

The Complete Guide to MSP Marketing



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There's a certain irony to the business practices of managed IT services providers. As an MSP, by definition, you've mastered some of the most complex concepts of modern information technology – and have distilled that expertise into simple and effective services for clients of every size and type. The technical concepts MSPs must professionally master are, to the bulk of the population, mysterious and incomprehensible.

However, to some of these same talented and capable MSPs, the basics of effective marketing and lead generation appear like a dark art of sorts; a mysterious blend of alchemy and shamanism that defies definition and eludes their grasp.

This eBook is designed to dispel the mystery surrounding marketing for MSPs, and alleviate the trepidation it creates. Inside, we'll take a close look at the finer points of marketing a technology services business – including the optimization of inbound and outbound marketing, leveraging social media and the Web, and developing a comprehensive engagement strategy that draws on all available resources for messaging, generating leads and increasing sales.



It's a fact: Even the most successful and profitable solution providers are simply trading water if they're not engaging in at least rudimentary marketing efforts.

Effective marketing ensures an organization is attracting and retaining a significant enough number of satisfied customers to guarantee continued growth, with an eye towards profitable sales volume rather than maximum sales volume. Though widely varied, marketing programs are aimed at convincing clients to explore or keep using particular products or services.

Most businesses approach marketing with a focus on the value a given product or service can provide to its clients, but the strongest marketing programs begin with the exact opposite: an emphasis on the importance of the customer to the business. All marketing efforts, regardless of venue or medium, should focus on understanding and satisfying customer needs.

Chapter 1

Get Inside the Buyer's Mind

Before you can begin to actually market any offerings, you'll first need to intimately know your target market.

The first step in the marketing process is to identify potential buyers and understand their processes for considering and implementing an IT services purchases. Part of this comes from introspection, asking questions such as:



What kind of services am I offering?



Do I target small to medium Size Businesses (SMBs) or Larger Enterprises?



Do I provide general Managed IT Services, a specialized vertical product or something different?



How precisely am I adding value beyond the plethora of available IT services in the marketplace?



And, perhaps most importantly, where am I successful today?

The answers to these questions will set the stage for the next step in the basic marketing agenda –developing and executing effective market research.

Improve Market Intelligence

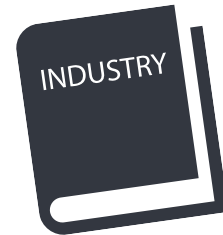
To make prudent decisions about service offerings and improve sales, all successful businesses – MSPs and solution providers included – must learn everything they can about their customers, competitors and industry trends.

Effective market research involves talking with current customers and prospects, and analyzing data to determine which products and services are in demand, who's buying them, and how they can best be competitively marketed and sold. The insights gleaned throughout these processes allow an organization to greatly reduce business risks, identify current industry trends and target lucrative sales opportunities.

Many small businesses begin their market research by poring over the wealth of data available from government sources on market and industry. These free services provide insight into businesses, industries and economic conditions, and include databases on employment statistics, income, earnings and economic indicators. The U.S. Small Business Administration (sba.gov) provides a good entry point to many of these sources

In addition to public databases, much insight can be gathered from trade groups, business magazines, academic institutions and other third parties that collect and analyze research data about technology and services business trends. Most of this information can be assembled or discovered through Web searches and by scouring social media contacts for relevant information. In addition, there are a number of commercial services that provide access to highly-targeted market and customer prospect data.

For the increasing number of MSPs and solution providers thinking beyond U.S. borders in this age of increased globalization, it's important to also consider international factors that influence the industry. Sources such as BuyUSA.gov can help U.S. companies discover global needs and trends and find new international business partners.



Create a Marketing Strategy

Building on the information gathered during market research, an effective marketing strategy identifies customer groups that an MSP can serve better than its competitors, and helps tailor IT service offerings, pricing and promotional efforts toward those potential clients.

Here the strategy is focused on addressing unmet customer needs to offer adequate potential profitability for the solution provider.

In order to develop such a strategy, the MSP must understand the individual customer in much the same way it investigated the market as a whole. Again, there are some important questions to ask:



- What does a potential client look like?
- Am I targeting an owner-operator type of SMB, or something larger and more complex?
- Who in the organization makes the buying decisions?
- What are their available budgets and billing preferences?
- What vertical(s) is the customer serving – financial services, health care, etc. – and how do those verticals affect customer needs?

The answers here help define what is known as a “buying persona.” This profile of the most likely – and most profitable – prospects can assist MSPs in crafting and pricing packages of services. It also sets the stage for focused, targeted and effective inbound and outbound marketing efforts.

These buying personas can vary widely by vertical, business type and geographic segment, but there are a few universal truisms for MSPs to consider. Buyers today are more educated and knowledgeable about technology, and its potential impact on their businesses, than ever before. In many cases, they know what services are available (and how they work) before making contact with a third-party solution provider.

Most potential customers have looked at products and services online, read peer reviews and developed an impression of the technology long before the first sales call. When it

comes to crafting important marketing content – whether on Web sites, social media, e-newsletters, webinars, white papers or event presentations – education always trumps pure sales messaging. The focus should be on improving the prospect’s understanding of the value inherent in a technology service, not simply making a sales pitch.

Generate Quality Leads

All of this research and work is done in pursuit of the coveted sales lead, the stock-in-trade of marketing that transforms focused branding and messaging into actual prospects that can be handed off to the sales team for conversion into a new or extended services engagement. The efficacy of any marketing program is determined by the number and quality of leads it generates in a given time period, in addition to the conversion rate of those leads into actual sales.

Most MSPs take some advantage of the basic lead sources available to them, namely their own prospect databases and customer lists. Applying the aforementioned principles of market intelligence and buying personas to this data set can deliver valuable business insights, and produce high-quality leads for sales teams.

Problems arise, however, when the act of feeding the insatiable demands of sales for more high-quality leads pushes IT marketers to focus on selling products rather than brands. MSPs talk frequently about partner and customer loyalty, yet they often end up devoting most of their marketing efforts toward individual products; a short-lived and unsustainable answer to the challenge of MSP lead generation.

A well-crafted marketing strategy must generate not only today’s leads but also nurture future market opportunities, sales engagements and customer loyalty. This means developing a sustained, holistic marketing effort that emphasizes brand awareness, not just product awareness.

Keep in mind, however, that even a carefully crafted marketing plan that drives home brand value and produces adequate leads will falter over time if it is not continually measured for effectiveness. Such monitoring and measurement of the marketing program must account for the number of leads produced, and more important metrics such as time to close sales, cost of sales, sales by region and attached sales rates. It is through this process of constant measurement and adjustment that an MSP develops a truly ongoing



marketing philosophy that permeates the organization and has a lasting impact on sales and services delivery.

Effective marketing has no real beginning or end. It is a series of interconnected initiatives working in harmony to keep a solution provider's brand and services top-of-mind for existing and potential customers.

Reverse Marketing

In addition to marketing directly to potential clients and customers, MSPs and solution providers can generate a significant number of sales leads can through the marketing efforts of the vendors whose technology they employ and resell.

So-called "reverse marketing" lets solution providers capture opportunities from their vendor partners, but only if they are willing to reinforce their competencies, capabilities and capacities. By cultivating relationships with channel account managers, territory field reps and direct sales counterparts, MSPs and service providers can differentiate themselves from their peers and remain top-of-mind when leads arise.

MSPs that spend time marketing up enjoy greater sales success and revenue performance than those trying to pull double duty on sales and tech fulfillment. Those who deftly apply such reverse marketing techniques to maintain their vendor relationships are getting pulled into more deals, and are growing faster than their competitors.

Chapter 2

Inbound and Outbound Marketing

The goal of marketing for managed IT services providers (MSPs) is to transform the academic exercise of value promotion into a tactical program that results in successful lead generation. In many respects, however, marketing is more art than science.

Granted, successful marketers often affix hard figures to determine the success of their demand-generation efforts; but the art of marketing often defies such metrics. The true value of marketing should be measured not in the product of the program, but by its overall contribution to the business. In other words, marketing should be measured by business growth, not solely by the number of leads generated.

The processes of outbound and inbound marketing are a matter of trial and error, of measurement and constant adjustment. When things work, replicate them. When they don't, acknowledge the discrepancy, adjust, and move on.

Outbound Marketing: The Power of Reaching Out

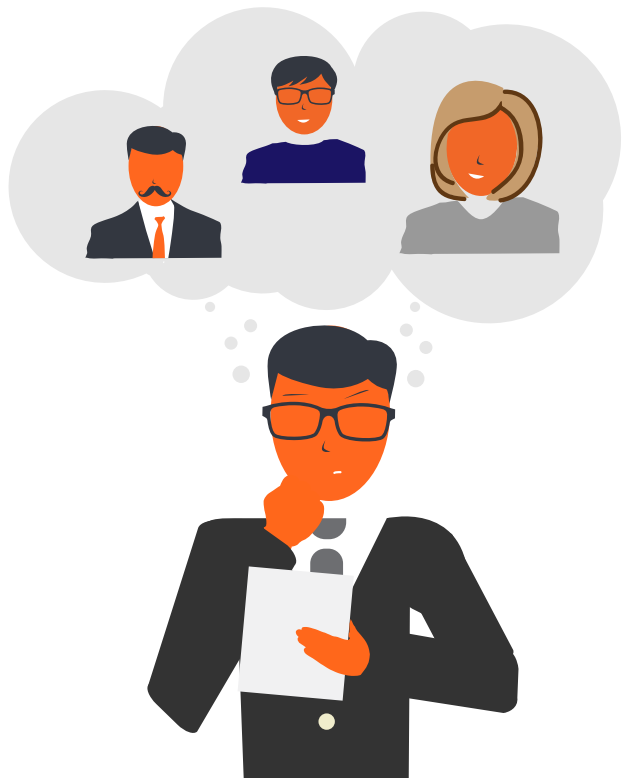
As the grandfather of marketing communications strategies, outbound marketing often suffers under the disapproving heading of “interruption marketing” due to its focus on generating demand by pushing your message in front of current and potential customers through a variety of channels. Typical outbound marketing vehicles include direct mail, print and online advertising, cold calling, telemarketing, sales fliers and the like.

And in today’s age of highly connected and educated consumers, social media, search engines and online reviews, it’s easy to dismiss outbound marketing as simply being too old school. The reality is, however, that a significant number of customers won’t act until you approach them.

For MSPs, successful outbound marketing goes beyond subverting spam filters and watchdog office managers to access business decision-makers. The secret to generating strong, qualified leads means blending outbound methods into a larger overall marketing strategy, and crafting messages that quickly and authentically demonstrate your value.

The heart of outbound marketing efforts is the prospect database. More than a simple directory, billing file or ship-to-customer list, the prospect database focuses outbound marketing efforts toward those leads most likely to act on your collateral, advertising and sales advances. Most MSPs covet an effective prospect database, but many lack the ability to merge a known buyer persona with a list of contacts that can be turned into leads.

One method to overcome this obstacle is to outsource the task. There are dozens of reputable lead-generation marketing firms that can take a customer list, define the core demographics and buyer personas based on most successful engagements, and overlay that information onto a larger ecosystem of B2B buyers to identify potential clients. Many of these firms can handle the entire outbound marketing process – from prospect identification to the creation and distribution of creative materials, and program measurement and testing for effectiveness in generating leads and closing sales.



For MSPs with a more limited budget, or simply a preference for handling marketing duties themselves, lead-generation software platforms can simplify the transformation of internal lists into valuable prospect databases for use in outbound marketing efforts.

With a prospect database in place, most MSPs focus their outbound marketing efforts on direct e-mail and calling campaigns. E-mail has an advantage over other outbound efforts in that it is less intrusive and lends itself to detailed analyses of program effectiveness. Most e-mail marketing platforms provide important metrics such as open and click-through rates, time of day the message was read, and which addressees were the most receptive.

This information feeds back into the marketing strategy to help fine-tune future messaging, prospecting and lead generation. There are few mistakes in outbound marketing, simply opportunities for adjustments and course corrections.

Inbound Marketing: Clearing a Path to Your Door

The natural evolution of marketing to an increasingly tech-savvy, educated and connected clientele has led to the development of inbound marketing strategies. Fueled by Internet presence and an expanding use of the web and social media, inbound marketing enables prospective customers to find solution providers through the broad distribution of targeted and optimized content.

More akin to online dating than traditional demand generation, inbound marketing uses the entire amalgam of online presence as a “profile” that attracts interested buyers and gives them an easy route to make contact and interact with the service provider.

Inbound marketing leverages the way potential clients are looking at content, which in turn drives buying decisions. Let’s take a look at how to leverage web and social content to drive inbound leads:

http:// The Web Site: The best MSP websites are those centered on visitor experiences. Attractive and professional design and site construction speak for themselves; beyond that, the best engagement efforts are those focused on high-quality content that satisfies viewer needs, answers questions, addresses pain points, showcases value and converts the visitor into a contactable lead.

Many B2B buyers today seek out a vendor when they are ready to buy, and often begin that process by conducting a Web search. Furthermore, most are already well-into the buying cycle before they even consider from whom they will purchase. As such, the website’s first job is to establish value and expertise.



Blogging: Well-crafted, regularly updated company blogs addressing common concerns of existing and prospective clients are a proven way to position yourself as both a thought leader and a value-added service provider.

Bear in mind that most Web surfers, particularly B2B buyers, navigate by search engine and are unlikely to stumble across your blog simply by visiting your home page. Make sure blog items are well-written, informative, keyword-rich and SEO-friendly. Keywords are not simply the names and descriptions of the technologies and services you provide, but also things like the cities and towns you focus on, the vertical industries you specialize in, and any legitimate connections to top-of-mind business issues trending in the media at large.



Videos: MSPs should also consider simple, short videos that highlight solutions in areas of core competency. These videos, which can be embedded on the local site/blog and also hosted on a site such as YouTube, can do double duty by providing an engaging multimedia experience while also opening the content to new audiences.

All of this quality content, however, isn't worth much if it can't convert visitors into qualified leads. Conversion points, requests for referrals, trial opportunities, and real, personal contact information should be spread liberally throughout the site. Every opportunity for a viewer to sign up for an e-mail newsletter, comment on a blog, or engage with staff is a chance to open a line of communication with a potential buyer and forge a potentially profitable relationship.



Social Media: While websites can offer more robust and controlled content that demonstrates an MSP's value and services, social media sites like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Google+ offer an unmatched level of immediacy and engagement with a growing prospect audience.

Social media not only enables MSPs to interact with prospects and customers in real time, but can serve as a launch pad for strong content – sharing, liking, re-tweeting, up-voting and other social media functions are all great ways to help build awareness around your brand.

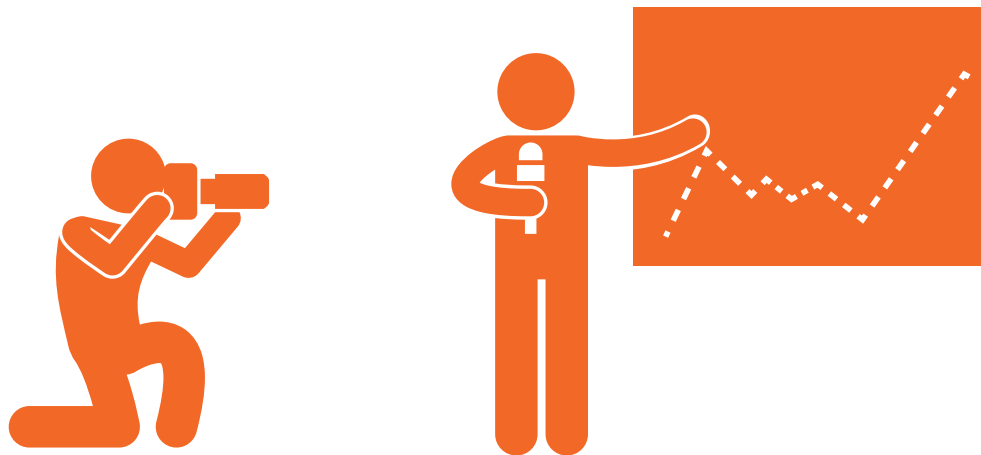
Social media can be used to help define buyer personas and target audiences, by exploring the interests and communities your prospects and customers are involved with. Additionally, social media trends, interactions and traffic are all easily tracked – meaning you can yield some valuable analytics and gain insights and into customer behavior patterns.

Outbound and inbound marketing are the primary building blocks for MSP marketing efforts. The former delivers targeted content to an audience of prospects with the hope they will react to and engage with the communications in a way that converts them to qualified leads and, ultimately, new or expanded client relationships. The latter relies on the wealth of modern content delivery mechanisms to position the service provider for maximum visibility in hopes of discovery by B2B buyers seeking qualified expert partners in which to entrust their attention and their business.

In both cases, all forms of effective marketing require commitment, dedication and accountability. This is no easy feat, to be sure, but the dividends justify the effort. Good, sustained, properly implemented marketing increases sales, lowers costs and expands profitability.

Chapter 3

Engagement Marketing



By now you’ve examined your technology service in terms of specific value to clients, and you’ve developed detailed buying personas that identify the type of clients who are most likely to respond to your sales and marketing efforts. You’ve used these internal and external identifiers to craft a prospect database you can use to reach out to qualified buyers and entice them into focused sales conversations. And you’ve honed your Web and social media presence to engage interested individuals when they embark on a search for IT services.

The final step calls upon all of these efforts to cohesively brand and present your MSP practice to the broadest number of potential customers possible – to upsell existing clients, attract new users, increase recurring revenues, and expand the kinds of profitable relationships necessary to grow a service provider business. This multi-pronged approach to demand generation, which invites prospects to engage with the business in real time and become an active part of the brand experience, is known as “engagement marketing.”

Content Is King

The heart of engagement marketing is a combination of outbound and inbound strategies reliant on the development, distribution and promotion of relevant content. Whether in an email newsletter, technical guide, Web page or social media posting, the MSP marketer must always be creating relevant, thoughtful and useful information that gets prospective clients to view the content and act on it.

Content marketing is perhaps best described as the art of communicating with customers and potential buyers without selling to them. Clients do not want to be sold, but rather to engage with brands they feel add knowledge and value to their efforts to solve business problems. This is particularly important to MSPs, who present a managed service offering that is often misunderstood – and must always be presented in a way that highlights its ongoing value to a potential client organization.

Think about it this way: As a decision maker, are you more likely to engage with a blatant advertisement or an informative article? In the age of DVRs and fast-paced Internet surfing that ignores ads and traditional conversion mechanisms, custom content is often the best method of sharing authoritative messaging and engaging clients in a meaningful dialog about your service, value and brand.

Today, branded custom content starts nearly all meaningful business conversations. By sharing expertise and infusing personality, you can begin to engage with clients and develop valuable relationships.



Getting the Word Out

Part of engagement marketing for the MSP involves mastering the basic tools of modern corporate communications, particularly content channels such as the Internet and e-mail, and social media tools like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Here, the content must be sharp, insightful, interesting and engaging – but almost never directly sales-oriented.

Engagement marketing has been compared to dating. It begins with a first impression. Be willing to share something insightful and interesting. Discuss things your audience cares about and always be starting a conversation. Be a persistent communicator, but not a pest. Respond to questions and engage by showing that you genuinely value the communication. At this level, such efforts don't require a great deal of verbiage; simple and short is often better. You aren't preaching or selling – you're inviting and educating. And, if you're doing it correctly, you'll find that you're listening as much as you're speaking.

Beyond social media, Web messaging and direct-mail efforts, there are other means of leveraging content to turn interested consumers into qualified prospects and leads. Most include outbound and inbound marketing efforts, designed to attract and distribute content that generates demand. These include:

Whitepapers & Case Studies:



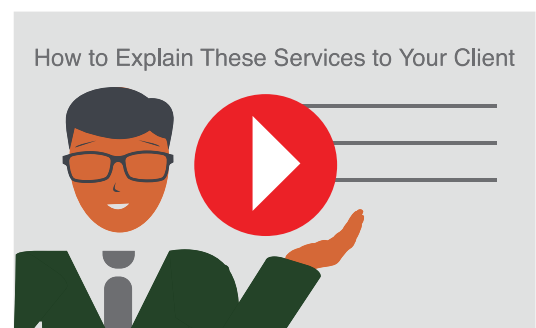
Whether they are single-page guides or 12-page PDFs, whitepapers and case studies take content marketing to the next level – by offering a deeper look at technologies or services, usually in a problem-solution construct that engages business readers tasked with finding solutions in their own organizations. More than 51 percent of B2B companies include whitepapers as part of their content-marketing strategy, according to research by the Content Marketing Institute.

Because of their length, depth and presentation requirements, some MSPs hire professional writers and editors to craft whitepapers, which can then be offered to prospective clients for free in exchange for basic lead-type contact information.

Whitepapers can be distributed via your website, or can be targeted to prospects via direct invitation. In either case, the whitepaper should be focused on prescriptive, useful business and technical content – not on sales. The time to pitch the client comes after they've expressed interest in the content and engaged in a meaningful way – not before or during.

Webinars & Webcasts: Many MSPs find webinars a valuable and cost-effective way to spread the word about their services and the value they create for clients. These Web-hosted presentations are typically 20 to 60 minutes in length, and blend the immediacy of a live event with the convenience and economy of a Web show that can be viewed from anywhere.

Like whitepapers, webinar content should be prescriptive, useful and eschew blatant sales pitches. The audience for webinars goes well beyond the



attendees for the actual presentation; slide decks and on-demand replays of the event keep the content relevant and productive for months, and leads generated from engaged participants are usually of high value. MSPs can develop, distribute and host webinars, or join forces with industry media groups that offer them as a hosted service, usually including lead capture and follow-up reporting on relevant metrics that gauge the effectiveness of the medium and the subjects presented.

Blogging: A well-crafted and regularly updated company blog addresses business concerns common to the target industry and can help position you as a thought leader and a truly value-added service provider. Blog items must be well written, informative, keyword-rich and search-engine-optimized. When it comes to blogging, MSPs should also consider simple, short videos that highlight solutions in areas of core competency. Blogs can be augmented with industry- or technology-specific microsites that further highlight expertise and thought leadership.



Live Events: The most costly of the engagement marketing tools, live events give an unparalleled opportunity to network with peers and potential clients, and raise the profile of a service provider to that of an industry leader and valued partner.



Traditionally, event marketing was gauged largely by how many samples or pieces of collateral were handed out, or how many business cards were collected. In the modern era of engagement marketing, however, the objective is to create an experience for prospects that's engaging and relevant enough to incite attendees to talk about it on social media, post photos, even act as brand ambassadors.

In fact, synergies with social media are becoming the most important facet of live event participation. Twitter and Facebook promote and engage attendees before, during, and after the event, and can organize "events within events" that let MSPs hone their messaging to select groups of targeted prospects.

Conclusion

The common denominator of any good marketing program is that the concept is on target, translated easily into an actionable plan, and is executed with vigor and consistency. A well-conceived and productive marketing program starts with logic and reason and ends with execution.

By treating marketing as a true driver of overall business development and making strategic investments in marketing, MSPs can attract new customers, further engage with existing clientele and see more return for their hard-earned marketing dollars.



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