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It's the Relationship, Stupid: Plugging the Gap between Lead Generation and Marketing Automation

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In B2B marketing, there is widespread agreement about the need for demand generation. But marketers don't always agree on what demand generation is. I like this definition from Adam Needles, head of demand generation strategy at Left Brain Marketing and former B2B marketing evangelist at Silverpop. Adam says:

Generating demand is what B2B marketers do. It's the art of educating buyers and nurturing these relationships from earliest awareness through to maximizing customer lifetime value. It's about sparking, nurturing and monetizing initial demand; it's also about sustaining and growing that demand among current customers. It's a holistic activity that spans the buyer lifecycle.

I particularly like this definition because it refers to **relationships**.

Relationships are about people. People make buying decisions. Sometimes that's forgotten in B2B, where we tend to focus on job responsibilities, cost savings, profitability, efficiency, and a host of other very rational, very logical attributes. But it's the **human** component, the emotional relationship you build with your prospects, that ultimately closes the sale.

Good demand generation requires human insight and interaction. Here's why.

Let's say you develop a killer lead generation program. Maybe you start with the world's coolest variable-data, dimensional mailer, followed by a highly personalized email. You drive prospects to a landing page with a great offer to capture their phone numbers and begin a dialogue with them. You send the leads to your marketing automation system and they go to your sales team.

Now what? Chances are, about 10% of those sales leads will be "in market"—actively looking for a product, whether it's yours or a competitor's. Another 10% probably will never buy. The other 80% might become customers at some future date—assuming you build a relationship with them.

There's no marketing automation platform that can build human relationships. There's no marketing automation platform that can:

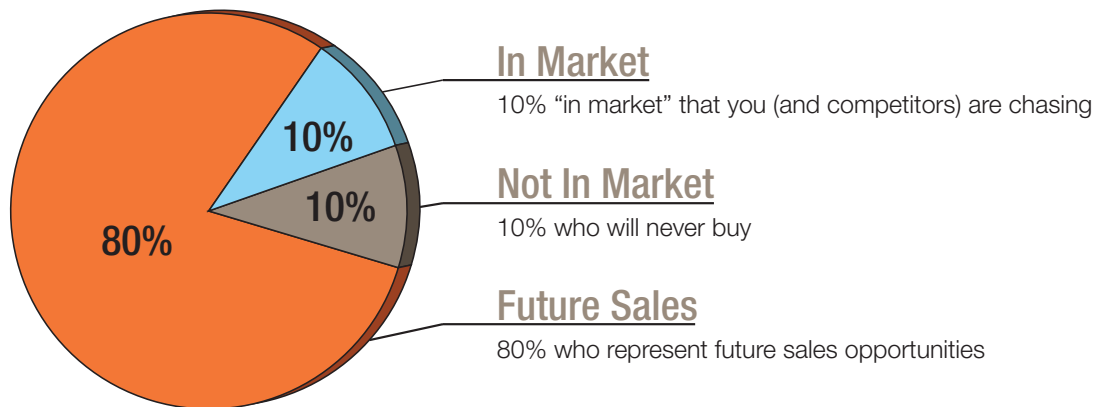
- Interpret, read and react to transactional data and make qualitative decisions based on behavior, not transactions
- Develop strategy that achieves an objective
- Look at sales based on an individual's activity
- Create a relationship that leads to a bond between buyer and seller
- Dive deep into the analytics, discover patterns, and figure out the insights behind them

To do all this requires people, interacting with other people, through a systematic mix of communication channels to develop the relationships that can convert that 80% of prospects into customers.

This is the job of lead nurturing.

Sales is ultimately a relationship business. A marketing automation platform can capture transactional information, but the majority can't really connect the dots and tell you what to do with that information. If you're selling multimillion-dollar equipment in a highly complex environment, it just isn't wise to trust those assumptions to a trigger-based software platform without taking advantage of the astute insights that only a human being can provide.

What are you doing to convert that 80%?

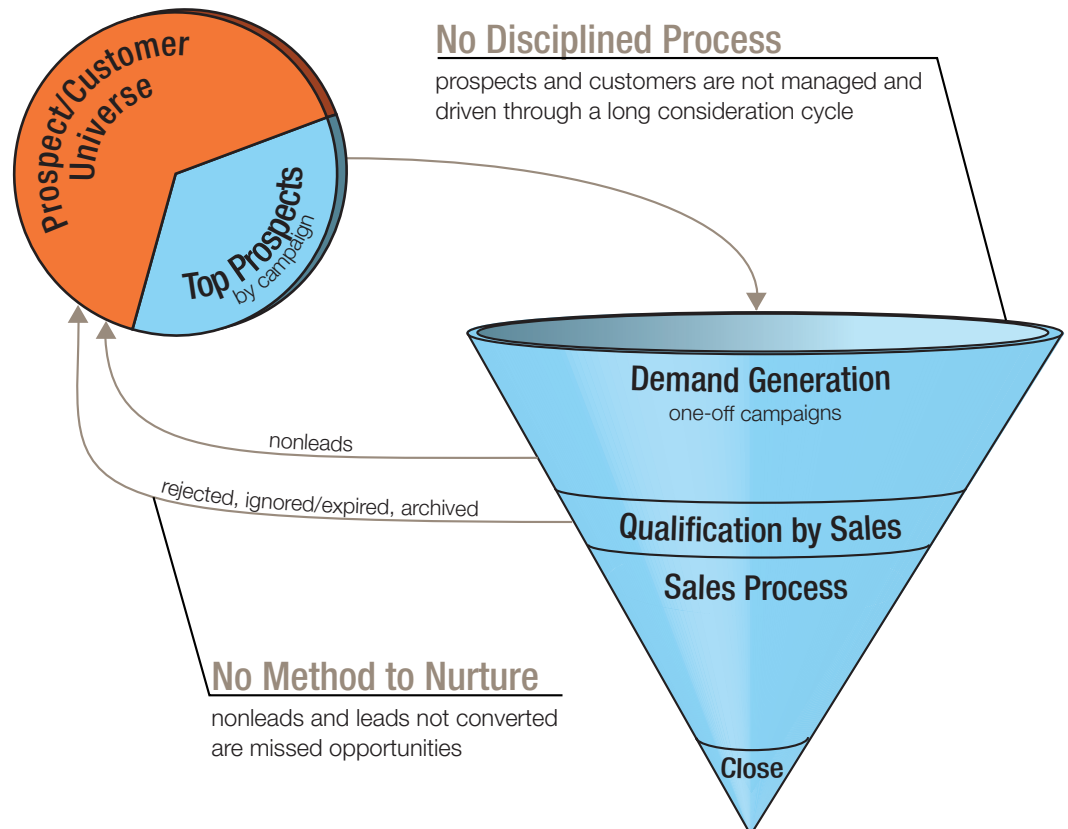


Why Lead Nurturing Matters

It's no secret that when the sales cycle is lengthy—frequently the case with capital equipment—your sales force is going to focus on that 10% of leads that are in market. You can't blame them for that; they're the lowest-hanging fruit, the easiest to work and close. And they have quotas to meet.

That's why the demand generation process tends to look like this at many companies:

Typical Demand Generation Process



Let's take a closer look at this funnel. Out of the full universe of prospects and customers, the funnel starts with top prospects by campaign. Demand generation is achieved through one-off campaigns. The sales force takes those leads, begins the sales process, and attempts to close as many leads as possible. Nonleads and less qualified leads—potential buyers with no immediate need—are channeled back into the prospect universe, where they languish until it's time for the next marketing campaign.

What's missing is the nurturing. That's the gap between lead generation and marketing automation, and to plug it effectively requires human intuition: Yours, to make strategic decisions based on prospects' **behavior**—and your sales force's, both working jointly to move those prospects further down the pipeline.

The Good and the Bad about Lead Nurturing

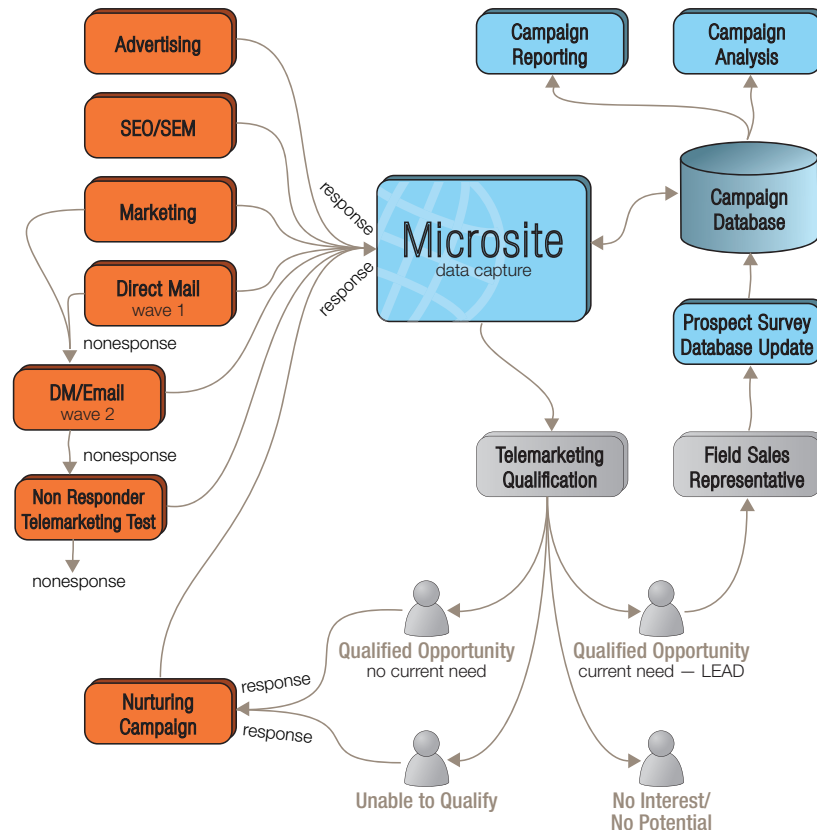
Mention “lead nurturing” to any B2B marketer and you’ll find little disagreement about its benefits. Actually putting a formal lead nurturing process into place is another matter entirely.

But imagine if you had a lead nurturing program that effectively aligned marketing and sales, one that was developed collaboratively (there are those relationships again). Consider what might happen if your nurturing approach established a relevant dialogue that:

- Identified influencers, specifiers and decision makers
- Initiated conversations that led to better understanding
- Nurtured interest regardless of buying time frame
- Was dynamic and responsive to what you learned along the way
- Shared a contact history in a common environment that included measurement data and decision-making data
- Mined for individual data that resulted in prosciutto-thin segmentation

Here’s what that process might look like:

A more dynamic sales lead nurturing process



Instead of limiting demand generation to a single campaign initiative, prospects and customers are nurtured through ongoing outreach efforts that include direct mail, email and telemarketing. Note the centerpiece: a content-rich microsite where potential buyers could access white papers, case studies, segment-specific content, and participate in online events. This is relevant information designed not only to keep them in the pipeline, but to push them further along. Your goal is to understand performance based on behavior. What did prospects **do** on your site? What do they want to know? How can you leverage that information to drive more relevant communications?

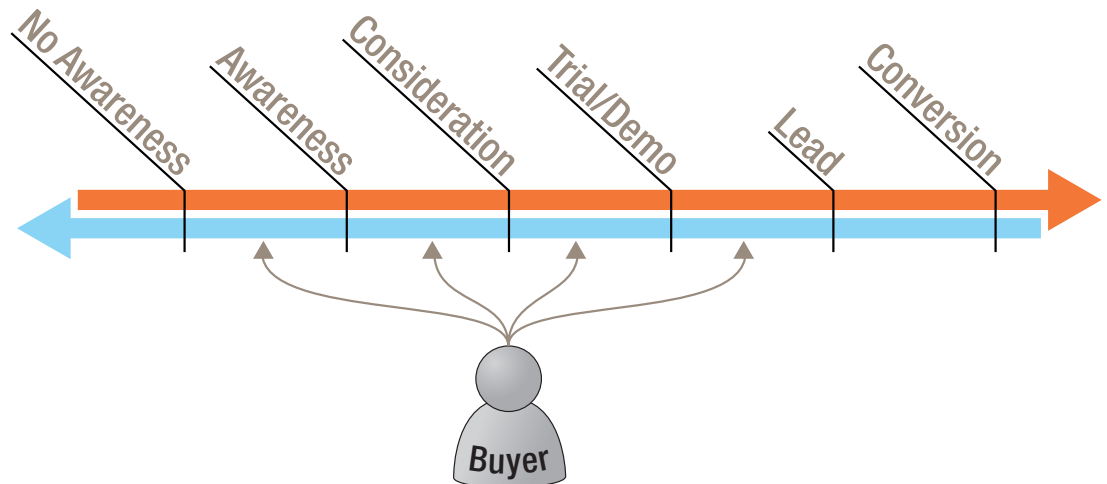
Your goal is to develop a cadence of communications that is both **relevant** and **insightful**, to keep your brand front and center and at the top of prospects' minds.

I believe the core elements of an effective lead nurturing program are:

1. **Relevant, targeted outbound communications**—innovative, inspired, thematically branded mail, email, PURLs, fulfillment, phone, event announcements, etc. All communications would drive prospects to your microsite for offer registration, additional product information and nurturing.
2. **Microsite**—the hub of your program, where interaction, qualification and education take place. It should be dynamically driven based on segment, constantly offer fresh content and be written from the SEO perspective. *Relevant content is key.*
3. **Ongoing lead qualification**—as your microsite continues to generate new leads, they must be qualified just like any other campaign lead. Your sales force should continuously participate in the contact strategy and nurturing process.
4. **Continuous nurturing**—monitoring prospects and creating permission-based interactions that move from transactional to relational, providing continuous education and motivation to buy.
5. **Campaign database**—a comprehensive repository to manage all activities that supports robust qualification strategy, captures and maintains prospect data, and tracks and analyzes data on an ongoing basis.

If you're not already using social media to engage prospects, now's the time to start actively listening. This is a great feedback channel to learn about likes and dislikes and how prospects make buying decisions, which you can use to drive relevant content more effectively. If you don't know where your prospects are engaging, find out. Social communities offer a rich store of knowledge and opportunity for B2B marketers. There are other reasons to embrace social media, but if your goal is to educate yourself about your customers' needs, wants and desires, this channel is hard to beat. *It's all about relationships.*

The whole idea is to start a relationship with buyers before they're in market and shorten the decision cycle.



Lead Nurturing Secret #1:

Align Internal Relationships (Marketing and Sales)

All of us recognize the need to align marketing and sales, but few people tell you how to actually do it. The most important step is to get both marketing and sales to the planning table right from the outset. Both need to be engaged at every level in order for a lead nurturing program to work effectively. Sales needs to become a consultant to marketing and marketing needs to understand the sales process. Both need to fully understand how their customers make buying decisions.

How do you do this? A few suggestions:

- Create a sales council
- Go out on sales calls—your relationship with sales needs to be much deeper than just hanging out with them at trade shows
- Demonstrate a desire to better understand what the other does
- Compensate sales for nurturing and developing leads, not just closing. Incent marketing and sales to work together
- Jointly develop sales personas for decision makers and influencers based on the rational and emotional attributes of each buyer

Lead Nurturing Secret #2:

You Have More Content Than You Realize

Often B2B marketers underestimate the value of their existing content. Mostly you already have what you need to do good nurturing. All you need to do is repurpose it. Look at your sales brochures, product literature sheets, proposals, SEC filings, annual reports, landing pages, PowerPoints, leave-behinds, trade show collateral, etc., etc., etc. You don't necessarily have to outsource content creation, though that can be a good option for some companies, or devote significant staff to creating it.

Lead Nurturing Secret #3:

The Payoff Is Big

You may be thinking, "This is a lot of work." It is. So what exactly is the payoff?

- A deeper understanding of how your customers learn, evaluate and make purchase decisions
- Marketing and Sales become one. Collaboration is no longer an option, it is required. Sales becomes Marketing's partner and client. Your Marketing and Sales teams are integrated according to the prospect's purchase behavior
- A relevant dialogue with your future customers—regardless of buying time frame
- A continuous drive toward sales—with measurable activity as the prospect progresses through the sales cycle
- Top-of-mind awareness and enhanced perception of your company's solutions
- Insights that can be leveraged along the way
- A dynamic sales process designed specifically to move prospects from no awareness to conversion

Does it work? Absolutely. Companies like Kodak, Cisco, Xerox, and Xerox employ this dynamic demand generation model with great success. If you're investing in marketing automation, it's critical. Implementing marketing automation without lead nurturing is like getting off the freeway two exits early: You're only halfway there.

The fact is, today traditional lead generation methods are virtually irrelevant. Buyers engage with brands on their terms: when they want, how they want. Multiple channels are a must—a direct mail or email campaign in isolation simply can't deliver optimum results. Lead generation is not a one-step process—success requires lead development and nurturing. It requires **relationships**. Relationships with prospects, relationships between sales and marketing.

I like to compare it to playing a round of golf. Killing the first few holes means nothing unless you deliver great results over 18 holes. So play the full course, develop and nurture those relationships, and watch what happens to your sales.

About the author

Jeff Cleary is managing director of Catalyst, a 21-year-old independent direct and digital marketing agency based in Rochester, New York, where he oversees all agency business-to-business relationships, specializes in data-driven strategies for lead acquisitions, retention and lead nurturing, particularly for capital equipment manufacturers, workflow providers and their partners. A founding member of the American Telemarketing Association (now part of the Direct Marketing Association), he is considered a pioneer in the field of B2B marketing. Outside the office, Jeff serves on the board of one of the nation's largest community college foundations and stays active by working on his golf swing. Reach Jeff directly at jcleary@catalystinc.com.

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