

The Case of the Broken Buyers' Journey

How an oversimplified journey model –
and its accomplice, content marketing
– helped murder your B2B tech leads

1. Investigating the death of your B2B tech leads
2. Rehabilitating your buyers' journey – so it never kills again
3. Aligning around a buyers' journey that doesn't kill your leads

S H E R P Λ

Who's murdering all the B2B tech leads?

We bring a broken buyers' journey and obsessive content marketing in for questioning...

Today's most powerful marketing techniques depend on knowing who prospects are, what they care about, and what their intent is – at any given time.

And that means understanding the journey they are on better than ever before.

But as B2B tech sales become more complex, the basic, three-stage model of the buyers' journey – Awareness, Consideration, and Decision – is an increasingly poor fit for reality.

It doesn't reflect the number of stages actually involved in a purchase, or customer-to-customer variations. It doesn't capture the fluidity of the buying process, or the growing crowd of decision-makers who need to be convinced.

In short? It's a *massive oversimplification*.

Worse, this outmoded model of the buyers' journey is encouraging B2B tech companies to depend exclusively on content marketing for lead nurture and qualification. They're ignoring their prospects' need for the human touch. And they're letting their sales and marketing teams be forced apart.

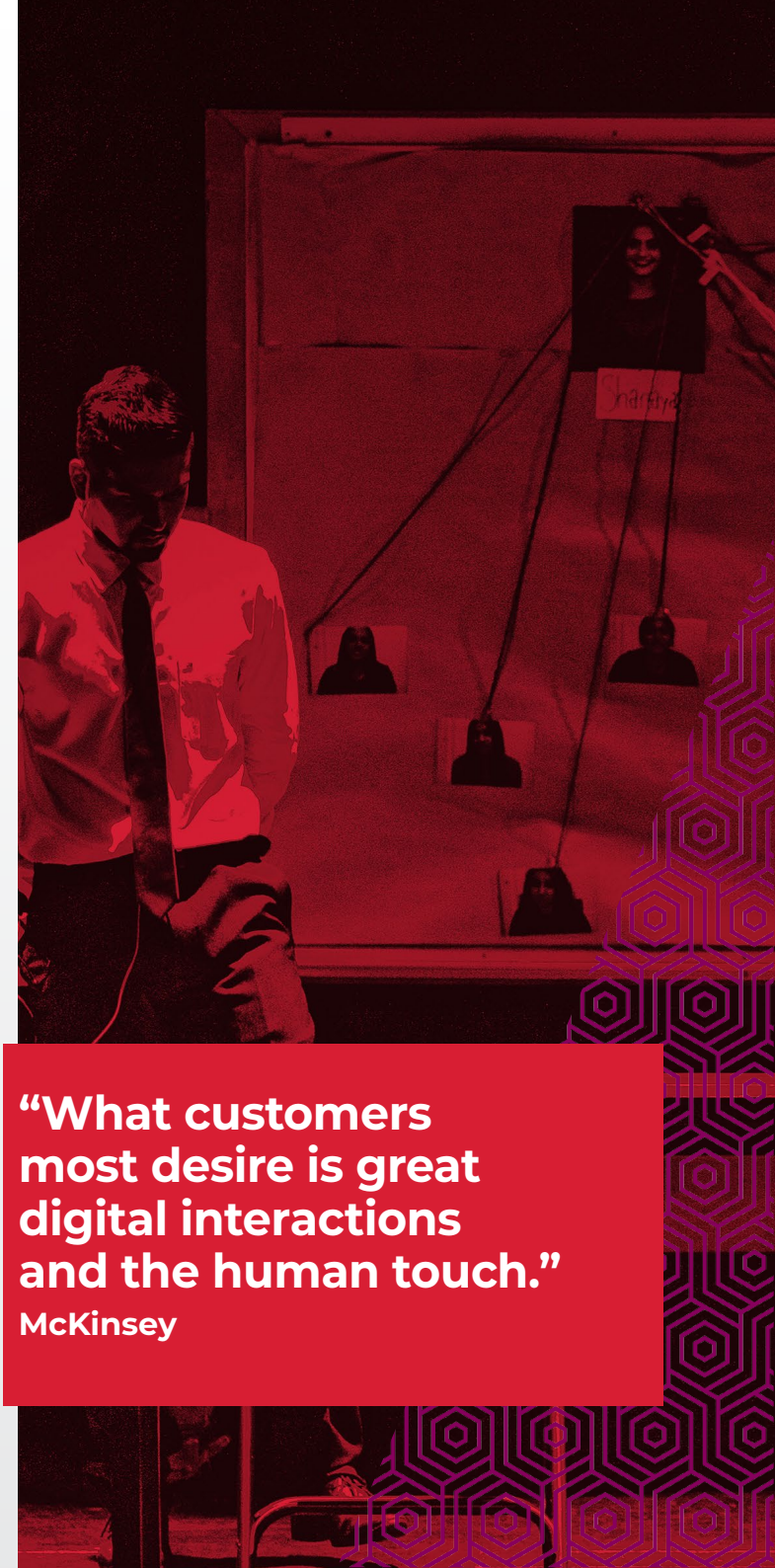
And that's *killing* B2B tech leads.

Over the coming sections, we'll investigate this all-too-common crime. We'll:

1. Profile the broken buyers' journey, and its accomplice, content marketing.
2. Expose their modus operandi – by autopsying B2B tech's dead leads & rehabilitate the buyers' journey so it never kills again.
3. Discuss how to reintroduce this reformed buyers' journey to your business.

“What customers most desire is great digital interactions and the human touch.”

McKinsey



1. Investigating the death of your B2B tech leads.

Whether they've gone cold by the time sales teams get their hands on them, or they're dead on arrival – too many leads are dying on the mean streets of B2B tech.

Exact figures are hard to come by. But research by Implitis suggests only 13% of B2B leads convert to opportunities, and only 6% convert from an opportunity to a deal.¹

What's more, a recent, predominately B2B survey by HubSpot found that 40% of salespeople say getting a response from prospects has grown harder in the last two to three years. And only 7% say the leads they receive from marketing are very high quality.²

But who's responsible for the untimely demise of these leads? Let's profile the key suspects...

1. <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/2014/11/b2b-sales-benchmark-research-finds-some-pipeline-surprises-infographic-gp.html>

2. State of Inbound 2018, Hubspot

Our prime suspects.

Suspect #1: The Three-Stage Buyers' Journey (Aliases: the buying process)

History

The three-stage buyers' journey has been around for years. Its roots can be traced back to at least 1898, and E. St. Elmo Lewis's AIDA-model of the stages a customer goes through from first becoming aware of a product or service, to deciding to make a purchase.

Key characteristics

The three-stage buyers' journey can be recognised by its distinctive tripartite structure:

Awareness

Prospects are aware they're facing a challenge, or missing an opportunity – so they begin to educate themselves to better understand what's going on, and give it a name.

Consideration

Prospects have defined the challenge or opportunity. They're now busy researching the various ways they can overcome/seize it.

Decision

Prospects have chosen their preferred approach to overcoming the challenge or seizing the opportunity. They're now comparing the vendors who can help them achieve that approach – and moving from a longlist to a shortlist before finally making a purchase.

Previous record

The three-stage buyers' journey has long since been a friend to marketers and their leads. It's given marketers a clear, if very basic, framework for their efforts, and helped encourage them to see the purchasing process from their customers' perspective.

Circumstantial evidence

Naturally, a lot has changed since 1898. In the age of ABM, content marketing, and increasingly complex sales, we've reason to believe this oversimplified model of the buyer's journey is responsible for the death of B2B tech leads.

It's too linear. Too blunt. Too rigid. And that means:

- Leads receive poorly targeted messages
- Leads don't get the 'human touch' when they need it the most
- Leads aren't effectively handed from marketing to sales
- Leads die unnecessarily, through systematic neglect

Our prime suspects.

Suspect #2: Content Marketing (aliases 'Inbound')

History

The earliest recorded sighting of content marketing was in 1732, when Benjamin Franklin published his annual Poor Richard's Almanac to help promote his printing business.³

In the early 21st century, however, content marketing has risen to be one of the most important marketing strategies in the world. In fact, a recent survey of UK marketers found that 86% were using it.⁴

Key characteristics

Content marketing involves creating, publishing, and distributing content that gives your prospects information they want or need – to ultimately drive conversion.

Previous record

Like the three-stage buyers' journey, content marketing has been a powerful ally for modern marketers, helping to nurture leads down the funnel. Indeed, 75% characterise their content marketing approach as moderately, very, or extremely successful.⁵

Circumstantial evidence

Increasingly, content marketing has pushed other methods of lead nurture out of the picture – and even muscled in on lead qualification efforts.

And content *can't* do everything. It can't deliver the same level of business insight of a human conversation. It can't begin to establish a personal rapport between buyer and seller. And when we depend exclusively on content marketing, we inevitably neglect our prospects' needs.

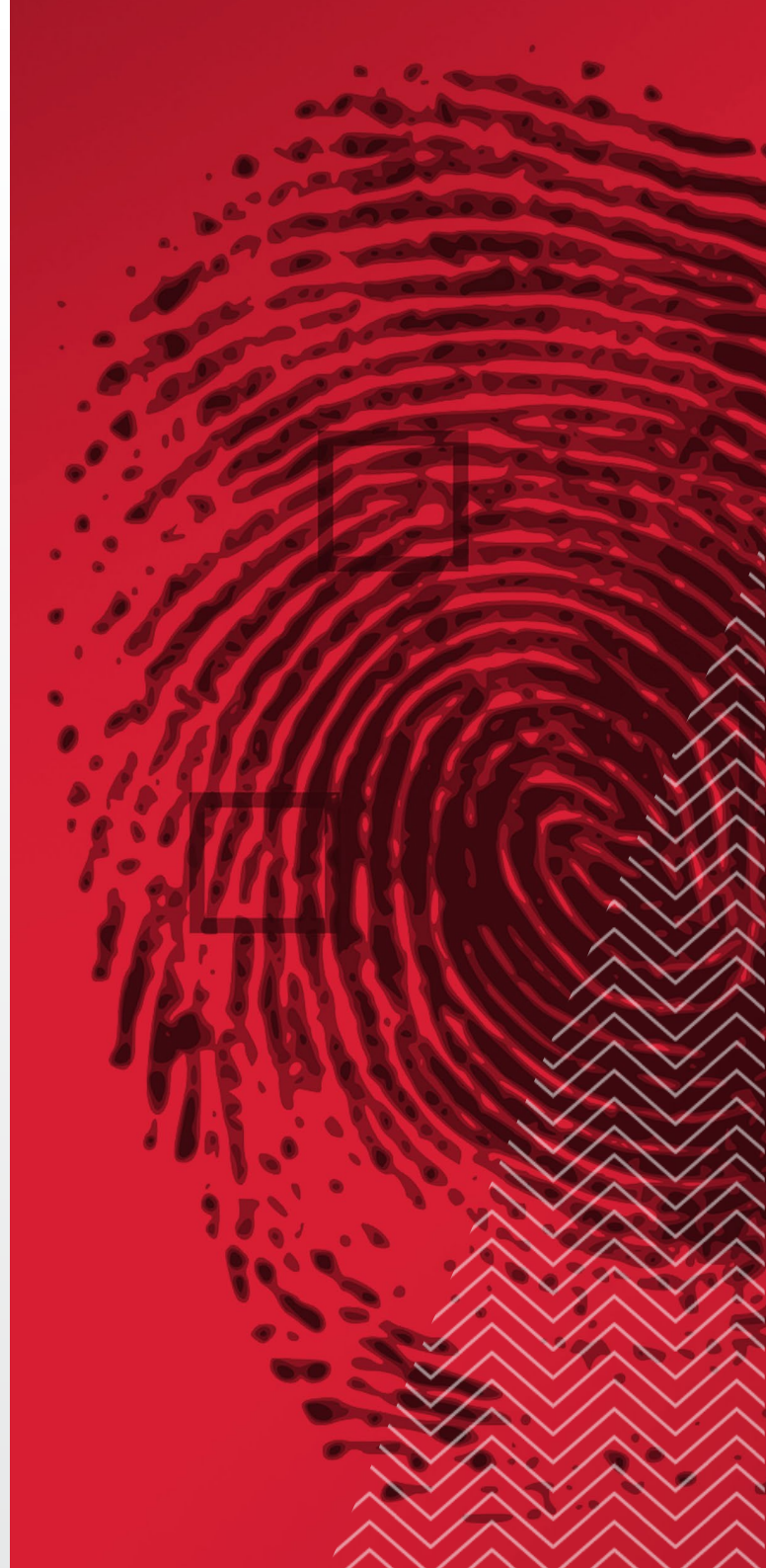
These leads:

- Can't be followed up quickly enough
- Can't be properly qualified
- And even more die unnecessarily

3. <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/07/history-content-marketing/>

4. https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018_UK_Research.pdf

5. https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018_UK_Research.pdf



B2B tech's dead leads: an autopsy.

**So, how exactly are so many B2B tech leads dying?
We've identified a range of contributing causes...**

Death by oversimplification

Most B2B tech purchases simply can't be forced into the three neat boxes of the traditional buyers' journey.

Intent data shows us that initial research for enterprise technologies is carried out by multiple departments, with multiple stakeholders, all of whom may go on a different journey.

In fact, Challenger estimates the average number of stakeholders involved in a single B2B purchase may now have entered double figures.⁶ (And that's not to mention **channel marketing**, where the fact a lead may originate with a partner adds a whole new layer of complexity.)

On top of this, the lines between 'awareness', 'consideration', and 'decision' are much blurrier than the three-stage model would have you believe. Even when a stakeholder is still defining the challenge

76 percent of B2B buyers find it helpful to speak to a salesperson when they are researching a new product or service.
McKinsey

their organisation faces, they may well be consulting your sales team or marketing content as part of that process – and as a result, adding you to their longlist of chosen vendors.

All this means gathering enough data to reach the right decision-makers and influencers, at the right time, in the right way, is key. Especially since, if you're like many companies selling enterprise tech, you'll need to work closely with a lot of the same individuals post-sale – to help them change their existing processes, and realise your product or service's potential.

Death by human neglect

The three-stage model has naturally been championed by inbound marketers, leading to some pretty wild claims, such as: "Buyers don't want to be prospected, or demoed, or closed. These steps add zero value to the buyer."⁷

The idea that your buyers will move, solely via self-directed research, through the three stages of the traditional model is a dangerous one. And it's an idea that's only been reinforced by the growth of the content marketing industry.

Content marketing's champions have been quick to present it as a silver bullet for lead nurture and – coupled with marketing analytics and automation – lead qualification.

The result? B2B marketers have been focusing on creating content aligned to an oversimplified journey. And they've been neglecting outbound efforts. And the human touch.

Pick up the phone within 5 minutes of someone downloading your content, and you're 400x more likely to get a response.

InsideSales.com

Simply put, the buyers' journey has become content-centric, not customer-centric.

Research suggests that this approach is miles away from what prospects actually want. They still crave human interaction during their buying process. As McKinsey recently reported, even among customers who prefer a more digital buying process, two-thirds still want human interaction.

And, of course, the ideal extent and timing of that initial human touch will differ for each sale – and each stakeholder who's involved.

6. <https://www.challengerinc.com/blog/more-b2b-decision-makers-want-in>

7. <https://blog.hubspot.com/sales/what-is-the-buyers-journey>

Death by disorganisation

Another result of trying to fit an incredibly simplistic framework over an incredibly sophisticated reality? Marketing and Sales fail to meaningfully connect with customers, and with each other.

Because marketers aren't identifying the specific needs of their prospects' multiple, individual stakeholders, their attempts at delivering the right content at the right time frequently fall flat.

And even when they do deliver the perfect eBook to their prospect's CFO, at the perfect moment, instead of reaching immediately to talk to and qualify the lead, they simply wait to deliver the next piece of content. This process is often repeated until they can justify handing the reins over to sales.

Sales then receive leads that aren't truly qualified, and in many cases have already gone cold.

What's more, when a rep does manage to contact a lead, they're expected to be an expert in every aspect of the sale and solution. Since the prospect hasn't had a chance to ask questions about, for example, specific implementation or technical needs during the journey so far, the salesperson must successfully field them all.

“Only 7% of salespeople say the leads they receive from Marketing are very high quality.”

HubSpot

And as salespeople divide their time between pursuing dead leads and trying to be all things to all people, the physical disconnect between Sales and Marketing becomes emotional and psychological.

The verdict

The three-stage buyers' journey wasn't built for the world of B2B tech. Content marketing has been exploiting its flaws, and together, they've been getting away with murder.



2. Rehabilitating your buyers' journey – so it never kills again.

Let's face it – marketers like us need a model for the buyers' journey. Without a framework of some kind to refer to, we can't hope to consistently lead prospects through the complex process of buying B2B technology.

But today, the three-stage model we've been using for decades is often working against us.

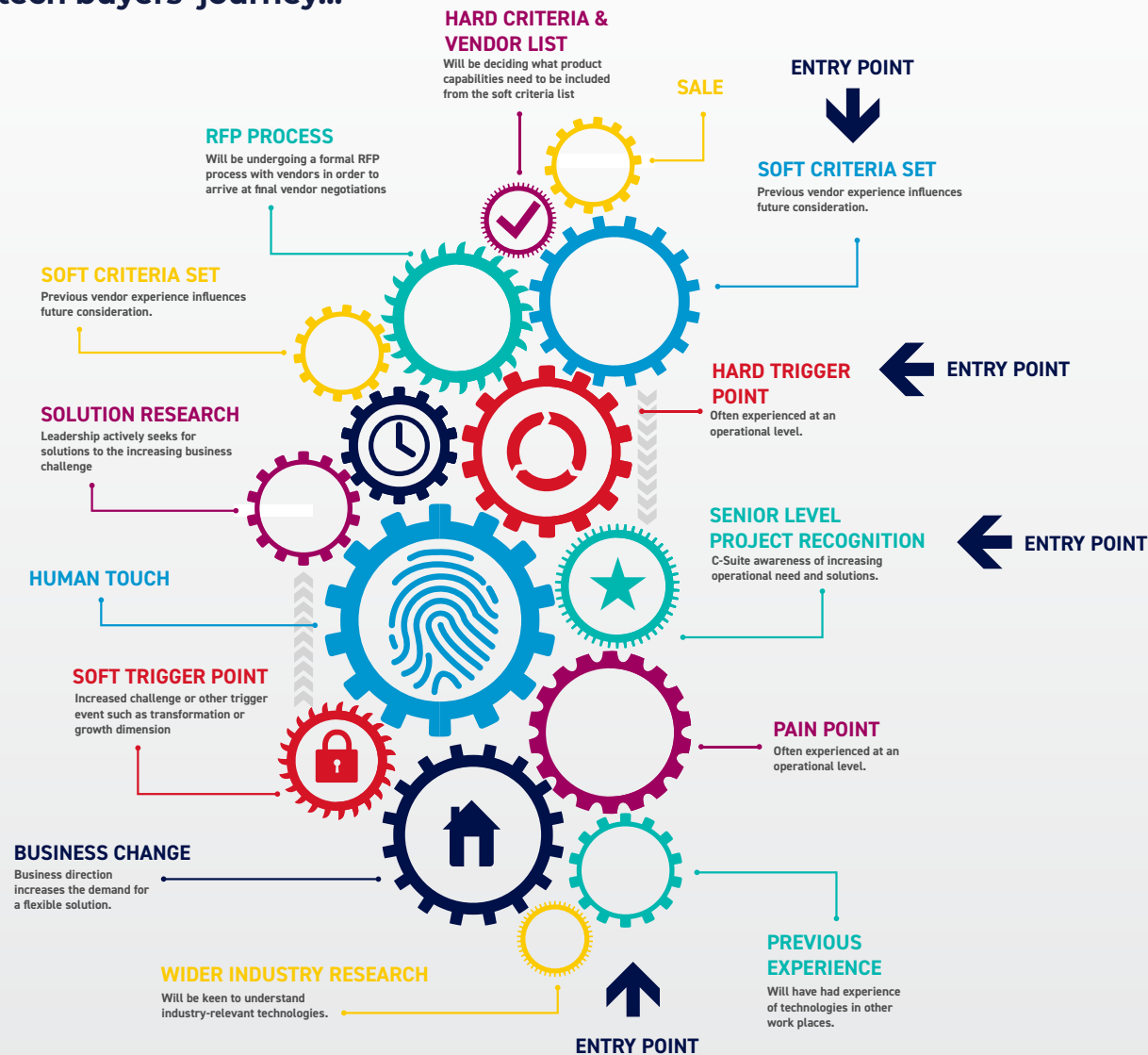
Its oversimplicity has obscured the need for multiple, truly personalised, truly timely, human interactions, and encouraged an overreliance on content marketing. And that's led to a lack of responsiveness, a disconnect between Marketing and Sales, and the death of too many leads.

Is all lost? Or can we rehabilitate our model of the buyers' journey, so it never kills again?

Of course we can...

What a reformed buyers' journey looks like.

We've worked to create a more accurate – and less murderous – model of the B2B tech buyers' journey...



Characteristics of our reformed buyers' journey

#1 Recognition of a multiplicity of stakeholders

This new model includes the wide range of people involved in a B2B tech sale, from technical practitioners and senior decision-makers, to channel partners. It acknowledges their differing contact and content needs and preferences. And it encourages a dynamic, agile approach, tailored to every one of them.

#2 Recognition of multiple entry points and buying paths

It reflects the non-linear nature of B2B tech buying – and that means there are no backwards steps, only different paths forwards. Just like in real life, key events like price discrimination and initial contact can come at any point.

#3 It's customer-centric, not content-centric

By letting go of the rigid – and misleading – idea of uniform prospects passing through three distinct buying stages, it frees us to focus on the specific stakeholders and their changing needs. And to make sure we deliver more human touches when they want them the most.

What this means for your marketing strategy.

Spend some time with this reformed, more truthful version of the B2B tech buyers' journey, and a few things quickly become clear.

Your marketing strategy needs to be broad and deep

Content marketing alone isn't enough to nurture and qualify B2B tech leads. If marketers are to keep this multiplicity of stakeholders in motion, they need to be targeting them proactively, faster, and with variety and precision.

It's not just that content marketing isn't well suited to this task (which it isn't). It's that the practice has become so prevalent that 'content fatigue' is setting in – as prospects begin to feel overwhelmed by the slew of whitepapers, webinars, and infographics sent their way.

This means a broader and deeper marketing strategy is essential. If you're selling high-value enterprise tech, one tactic you should definitely consider is **Account Based Marketing (ABM)**.

As we've seen, you can't assume all your contacts at a company are at the same point in their journey, or have similar preferences and needs; by gathering deep insights on the individuals you want to influence, you can tailor your communications and content to cut through the noise, and deliver much greater impact. But remember, much like content marketing, ABM is no silver bullet for lead nurture and qualification – just one potentially powerful tool at your disposal. (You can read more about ABM, and what it takes to get it right, in our report [Account Based Marketing: 5 key success factors](#)).

89% of companies who use and report on ABM say their ABM accounts deliver greater ROI –
SiriusDecisions

Paid traffic campaigns should also be part of your broader, deeper marketing toolkit – again, targeted with as much precision as possible. In a complex buyers' journey, they're invaluable not just for generating leads, but for reengaging those that have gone cold.

Whether you're running an ABM or paid traffic campaign, being able to monitor, refine, and optimise your efforts is essential. Which means as your marketing arsenal grows, your spend and ROI has to become more transparent.

[\(For more on ABM and paid traffic, check out our comprehensive guide to demand generation.\)](#)

You need to use the human touch, earlier in the journey.

In B2B tech, having an **inside sales** team is a huge advantage.

When it comes to showing prospects how you can help their specific business, a chat on the telephone is often worth a thousand blog posts. Why? Because human conversations can qualify leads in a way that content simply can't.

Finally, having someone there to respond at the drop of a form submission can dramatically increase the likelihood you'll make successful contact. Research suggests response rates are 450% higher in the first hour following an enquiry than the second.⁸ (And if you can get back to someone within just 5 minutes, you're 100 times more likely to make contact than if you respond thirty minutes later.⁹)

“Companies that add the human touch to digital sales consistently outperform their peers. They achieve five times more revenue, eight times more operating profit, and for public companies, twice the return to shareholders.”

McKinsey

You need to blend marketing and sales.

Once you realise the complexity of the buyers' journey, the idea of a hard-and-fast division between marketing and sales – for so long reinforced by the three-stage model and poorly defined categories like 'MQL' and 'SQL' – is blown out of the water.

After all, you might want to send a tailored, ABM email to the Director of Finance at a prospect company, while your sales-focused colleague is picking up the phone to the same company's IT Manager – who's just downloaded your latest eBook.

If you're going to effectively co-ordinate this kind of sophisticated activity, and introduce the human touch earlier in the buyers' journey, you need a blended sales and marketing team.

That means planning together, and executing together. It also means creating job roles that span both disciplines and act as a vital bridge between your purer marketing and sales activities.

8. <https://callhippo.com/seo/best-day-time-make-business-call>

9. McKinsey On Marketing & Sales, May 2018



What blended marketing and sales looks like

This is Genna, part of Sherpa's very own blended sales and marketing team. As a Sales and Marketing Executive, her key responsibilities include:

- Lead nurturing with emails and calls
- Acting as a liaison between marketing and sales
- Managing our prospecting and client event programme
- Running social media campaigns from creation to follow up
- Outbound prospecting
- Prompt follow-up with inbound leads
- Preparing sales material for pitches, presentations and events
- Assisting the Business Development Director with opportunity management
- Assisting with driving business development
- Reporting across marketing and sales activities

Marketing tech is an absolute must-have.

A more nuanced, more personalised marketing strategy. A swifter human touch. Seamless sales and marketing co-ordination. Pulling all this off can seem impossible. And it is – without the right technology at your fingertips.

From surfacing prospect data and driving smarter segmentation, to automating cross-channel campaigns, and proving ROI in real-time, MarTech solutions now exist to support all aspects of marketing life.

Plug them into your reformed buyers' journey, and you'll not only be better equipped to gather the insights you need, you'll have more time to act on them.

Here's just one example. Despite GDPR, there's still an abundance of data to be gleaned about your individual prospects, freely available to anyone with an internet connection. But unless you've the tools to gather, slice, and dice it, you could easily waste days or weeks trying to answer those key questions. Questions like 'What are their personal interests and ambitions?' and 'How time-critical is this purchase for them?'.

When shopping for MarTech, it pays to look for the leading edge, not the bleeding edge – there's no need to take on the risks that come with unproven solutions.

It's also worth thoroughly exploring the full features and capabilities of any legacy CRM or marketing platforms (e.g. Salesforce, SAP, Sharpspring etc.) before deciding to bolt on additional tech, since you may find you're already paying for the very capabilities you think you need.

If you want more tips on getting started with MarTech, [here's our guide.](#)

How does your marketing strategy measure up in the light of everything we've just discussed?

Register for a [Marketing Health Check](#), and our expert team will help you identify gaps, actions and priorities.

3. Aligning around a buyers' journey that doesn't kill your leads.

In the case of the dead B2B tech leads, we've identified the culprits: an overly simplistic buyers' journey, and unfettered content marketing.

Engaging with the true complexity of the buyers' journey – and helping prospects along the way – means developing a deeper, broader marketing strategy.

It means combining content marketing with ABM, paid traffic, and inside sales. It means creating a blended sales and marketing team. And it means taking advantage of MarTech to support hyper-personalisation, campaign automation, and real-time reporting.

You may have done some of this already. You may be starting from scratch.

Either way, there are two paths forward.

The DIY approach.

You can manage this change yourself (or appoint a member of your team to do it for you).

You'll need to:

Transform your marketing and sales teams

- ☐ Review your existing marketing and sales roles
- ☐ Note the physical location of your marketing and sales staff
- ☐ Audit your marketing and sales line management structure
- ☐ Catalogue your marketing and sales planning and reporting activities
- ☐ Develop joint planning and reporting activities
- ☐ Define the responsibilities of new joint marketing and sales roles
- ☐ Create any new inside sales roles
- ☐ Decide how you'll fill these positions
- ☐ Develop or recruit staff as necessary
- ☐ Set KPIs, and track and report on the impact of these changes

Reformulate your marketing strategy

- ☐ Map your current marketing capabilities to a complex B2B buyers' journey
- ☐ Identify any gaps – e.g. content marketing, ABM, paid traffic, and inside sales
- ☐ Research ways to fill those gaps
- ☐ Choose an approach
- ☐ Research the skills, resources, and tools you now need
- ☐ Source all of the above
- ☐ Set your KPIs
- ☐ Track and report on the impact of your new strategy

Evaluate (and maybe expand) your MarTech

- ☐ Review your existing MarTech investments
- ☐ Explore the full features and capabilities of your legacy solutions
- ☐ Identify any gaps you need to fill – e.g. marketing automation, lead management, reporting
- ☐ Research the marketing technologies available to support your activities
- ☐ Compare solutions and vendors
- ☐ Make the business case for each
- ☐ Complete the procurement process
- ☐ Integrate your new MarTech solutions with each other, and your existing systems
- ☐ Set your KPIs
- ☐ Track and report on the impact of your new solutions
- ☐ Still reading these? Good on you!

If that feels like an intimidating list, it should.

That fact is, for most companies, shifting to address how B2B buyers actually buy will be a substantial undertaking. You can do it all yourself, but if you decide to, you should go into the process with your eyes open – as well as a realistic understanding of the tasks ahead and time needed for the transition.

+ Pros

- Free choice of MarTech solutions
- Self-sufficiency
- Complete culture shift

- Cons

- Takes months or years
- Involves multiple investments
- Requires substantial restructuring
- Needs robust change management
- High IT integration workload

The get-some-help approach.

If you want to get started faster, and with less legwork, you can always look outside your business.

A handful of agencies, including our own, have even done the hard work of blending sales with their marketing services, and creating an inside sales team. This means you'll have experts on hand to call, nurture and qualify prospects as soon as they engage with your campaign content.

Today's savviest marketing agencies often have their own integrated MarTech stack, saving you the cost and complexity of sourcing, integrating, and operating best of breed solutions. (A substantial saving, considering some CMOs report having up to 50 platforms in license¹⁰).

Any agency worth their salt will also be able to advise you on how to define your marketing activities by product set and vertical, and align them to your own buyer's journey – whether you're selling direct or through the channel.

And if the agency is anything like ours, they'll wrap all of this up into a single, neat package, so getting started is easy, and your costs are transparent.

The result? From a standing start, you can run pilot campaigns that reflect how your buyers' actually buy – *and* measure the increased impact.

(If you're interested in going the agency route, have a [chat with us](#) about your needs, and how we can help.)

+ Pros

- Get started immediately
- Draw on specialist expertise
- Prove the value of realigning your marketing strategy
- Removes the immediate need to restructure teams
- No need to hire/develop an inside sales resource
- No need to invest in and manage multiple MarTech solutions
- Access to MarTech solutions you couldn't access directly
- Low IT integration workload
- Can be a fully-managed service

- Cons

- Dependent on a third party
- Another supplier relationship to manage
- You'll still want to restructure / develop your own teams in time
- Finding the right agency for your needs can be tough

10. The State of the Stack in 2019, B2B Marketing, 2019

Don't be complicit in the death of your leads.

Market for how B2B tech buyers *really* buy.

If you're still using a three-stage model of the buyers' journey, you may not be actively killing your leads, but you're almost certainly guilty of leadslaughter.

You could prevent those leads dying, cold and neglected – smothered by a mound of poorly targeted content. All you need to do is understand the path they're actually on, reach out to them as individuals, and give them a little human contact.

So don't delay. Reform your buyers' journey. Broaden and deepen your marketing strategy. Add ABM, paid traffic, and inside sales to your toolkit. Make smart use of MarTech. Pull down the barriers between your teams.

And breathe new life into your leads – and your marketing ROI.



About Sherpa.

Sherpa knows tech. We understand the channel, the market place and speak your language. We are specialists in providing marketing expertise to vendors, distributors, resellers, solutions providers and other tech organisations who need guaranteed results.

Your sales pipeline is our priority; but we won't stop there...we will develop revenue streams that last.

Our clients recognise us as a trusted, strategic partner who drives bottom line by fusing proven IT sector marketing skills with radical automated tools and inbound processes; proven to increase ROI.

Our team have sat where you sit and know not only how to transform your marketing activities, but also how to grow and deliver sales...and continually align the two.

Let us know about your sales and marketing goals and we can advise how our marketing strategies can help you achieve them.

Thoughts and insights? We'd love to hear them.

We're always interested in chatting with our fellow marketers. If you want to wade on into the debate, just [head over to our forum](#).

Chat with our expert team.

We'd love to hear from you. Here's how to get in touch.

via email on letschat@sherpamarketing.co.uk

by giving us a call on 01234 964000

sherpamarketing.co.uk