

Inbound Marketing: Just Another Marketing Buzz Phrase?

By Mary Sullivan

Definitions of *social media marketing* and *inbound marketing* sound very similar at first glance. But if you look closely, “social media marketing” focuses on the media, the channels for communication such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, etc. Unless it is part of a broader marketing strategy, a social presence for a business simply is not enough.

“Inbound marketing”, however, focuses on **getting found by customers**, and it represents more than just the media used. It is a larger, more strategic vision. In fact, making it easier for buyers to find you is the reverse of “outbound marketing”, which pushes out via advertising, cold calling or telemarketing, and direct marketing. Inbound marketing turns the outbound marketing approach toward customers upside down, pulling instead of pushing.

This distinction between outbound and inbound marketing activities is important, because potential buyers, as we are frequently reminded, are constantly deluged by outbound marketing communications and messages. They mentally block out advertisements, screen phone calls and filter mail they consider to be junk unless they are in an appropriately ready buying stage for that particular product.

What constitutes Inbound Marketing?

Social media is an important part of inbound marketing, but it is not the end game. [HubSpot identifies three components of inbound marketing](#):

- Content
- Search engine optimization (SEO)
- Social media

Increasingly the distinction between these three elements is blurring. Updates on some social sites are findable via search engines (SEO). Social media sites are offering their own search capabilities. Non-text content (videos, podcasts, photos, etc.) needs to have search-engine-friendly titles, tags and descriptions. And, of course, your text content will contain searchable key words.

Content – The heart of any inbound marketing campaign, content is the set of online information that attracts potential customers to your site or to your business. It may take many forms that serve to educate visitors about what you offer.

Types of Content

- o Blog posts – May or may not be generated by Marketing. (For two years in a row, [HubSpot’s survey](#) shows *blogs* as the “most important social media channel”.)

- Video – demos, customer stories
- Tools – ROI calculators and/or other self-qualifier tools
- White papers
- Proprietary research reports
- Customer reviews – This type is generally not generated by the marketer.

Content for different stages of the buying cycle

Make available different types of content for various stages in the buying cycle. The vast majority of marketing messages that are aimed at people do not really “reach” them. Rather than trying to grab buyers’ attention, inbound marketing *draws* the attention of those who are already curious and leads them to content that tells them what they need to know at different stages in the cycle.

- Attention – Content that is useful at the earliest phases of the buying cycle needs to be educational in nature. Avoid being too promotional at this stage. You’re just helping the buyer sort out your qualifications, attributes and special capabilities. Consider using a White Paper here.
- Consideration/Interest/Research - Help your prospects home in on the attributes that best meet their most important requirements. At this point, a demo video that shows buyers how they can use your product can elevate the prospect to the Desire stage.
- Desire/Decision – Here is the time to bring in an honest competitive product comparison. Or offer compelling customer testimonials as text customer stories, or on video, if you can get it.
- Action/Purchase – Set up a situation where the prospect can move on the decision. At this point, a promotional offer can tip the decision.

The more good quality content you place online that targets people in each stage in their buying cycle, the broader spectrum of buyers you will reach and the more effective your messages will be.

Search Engine Optimization – Organic SEO is less costly than paid search, and it plays nicely with *social media* and *content*. I can search for “riding stables” along with the name of my hometown and find all the relevant businesses that have a findable website, and I can share links with friends who would be interested.

Furthermore, “search” no longer belongs only to Google and other search engines. Social networks are providing the capability to do in-network searches. I can search Facebook for “marketing Portland” and find thousands of people talking about marketing in that locale. It still isn’t quite as robust as the search engines, but in-network search is actually the fastest-growing vehicle for finding information online. Again, the line between *search* and *social* is blurring.

Social Media

Social networks amplify the impact of your content, giving a large number of people access to information about you. It can seem a little “pushy” when it comes from your business, but friends telling friends about your product, or Twitterers retweeting what you said has the effect of extending your message.

Once content is in place, you can increase your exposure to it by placing **links to the content** strategically in social networks, and *invite target customers to come learn about you*.

Keep your social messages short; on Twitter, you have no choice. Learn what makes [good headlines](#) that invite readers to click for more information.

Why you need to be doing inbound marketing

- ★ **Value** – Inbound marketing is less costly. Freely placed content can be as attractive and successful as Pay-Per-Click, and when found organically via search engines is less expensive. The [2010 HubSpot survey](#) reported that inbound marketing is **60% less expensive per lead** than outbound marketing.
- ★ **Effectiveness** – Outbound marketing messages are becoming less effective because, a) buyers are bombarded by a high volume of messages each day and are either blocking them or turned off by them, and b) people trust social sources more than paid sources of product information.
- ★ **Self-qualifying** – Rather than marketers trying to guess who might become a customer, potential buyers identify themselves. Inbound marketing's messages reach prospects at the time when they are contemplating a purchase and are most receptive to marketing messages.

Make your case for an **inbound marketing budget**. A good source for data to back up your budget request is HubSpot's February 2010 [The State of Inbound Marketing](#), a free download. The argument for a comprehensive Inbound Marketing Budget is much more compelling than cases for its individual components. And in fact, inbound marketing is far more than the sum of its parts (content, SEO and social media). It's not just a buzz phrase, it's the real thing.

About the Author

Mary Sullivan, co-founder of KickStart Alliance, delivers customer-focused product marketing to clients in a variety of technology sectors, including clean tech. Mary is an experienced social media user and community builder: a long-time [blogger](#), LinkedIn member, Facebook user and active [Twitterer](#). She is an expert at content development and editing, and understands search optimizing methods. [Contact Mary](#) for help mapping your Inbound Marketing strategy.

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