

leading off

Automation key as resources dwindle

Marketers hoping to keep on top of customer behaviors and interaction are relying on tools

BY CHRISTOPHER HOSFORD

FOR CONNIE Stack, VP-sales and marketing at Wordstream, a company that helps small and midsize companies optimize their search marketing efforts, the two most important lead-generation metrics are determining the effectiveness of the lead source and the lead offer.

Once she knows these two things, Stack can get a pretty good glimpse into how Wordstream's lead-gen efforts are working. But for a company that's generating thousands of potential leads a week, the hard part is making sense of these trends.

"These are not sales-ready leads or candidates," Stack said. "You need some place to put them first, a process to continue the dialogue until they hit that point where they're ready to purchase."

Wordstream, just 2 years old, generates most of its queries via its own search marketing and optimization efforts. Stack parses customer interest in the 15 to 20 offers that are on the Wordstream site at any one time, encompassing everything from newsletter signups to demos and free software trials. To aid this process, she uses

marketing management solutions from Manticore Technologies.

"This sets up the rules, letting us know how much attention to pay to various lead types—how much to glean, for example, from someone who downloads a white paper, or who is ready for a free software trial," Stack said. "For a company with a relatively small inside sales force, automated lead scoring is essential to trigger sales alerts."

AUTOMATION IMPORTANCE

Lead-generation management is typified today by a plethora of marketing automation solutions that assess prospects' online behaviors to determine where they are in the sales pipeline. In a post-recessionary economy, automating the process is more important than ever, according to Laura Ramos, VP-industry marketing for Xerox Global Services, North America.

"The world has changed," said Ramos, a former Forrester Research analyst and b-to-b marketing blogger. "Last year was a boom year for the lead management and automation vendors, as marketing budgets were slashed. But marketing bud-

gets are still tight, and marketers are finding they can't do more with less without automation."

Because of this, Ramos said, it's fairly easy to make the business case for purchasing some form of marketing automation designed to run online campaigns, capture re-

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sponses, profile prospects with some form of scoring and turn good leads over to sales.

It's the continuing conversation that counts.

"If you think about it, if you assume that your product has value, it's not a matter of if the prospect will buy but, rather, when," said Christopher Doran, VP-marketing at Manticore. The key is having a solution that automates the nurturing process, he said, because "if your conversations end, you won't be top-of-mind."

Key to any lead-scoring system, automated or not, is a common understanding between marketing and sales as to what constitutes a lead, Doran said.

"Marketing and sales still struggle to agree on what a sales-qualified lead is," he said. "That's where the blame game begins. You need to lock the VPs of marketing and sales in a room until they agree, down to the details, about what a qualified lead is."

Marketers need to get a little humble here, Doran said. He estimates that sales generates about 70% of the pipeline and marketing just 30%. But, he said, the process can be boiled down to a handful of principles:

■ There should be no clear distinction between sales and marketing. Both must work together.

■ Marketers should "think beyond quantity."

■ Marketing automation isn't a cure-all if a company can't understand its own process of lead generation and nurturing prior to the sales hand-off.

"You don't know what you don't know," Doran said. "The process piece of marketing is relatively new. You need the skill sets to think of this as a process."

STILL NOT PERVASIVE

While the use of marketing automation is growing, it's far from pervasive, perhaps used by no more than a quarter of companies, Doran said. And for many companies, even those that use some form of marketing automation, more traditional methods help the process immeasurably.

Ann Smith, director-marketing programs at MarkLogic Corp., has an intriguing challenge in getting and nurturing leads. In promoting the use of MarkLogic software solutions, which aggregate, repurpose and deliver content in multiple formats, Smith must convince prospects—often in person—that MarkLogic automation is better than the way they've been doing it.

"Lead-gen for us is just getting in that first hook into an organization," Smith said. "Education is really important in a complex sale. Technically, we're selling a new idea to a lot of people. There's not a lot of things they can compare it to."

As a result, MarkLogic participates in many trade shows and other live events. The company's demand generation agency, Bulldog Solutions, also is tapped to help stage webinars to demonstrate MarkLogic products and help build prospect lists.

"For the government sector in particular, where it's hard to reach people, live events are important," Smith said. "If we select our events carefully, we're able to have very good conversations with people, to understand their pains and what they're experiencing. We want to be problem-solvers."

But Smith added that, in finally determining what's a good lead, marketing has its limits.

"At this stage, determining a full-qualified lead is not something marketing can really do," she said. "Even if somebody downloaded a white paper or attended a webinar, we rely on the people on the phone to dig further, to see if there is a fit. Ultimately, you need that live conversation." □

ask the expert

Maximizing online content to fuel conversations, conversions

PAUL KENJORA is founder and CTO of Arkayne Inc. (www.arkayne.com), whose technology automates link-building to related websites. BtoB recently asked Kenjora about how strong and appropriate online content can inspire conversations, nurture leads and boost conversions.

BtoB: What factors influence the success of content marketing?

Kenjora: Information gathering is a key step to content marketing. To get results, first identify your audience. Second, you need to assess your existing material as a fit for that audience. Marketers that tailor content for a specific customer segment will become more effective at engaging customers in both search and social media.

Content that is targeted at specific customer segments has the added benefit of improving search engine optimization campaigns. As the number of search keywords increases, more specific content can improve your likelihood of being found.

BtoB: What about the tone or level of that marketing content?

Kenjora: The conversational nature of social media has impacted consumer behavior in the traditional online space, especially with regards to tone and directness. Presenting people with information they want, even when the material is only mildly associated with your product or service, has a much greater effect than pushing blatant sales material and lead-capture forms. However, remember that when prospects do locate you, you'll have a few precious seconds to convince them to stay.

BtoB: Should content marketing get into product features or competitor comparisons?

Kenjora: This is a tricky question. The short answer is to do both



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but with a catch. Businesses want their websites to focus on value propositions for the specific audience segments they are trying to engage. SEO campaigns in traditional search should then be focused on competitive terms for that segment. Common to both search and social media is the need to understand your customer segment, as well as how your competitors play there. Here, your content assessment will reveal gaps to address, such as countering your competitors' strengths and highlighting your own unique attributes that differentiate your offerings. Evaluate specific themes, engaging topics, types of content and the keywords attached to each, and gauge what performs well via search queries.

Additionally, and important to note, the social media space is still young and has fewer manners. It's OK to directly engage with consumers who are specifically complaining about competitors. If done in a friendly, helpful manner, others will start differentiating you from the competition as a better alternative. The social media content is just as important here for competitive benchmarking as any other content searched for on the Web.

BtoB: What about purposing content for specific marketing needs?

Kenjora: Content marketing requires volume, so reflect again on whom you want to reach. Zero in on the best performing types of content for your audience, and develop a budget and production calendar that guides the distribution frequency your resources can support. If your frequency expectations fall short, consider agencies that specialize in content development. Also, think about utility as your team or agency builds content. For example, a company that markets conference planning and support services can appeal to event planners with videos about

meeting destinations, custom calculators that estimate hotel service costs and articles about managing travel logistics. These materials shouldn't hawk your services, but rather should share advice. Your prospects will come to trust you as their go-to source for such knowledge and will want to do business with you.

BtoB: Content can be tailored for specific customers as well, right?

Kenjora: Absolutely. Putting relevant content in front of Web visitors immediately, based on their interests and behaviors, diminishes their need to spend time searching, or getting frustrated and leaving altogether. Techniques beyond basic SEO can help you fine-tune content and capture maximum visibility for each piece of content. Context-aware tools, for example, profile Web visitors and predict what kinds of information will be most useful for them while they are browsing. In addition, cross-linking content within your network of sites and with other sites for sharing across social communities also can expand the reach of your material. Tap social media to seek out ideal customers who in tandem can aid your rise to first-page search status as they pass your content through their networks.

BtoB: How about measuring success?

Kenjora: Routine checkups are required to achieve and maintain success, and often uncover ideas for improvement. You should track social media mentions, links to your site and inquiries or sales by content and referral source.

Google Analytics and similar free tools exist to get you started, and more advanced features and alternative systems are reasonably priced. Use these measurement tools throughout the course of your programs rather than just at the end. And don't rely on keyword analysis too much; customers read content, not keywords. A focus entirely on keywords generates content that only machines and algorithms care about. □