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**Next Generation Lead Generation**

Today managing leads means collaboration between sales and marketing.

As marketers, it's time to throw out the notion of simply throwing leads over the wall to sales. No one wins in that situation-marketing gets a bad reputation for generating poor leads, and sales has to devote too much time just discerning who a good person is to contact. The cycle continues, and sales and marketing grow further apart. "I think the most popular lead management tool in the world right now is still Microsoft Excel," says Jim Dickie, managing partner of CSO Insights. But he and other experts agree that marketers must move beyond spreadsheets and take a more strategic approach to lead generation.

New strategies in lead generation must involve collaboration, information sharing, and interaction among sales and marketing. "Marketing has to be the evangelist, the advocate, the end-to-end responsibility across the customer lifecycle," says Laura Ramos, vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research. "Sales' job is to close sales." For marketers, it's about managing leads, not just generating them.

Do you have an award winning customer-based business strategy?

Next generation lead generation comprises three basic phases: creating a common definition of a lead, scoring each lead, and nurturing leads as they move along the purchase lifecycle. Ian Michiels, senior research analyst at Aberdeen Group, says that it all starts with sales and marketing coming together. "[Sales and marketing alignment] is the number one key to success," he says. "It drives accountability on both sides." He recommends that the two departments collaboratively define what a "good lead" is, then measure small wins and low-hanging fruit. Also, he recommends that marketing employees sit in on sales update meetings, and vice versa. That way each group can see what works and what doesn't before and after the leads get handed off.

Once a clear definition is in place, marketers should begin their lead management process by scoring leads. Lead scoring is a technique for quantifying the expected value of a lead or prospect based on that person's profile, behavior, demographics, and likelihood to purchase. It is used to prioritize and articulate the potential value of leads and maximize both marketing and sales effectiveness when interacting with that potential customer.

"Organizations are starting to embrace lead scoring, but haven't quite cracked the nut," Michiels says. He says those companies that do score leads are looking at one or two components, but haven't advanced beyond that. "Features like segmentation and scoring based on behavior are advanced actions, but gaining in popularity."

He adds that lead scoring can become even more valuable when marketers add a lead nurturing component to it. Most leads that marketers get are not ready to buy at the time the lead first comes in. In those cases, Michiels says, "you want to remain top of mind with prospects, as a thought leader and trusted adviser," as they move through the buying cycle of awareness through to consideration and then purchase. This may mean sending leads relevant articles, or inviting them to trade shows and events.

Search engine optimization firm Enquiro has employed this three-pronged approach to lead management, with a keen focus on the customer experience. "Each lead is a person," says Andrew Spoeth, director of marketing at Enquiro, which works with Marketo on its lead management program. "It's important to never forget what things look like through the eyes of the customer."

Spoeth works with sales to jointly create a scoring system for user activities, such as downloading a white paper or visiting a trade show booth. He is also constantly refining his lead nurturing activities. For example, the company recently held a webinar about search engine optimization and website design. Prospects who attended the webinar or viewed the archive receive a related article via email eight days later. If that person opens the article link, Enquiro will send a more detailed slide presentation.

"We only do the next step if they show interest and take action on the previous step," Spoeth says. The marketing team then sends a lead to sales if certain scoring criteria are met. However, he warns, "high scores don't always mean highly qualified leads. We're constantly refining the algorithms and providing more nurturing."

As a result, Spoeth does not send as many leads to sales as in the past, but those he does pass along to sales are higher quality and more informed. "We're learning all the time when it's ready to pass on to sales," he says, adding that the lead generation program only began a few months ago, so the sales cycle is not yet complete for the initial leads that have come in. But, he adds, "we're learning a lot about how people want to interact with us."

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