley says, "Leverage social media to research prospects prior to initiating contact. Find out what they say about themselves on LinkedIn. If they're on Facebook, Twitter or any other medium, check that too. See if you have anything in common. Then leverage what you know to create a connection and establish rapport."

Jim Reynolds warns salespeople not to be creepy: “Just because you can see personal information, it doesn’t mean you need to use it in a sales process. Just because you saw that person X ate Y for lunch you don’t need to discuss it if it’s not relevant.”

Using data.com to bridge into email and phone

Some salespeople find that prospects don’t respond via LinkedIn InMail. If that’s the case, or if you just prefer to streamline and bypass that part of the process, use data.com to get their email and make contact with them that way. Your email will need to bridge the gap. Mention what LinkedIn group they know you from. If you’re using marketing automation, mention a content piece you know they’ve seen. Your emails will be much more successful if they’ve been in the same LinkedIn discussion with you.

Preston Rahn says, “I sell \$2k to \$20k programs, products and services, and the marketing doesn’t sell those things. The salesperson does. And I sell them about 80-90% of the time on the first call, meeting or appointment where most people have never even heard of me before. I find that if you want to sell high-ticket products and services of four, five, six or seven figures, it requires a specific sales process that ultimately happens on the phone, or in person. You can’t sell high-ticket stuff without at least jumping on the phone.”

How to build a sales reputation using social media

Earlier we mentioned thought leadership. How do you build a credible reputation? Doug Theis says, “The Internet gives an individual sales professional the opportunity to build credibility as an expert in their field, and to win business because of it. Sales professionals who publish regularly and deliver valuable industry information can build credibility with potential buyers without ever meeting them. And those prospects will remember that credible sales professional when they are ready to buy.”

When it comes to posting effectively in social media, Garrison Wynn says, “I think salespeople need to write better. You need clearer writing skills. To post you need to be clear and concise. You didn’t have to have that skill before. Proposals are really different. The post needs to get attention. If you write jokes, putting the funny thing at the end, that gives it some pop.”

LinkedIn groups can also be a good way to stay up to date, find the latest blog posts, see new trends and continue to learn.

In-person meetings vs. online meetings vs. video conferences

Sometimes it’s impossible to travel and meet your prospect face to face, but you may want something more powerful than a phone call. Video conferencing is a virtual, face-to-face meeting experience that salespeople are finding [helps them close deals faster](#).

Connecting face to face is more effective than connecting through the phone or email alone. It leaves less to be interpreted, which can be the difference between making or breaking the sale. In face-to-face environments, you can see each others’ facial expressions and enjoy clearer communications.

And chances are you're selling nationally, if not internationally, so video conferencing makes meeting face to face with prospects and customers possible on a daily basis. When you're inmailing or emailing a prospect for a meeting, you can always include a link to a video conference, like GoToMeeting. Most prospects these days have been on an online meeting. To make sure they are prepared to connect face to face, let them know that it's a video conference—better yet, send them a webcam, so you can be sure they have the equipment they need.

Facebook works too

While some salespeople find Facebook too personal a place to network with prospects, if your responsibilities include maintaining the account and relationship, you sometimes hit it off with someone well enough to connect to them on Facebook. Overall, you're trying to break down barriers and get emotionally connected to them. You may discuss aspects of your personal life to do so. If your personal rapport has been good with a prospect or new client, you might mention the idea of connecting on Facebook during a phone call, just to test the waters. If you're ever in doubt about whether to add them as a Facebook friend, though, don't do it. Too much familiarity might make them uncomfortable and damage the sale or client relationship.

Garrison Wynn reports, "I use Facebook ads to market. I post on Facebook and it goes to my Twitter. We sell books that way and we see that in the Amazon reports."

Conclusion

This report has covered five shifts in sales and marketing, six sales obstacles, and a dozen of the newest best practices. Chances are, your company has taken action on some of these sales strategies, but not others. Use this report as a checklist and keep moving through the list to adopt more of these best practices. This is certainly a transformational time for sales organizations and marketing departments, and sometimes growth is painful. But instead of ignoring the winds of change and being run aground, choose to be one of the companies that rides these new waves into new lands of opportunity.

About the author

A regular presenter for top sales and marketing conferences, Brian Carter is a seasoned expert in the world of modern sales processes and Internet marketing. [Brian delivers entertaining motivational talks](#) on how top-performing organizations can generate more revenue. His topics include modern sales methods, social media and Internet marketing. Audience members include CEOs, salespeople, business owners and expert marketers. Brian's 18 years of business success plus a background in stand-up comedy produce presentations that are both entertaining and enlightening for attendees.

Brian is also the internationally bestselling author of *The Like Economy: How Businesses Make Money with Facebook*, *LinkedIn for Business: How Advertisers, Marketers and Salespeople Get Leads, Sales and Profits*, and co-author of *Facebook Marketing*. His books have been translated into Spanish, Chinese and Portuguese.

Brian consults on digital marketing strategy and advertising for companies of all sizes, including well-known entities such as Microsoft, Universal Studios, the U.S. Army, the World Health Organization, Hardee's and Carl's Jr. He has been quoted and profiled by ABC News, The Wall Street Journal, Information Week, U.S. News & World Report, Mashable, Forbes, Inc. Magazine and Entrepreneur Magazine.

Brian has written for Salesforce, The Huffington Post, Mashable (which boasts 20 million monthly readers), Marketo, The Search Engine Journal, AllFacebook and The Next Web. He has more than 200,000 online fans and his content is viewed over 8 million times a month. Learn more at www.briancarteryeah.com.

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