Shortening the Sales Cycle with Persona-Driven Marketing
By Mike Gospe

Your marketing team may be lengthening the sales cycle and not even know it. We are victims of our own desire to sell to anyone and everyone. Collectively speaking, in our race to help sales make quarterly numbers, marketing teams fall into the trap of casting as wide a net as possible for fear of leaving out a potential audience segment. Unfortunately, this approach of broad inclusiveness leads to a mish-mash of messaging and an ineffective marketing campaign that actually **extends** the sales cycle. Here are 3 practical steps marketers are taking today to hone their go-to-market strategies *and* shorten the sales cycle.

Step 1: Focus, focus, focus

The task of market segmentation is like aiming for the bull's eye. Where is the sweet spot: those key folks most likely to buy your product?

Traditional market segmentation brings to mind an academic, time-consuming, and costly process. It doesn't have to be. I've found that key people within any company have knowledge in their heads that, if shared, would greatly accelerate any segmentation process.

Template: A simple bull's eye template is an excellent way to guide a cross-functional team discussion.

Bull's Eye Example

IT leaders (executives, influencers) who are responsible for *architecting and managing* their evolving network in order to ensure it supports business priorities today and tomorrow.

Within the Installed Base: F500 enterprises (divisional leadership, not HQ leadership) and mid-sized businesses up to 2,000 employees. Emphasis on Ed, Healthcare, Retail verticals

Early majority: IT leaders of new/expanding business locations, who are considering adding wireless access (or going all-wireless)

The Sweet Spot
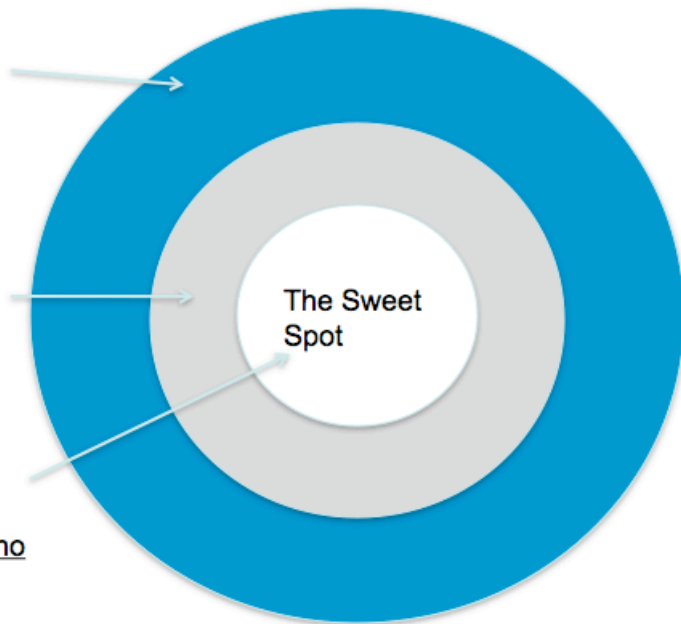
This exercise is all about focus. Start by asking the team about whom you want to target. If you get an answer like, "We want CIO's of the global 5000", then you're being too broad. Consider that all CIOs don't think alike. Industry, cultural, business-size differences color the way CIOs look at the world. Focus on a subset. What keeps these folks up at night? What do they fear?

We need more focus. While capturing some dimensions of the broadest segmentation description (outer circle), ask the team to add a few more adjectives and distinguishing characteristics about the prospect and their environment. Do these folks know who we are? This is represented in the middle layer. But, we're not yet done.

Still, we need more focus. Are they already aware of solution alternatives, or do they need to be educated? What are their preferences? Where are they in their buying process?

Combined, the three layers of the bull's eye template help marketers hone their messaging to capture the set of prospects most likely to buy now.

Step 3: Paint a picture of your target persona

Market segmentation, however, is not enough. Buyers are a skeptical bunch that doesn't like to be sold to. You need to empathize with your buyer personas. And you

can only do that by knowing what makes these folks tick. That's where the persona template comes in.

Template: In general, the marketing team (as a collective) has a lot of knowledge and perspective about the target buyers. Unfortunately, this information is distributed in pieces and not written down in a format that can be easily referenced and shared. It's easy to collect a lot of data, but it's another matter to boil it down into a single, meaningful slide.

Persona Example
CIO, Network Architect, IT Director

"The skeptical futurist"

General Information	
Age	35-50 years old
Education	BS/MS Engineering or Computer Science + MBA
Experience	At least 10 years executive leadership; cross functional experience
Attitude	Leader; business savvy; frugal; skeptical of vendor claims
Reputation	Visionary; decisive; well regarded in organization (with an ego to match)
Work Information	
Job Focus	Moving technology from being a utility to a strategic business weapon; balancing TCO/cost containment with optimized productivity in an ever-changing business landscape
Role in Purchase Process	Develop IT strategy & roadmap; leads team that identifies and evaluates new technology partners, products and services
Values	**Leadership:** Ability to see the "big picture" and lead the organization forward **Knowledge & expertise:** Broad IT knowledge, but not interested in the technical details **Innovation:** Personally interested in the latest trends; looking for proof points on how others have successfully applied new technologies **High expectations:** Expects team and vendors/products to live up to his expectations
Fear	Making a bad purchase decision
Pet Peeves	Self-serving vendors who don't understand his business; vendors who disappear after the sale; implementation woes
Information sources:	Peers/colleagues, Search, CFO Magazine, FierceTelecom, The VoiceReport, Network World, Trade rags, will read analyst reports but doesn't always trust them

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Is this exercise really necessary? You bet. A case in point: After guiding a cross-functional team through this exercise, they socialized the resulting persona with the VP and regional sales leaders. Two of the most telling pieces of feedback were:

"Historically, we've been selling too low into the organization. We need to aim higher, and this is the right target for us."

"I've been selling to this group for 5 years and I've never seen the persona written down before. You got it right. This is exactly who I'm meeting with this afternoon"

Talk about a confidence boost to the marketing team.

Step 3: Adopt the 80/20 rule for proactive/reactive marketing spend

There is not enough time, money, or energy to be all things to all people. Therefore, marketers need to determine where the best ROI can be found. While we will all

gladly accept money from anyone who wants to purchase our products, where is the easiest target segment to capture first? It is assured that if marketers identify and win a beachhead segment, there will be a halo effect to attract a wider audience.

An example: A company was caught up in the vicious cycle of continuously marketing to everyone, with no distinction between new leads and their prospect database. They treated all prospects the same. In search for a more effective approach, they worked cross-functionally to identify and prioritize two target audience personas that represented entry points for engaging the most-likely-to-buy prospects. Marketing efforts were then split between a new proactive lead generation outreach to these personas with 80% of the marketing budget being applied to developing a meaningful marketing blueprint to engage these folks. Meanwhile, 20% of the budget was saved to allow for flexibility to address reactive market opportunities.

Putting it all together

This heightened focus resulted in crisper, more relevant messaging. Response levels increased, and the sales team was rewarded with more, higher quality leads in less time.

Deciding to prioritize and focus on a sub-segment is risky. After all, what if you guess wrong? However, think about it this way: If you guess correctly, then your marketing ROI is guaranteed to be greatly improved. If you do guess wrong, then you quickly find out what not to do and you can move on to the next segment with confidence. Either way, you win by avoiding wasting precious time and money and unnecessarily lengthening the sales cycle.

About the Author

Mike Gospe leads KickStart Alliance's marketing operations practice where he conducts team-based "practical application working sessions" to improve the effectiveness of lead generation campaigns and product launches. His fun, practical approach and roll-up-his-sleeves attitude energizes teams, helping them to get "real work done" while guiding them to the next level of excellence. Mike is the author of the book and blog, Marketing Campaign Development, and his methodology is being used by San Francisco State University's College of Extended Learning course: "Essentials of Integrated Marketing."

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