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At the beginning of each year, my team and I have the opportunity to reflect on the past year's activity and results, conduct some industry research, and spot some B2B trends that we see gaining traction across a wide array of business models and markets. Our wide and varied discussions with many B2B companies about their challenges, opportunities, successes and failures drive much of this insight.

The point of our research (and experience) is not to write a nice article. You can certainly find many of these. Instead, our purpose is to provide information that is not only timely, but also actionable. You can take advantage of every one of these trends to increase your competitive advantage and improve marketing and sales performance in the coming year.



Trend 1: Metrics are a major priority.

Although this is not a new trend, it is a continuation of a critical movement in the B2B marketplace. We see many B2B companies adopting an end-to-end marketing and sales framework that:

- Attributes new revenue to specific lead sources. As Casey Szulc of www.Inc.com reported, "...89% of businesses who carry out any form of attribution say it had a positive impact on their business."
- Tracks conversion rates at every step in the process, including response to marketing qualified leads (MQL), MQL-to-sales-accepted leads (SAL), sales-accepted leads to opportunities and opportunities to closed deals.
- Combines marketing and sales reporting in a dashboard view. This is helpful for both marketing and sales as they track the performance on service level agreement (SLA) metrics, as well as executives who need a dashboard view of overall performance.

Trend 2: Social media is getting tougher.

It's getting tougher because it is getting more competitive and the battle for prospects' eyeballs and ears is fierce. The social sites that used to be mostly promotion-free (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter) are now inundated with paid promotion. Just as with past "hot media" like direct mail, email and online banner ads, when advertiser activity goes up, response rates go down. And according to the Global Web Index, year-over-year growth in key social networks is going strong. A few examples:

Instagram	^ 23%
Reddit	^ 13%
LinkedIn	^ 09%
Google +	^ 06%
Twitter	^ 02%

You can see a lot of the [Global Web Index research here](#). But the point needs to be made that for a lot of companies, social networking is not optional behavior. If your prospects and competitors are on the social media playing field, you need to be there, as well. However, as the graph below (courtesy of B2B expert Ruth Stevens) illustrates, only a small percentage of B2B companies believe they are using social media effectively. The good news is that since others are not utilizing this medium effectively, you have the opportunity to achieve competitive advantage.



Trend 3: The buyer's funnel is becoming more important than the sales funnel.

There are many variations of sales funnels, but they all have one thing in common – they are focused on the methodology sellers use to find prospects, engage with them, and close business. And while having a systematized process for achieving revenue is important, it will fail unless you incorporate something more important than just the way you prefer to do business.

The sales funnel is essentially a linear process that assumes that a large number of suspects/raw inquiries come in at the top (e.g. respond to a marketing offer) and pass through a number of process steps (e.g. qualification, proposal) and end up at the bottom as a smaller number of new deals. And while this works great in theory, in reality, prospects want to buy the way they want to buy and are not prone to being directed by a sales team. For instance, they may do their own competitive product research, read reviews and appear much deeper in the funnel, ready for a quote. Yet, the prospect is confronted with a sales rep that frustrates them because of the insistence of following a rigid process that may have little to do with the way they prefer to conduct business.

Industry experts have referred to this trend in different ways, calling the new model a “blurry buyers funnel” or a “fuzzy sales funnel.” James Franklin, CEO of Impact B2B Sales has a great description of the differences between the old and new models in his article, [The Buyer's Funnel: A More Dynamic Way to Convert, Sell and Win](#). Jim makes this important point: “I have noticed a preponderance of time spent on training sales staff with rigid processes and not enough time spent training them on how to understand the customer's buying process and their unique challenges. The point is that one size does not fit all.”



Trend 4: Tighter alignment of the sales and marketing functions.

We are seeing a greater emphasis on sales and marketing alignment, not only in industry buzz, but also among our clients and prospects. As a specific example of why this is important, you can read my [June 2014 article](#), where I talked about two very different sales models: In the first example, awareness is created and generated leads are fed to a business development function. In this scenario, direct sales reps will only see leads that have been pre-qualified, usually by a business development rep (BDR) who has personally qualified inquirers by asking a series of questions about budget, authority, timing and so forth. To best support this type of sales model, we want to drive as much activity into the top of the funnel as possible, creating the critical mass of inquiries needed to achieve the target number of qualified leads that have passed through the qualification process.

Let's now look at the second sales model and how we align it with the marketing plan. If an organization utilizes a direct sales force, but provides no pre-qualification function (e.g. no BDRs), our focus in the marketing plan will be more on quality than quantity. This is true because we know that in most B2B scenarios, somewhere between 10 and 15 percent of all inquiries will pass the qualification filter. This means that sales reps will talk to 8.5 to 9 suspects before reaching one qualified prospect. This imbalance leads to two negative consequences. First, the reps fail to call all the suspects, finding reasons to disqualify them before making the calls. Second, reps get busy chasing their hot prospects and neglect to make the qualification calls in a timely manner.

In the second type of sales model, we purposefully back off the quantity goal and align our marketing plan to deliver leads that are more qualified. These are just two sales model examples. When you include hybrids, there are dozens of possibilities. And every sales model will require a marketing plan that is tightly aligned between marketing and sales.

Trend 5: Failure to follow-up remains a big revenue killer.

My company, [Fusion Marketing Partners](#), has conducted extensive research on short- and long-term B2B buying patterns. One of the most striking conclusions is that the number of qualified prospects that will buy short-term is matched by an equal number who will buy, either from you or a competitor, downstream. This is why nurturing your prospect database is such a valuable activity. This means that you must follow-up not only when the lead first comes in (even though our research shows that 51.4% of inbound inquiries are not contacted), but also on a regular basis until that individual/company is ready to engage with you and buy something.

I feel confident that taking advantage of one or more of these sales and marketing trends can have a large impact for your company. Here's wishing you success in 2015 and beyond.