The Content Funnel

By Hugh Taylor

U sing content in closed-loop marketing sounds like a great idea. However, arranging for your prospects to see the right content at the right time can present something of a challenge. For many of us, the trouble starts after we've accomplished the first step of lead generation. We create an interesting piece of content, such as a white paper, dangle it in front of the prospect like a baited fish hook and smile with satisfaction when the prospect fills out a registration form.

So far, so good, but what happens next? For a lot of us, the lead generation process ends at this point. We've gotten a lead. We throw it to sales and go on to the next campaign. It's okay. I've done it more than once in my career as a B2B technology marketing executive. We can do better, of course. We set up a drip process in a marketing automation system, such as Marketo or Eloqua, that sends the prospect a fresh piece of content periodically until they become qualified. The drip is an effective way of engaging with a prospect up to a point, but it's not optimal. We can do better.

The Problem with Simple Drip Campaigns

We must think through the complete buying cycle if we are to be successful with content in a closed loop process. There are many ways to lose a prospect's interest if you're just doing a simple drip. Here are some realities that emerge when the B2B technology buying cycle meets closed loop marketing:

- The prospect who registered for the first piece of content is probably just one of several people who are involved in making the purchase decision. If we want to move the sale through the funnel to a successful close, we will invariably need to address the questions and business needs of other people on the buying committee.
- We are usually competing with other vendors. If we're not, it's not a qualified situation. Any serious corporate technology buyer will be considering multiple options. We have to convince the buying committee that we are the right choice.
- The buyers' questions and concerns about our product/solution become more sophisticated as they progress down the funnel. We must speak to the buyers' increased need for detail and nuance as we engage with them.

How the Sales Funnel Really Works

The sales funnel involves moving the buying committee down the path from awareness to consideration, preference, and finally, selection. Table 1 shows a hypothetical buying committee for a cloud-based software development platform. The group includes IT operations, security, developers, business stakeholders, financial executives, and C-levels. Each persona in the group has a different role in the purchase process and a different set of concerns. For instance, the IT operations pro might need basic information about cloud-based development before forming an opinion about it. The developer wants to know if the cloud-based platform will speed up his or her work. The finance executive wants to know how much it will cost and whether it will save the company any money.

Experienced enterprise technology sales people usually know intuitively how to address the concerns of each buyer persona.   They shepherd the buying committee through the funnel and ensure that each person involved gets the information they need at each stage. They continuously differentiate their products and keep thought leadership at the forefront of the conversation. How do we replicate this kind of sales expertise in the closed looped marketing process?

Buyer Persona	Role		Awareness Stage	Consideration Stage	Preference Stage	Selection Stage
IT Ops Pro	Influencer	Issues:	Basic understanding	Distinguishing between options	IT ops challenges	Technical detail of implementation
Information Security Pro	Influencer	Issues:	High-level cloud security worries	How do we handle change management and version control?	API access controls for 3rd parties	InfoSec best practices for cloud software development
Software Developer	Champion	Issues:	Speeding up app dev	DevOps capabilities	Integration with Chef, Github, etc.	Development best practices in the cloud
Business Manager	Business decision maker	Issues:	Faster app dev, for strategic reasons	Should I go outside of IT for what I need?	Workflow that combines business and IT stakeholders	Has anyone actually done this successfully?
Financial Executive	Influencer	Issues:	Cutting costs in IT	Reallocating IT resources with savings from cloud	What's the business payoff for this investment?	Has anyone actually done this successfully?
C-Level IT Exec	Decision maker	Issues:	Does development belong in the cloud?	Is there a strategic reason to develop software in the cloud?	What's the business payoff for this investment?	Has anyone actually done this successfully?

Table 1 – The personas and buying issues for each member of a buying committee for a cloud-based software development platform, shown across the stages of the sales funnel.

If we want to scale a B2B technology business, we have to turn our marketing automation into the equivalent of a master enterprise technology sales person. The closed loop process has to emulate the high-touch addressing of buyer concerns as the committee moves from awareness to selection. Making this happen requires that we serve relevant, compelling content to each buyer persona at each stage of the sales funnel. If we can do that, it will be as if we are reading the buyers' minds and answering their questions as they decide which product they want to select.

The Content Funnel

Table 2 depicts the content funnel, which matches a piece of content with each member of the buying committee at the awareness, consideration, preference, and selection stages of the sale. With the goal of staying top of mind, relevant, and differentiated, we can program a marketing automation system to send content that speaks to evolving buyer concerns. For example, the IT operations staffer who needs a basic understanding of cloud development receives the "How it Works" paper at the awareness stage. As his or her knowledge of the technology increases, we send content that answers questions about how the cloud platform integrates with Application Lifecycle Management (ALM) tools, cloud development best practices, and so forth.   The security person gets a series of papers and briefs that inform him or her about increasingly sophisticated security issues that arise with cloud development. By the end of the closed loop content distribution cycle, each persona on the buying committee should be aware of our solution, have their major issues addressed, and consider us as the front-runner for selection.

| Buyer Persona	Role		Awareness Stage	Consideration Stage	Preference Stage	Selection Stage
IT Ops Pro	Influencer	Issues:	Basic understanding	Distinguishing between options	IT ops challenges	Technical detail of implementation
		Content:	*"How it Works" White Paper*	*Integration with ALM Tools Brief*	*Cloud DevOps Best Practices Brief*	*In-depth Technical Paper*
Information Security Pro	Influencer	Issues:	High-level cloud security worries	How do we handle change management and version control?	API access controls for 3rd parties	InfoSec best practices for cloud software development
		Content:	*Cloud Dev Security Overview Paper*	*Cloud Dev and Security Policy Brief*	*How to Secure APIs in Cloud-based Development Brief*	*Cloud Security Best Practices Brief*
Software Developer	Champion	Issues:	Speeding up app dev	DevOps capabilities	Integration with Chef, Github, etc.	Development best practices in the cloud
		Content:	*Software Development in the Cloud: Overview*	*Implementing DevOps in the Cloud Brief*	*Chef Integration Brief*	*Best Practices for Cloud-Based Development Brief*
Business Manager	Business decision maker	Issues:	Faster app dev, for strategic reasons	Should I go outside of IT for what I need?	Workflow that combines business and IT stakeholders	Has anyone actually done this successfully?
		Content:	*Cloud App Dev: a Strategic Perspective Brief*	*Partnering with IT for Fast-Track App Development Brief*	*Cloud Software Workflow Brief*	*Cloud Development Success Stories*
Financial Executive	Influencer	Issues:	Cutting costs in IT	What's the best use of my IT dollars?	What's the business payoff for this investment?	Has anyone actually done this successfully?
		Content:	*Cloud Dev Tools Financial Paper*	*How the Cloud can help You Reallocate IT Resources*	*The ROI of Cloud Development Brief*	*Cloud Development Success Stories*
C-Level IT Exec	Decision maker	Issues:	Does development belong in the cloud?	Is there a strategic reason to develop software in the cloud?	What's the business payoff for this investment?	Has anyone actually done this successfully?
		Content:	*Cloud Dev Thought Leadership Brief*	*Cloud-Based Software and Corporate Strategy Brief*	*The ROI of Cloud Development Brief*	*Cloud Development Success Stories*

Table 2 – The content funnel, matching content with each persona on the buying committee across the stages of the sales funnel.

Building a Content Funnel

This may look like a lot of work, but like anything worth doing in marketing, building an effective content funnel will take time and effort. The process requires that we complete four connected tasks.

1) Figuring out who is on the buying committee.
2) Understanding what's on their minds at each stage of the buying cycle.
3) Setting up intelligent campaigns in the marketing automation system.
4) Creating all that content.

Of these, number four may be the most daunting. Table 2 calls for 21 pieces of content! That's a lot of writing, surely more than most of our content budgets will allow. I have developed a way to create this volume of customized content within a reasonable budget scope. My approach is to create a core set of "Anchor Papers," long-form pieces that pull together the major technical and business issues inherent in selling the product.   In our example, the "How it Works", "Software Development in the Cloud: Overview", and "Cloud Dev Tools Financial" papers will anchor this entire content series. These anchors are highlighted in yellow in Table 2.
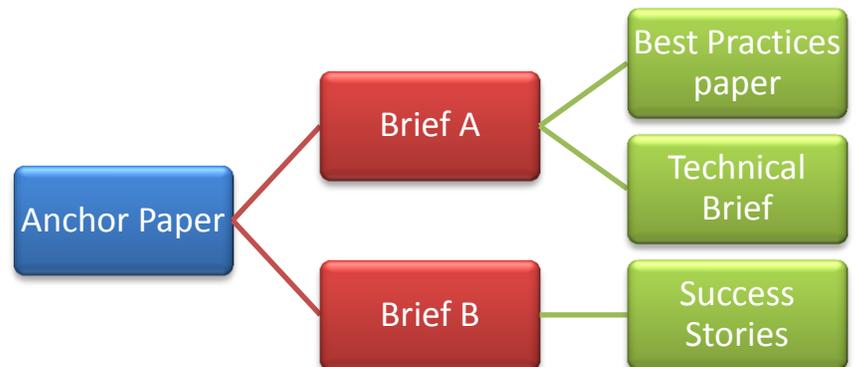
The Anchor Papers provide the raw material for derivative pieces that are employed in the content funnel. The "How it Works Paper," for example, could contain sections on ALM integration and best practices. These sections can then get excerpted and expanded into the briefs that are used later in the sales cycle. It's not a cut and paste process, but using an anchor as the main source material saves a great deal of time and effort in creating such a large volume of written content.

It Takes Focus

Building a content funnel takes focus. It is unlikely that any marketing department will be able to develop this depth of content for more than a handful of key sales initiatives. My suggestion is to focus on whatever solution is most vital to strategic success and create the content funnel around that as a start. Also, it may not be possible to address every single buyer persona at every stage of the sales process. This article offers an ideal scenario. However, if we can shift our basic drip campaign thinking toward a content funnel approach, we will invariably do a better job of connecting with the buying committee as it makes its purchase selection.

About Hugh Taylor

Hugh Taylor, President of Taylor Communications, is the author of the book *B2B Technology Marketing*. He has created marketing content for such clients as Microsoft, IBM, SAP, AMD, and Google. As Social Software Evangelist for IBM Software Group he developed a unique financial payback model to quantify ROI for social software in the corporate environment. The resulting paper received the Marcom Platinum Award for Whitepaper Writing in 2009. As Public Relations Manager for Microsoft's SharePoint Technologies, Hugh was responsible for generating the "Billion dollar juggernaut" story that helped make SharePoint a high profile product for the company, generating over 800 pieces of press coverage in one year. Hugh is a Certified Information Security Manager (CISM) and lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley's Law School and Graduate School of Information.   He is the author of the books *Event-Driven Architecture: How SOA Enables the Real-Time Enterprise* (Addison Wesley 2009), *The Joy of SOX: Why Sarbanes Oxley and Service-Oriented Architecture May Be The Best Thing That Ever Happened To You* (Wiley 2006) and *Understanding Enterprise SOA* (Manning, 2005) as well as more than a dozen articles on business and technology.

Hugh is also a frequent speaker at industry conferences, including the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA), the Microsoft Business Process Modeling and SOA conference, the HP Technology Forum, and IBM Rational DeveloperWorks. He has consulted with dozens of entrepreneurs and crafted business plans that have helped these new ventures get funded. He earned his AB, Magna Cum Laude from Harvard College in 1988 and his MBA from Harvard Business School in 1992. He lives in Los Angeles.

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