

THE B2B ONLINE MARKETING PLAYBOOK

A CEO's Guide to
Risks and Rewards

The logo for Act-On Software, featuring the word "act" in white lowercase letters on a dark blue square background, followed by "on" in white lowercase letters on a light blue square background. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a man in a dark blue suit, a striped shirt, and a striped tie, holding a blue clipboard and a pen, looking down at the clipboard.

act-on

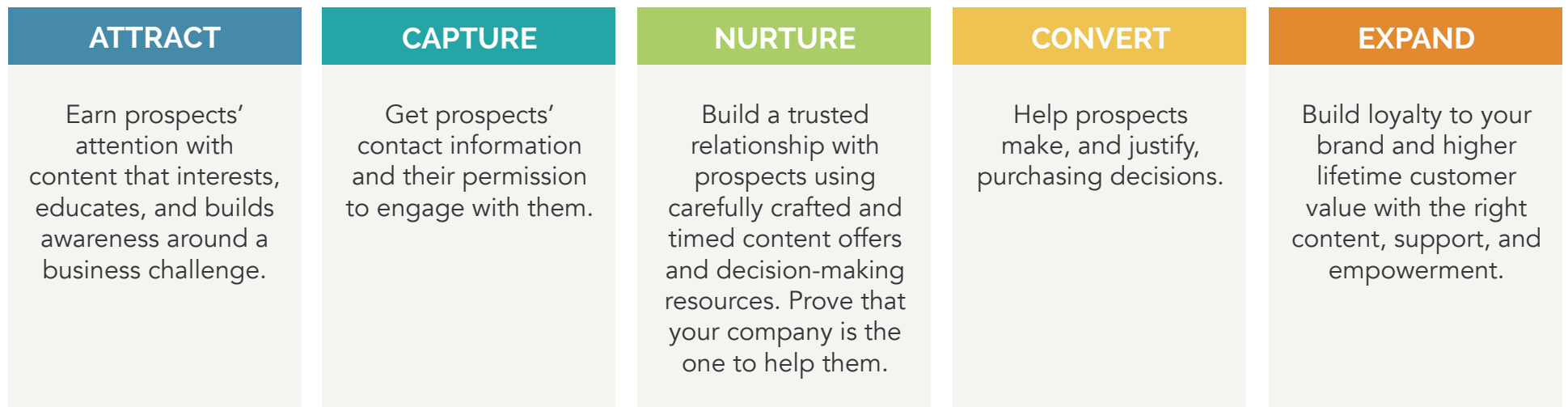
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A Quick Overview of the Buyer's Journey Framework

In marketing, it pays to understand the modern B2B buyer's journey – the process through which a prospect is identified as a lead and eventually as a buyer and loyal repeat customer.

This journey is a cycle that moves prospects through five stages:



At every step, modern marketers track, measure, and report key performance indicators (KPIs) for their online tactics. Whether you're using a marketing automation platform, web analytics, or other tools, the ability to measure your marketing's success – and revenue impact – is a powerful competitive advantage for **three big reasons**:

- It gives you **consistent and objective standards** for measuring your online marketing tactics' effectiveness;
- It makes it possible to **measure the ROI** from your online marketing investments, rather than rely on gut feel about which ones are paying back your investments;
- It allows you to **test and experiment** with different marketing tactics and assess which ones deliver the best results.

Every online marketing tactic can support measurement and analysis – and every tactic *should* be measured carefully when you assess its value so you can decide whether the reward is worth the risk.

Lead Generation



THE PLAY:

Lead generation is the process of finding and engaging with qualified potential customers of your B2B products or services. The goal is simple: Attract more (and better!) likely buyers, and **get them into your sales pipeline.**

In practice, lead generation isn't so much a tactic as it is an outcome. Most of the online marketing tactics we'll discuss help and accelerate the lead generation process. But lead generation deserves special attention because it's such a key concept in modern B2B marketing.

Many activities contribute to lead generation, from content marketing to social media to advertising. It's important to know which tactics work best together, and the costs of implementing them, before you and your marketing team create a lead generation strategy.

Pro Tip:

When you weigh the pros and cons of an online marketing tactic, ask yourself: ***Will the benefits, measured in qualified leads and closed deals, outweigh the costs of my investment?***

RISKS:

The most common risk is trying to do too many things, which can lead to doing nothing very well. Don't waste your company's time and money. Pick a few complementary, realistic tactics and make sure you can measure their results.

REWARDS:

Over 75% of B2B marketers say generating high-quality leads is their top challenge. When done well, lead generation delivers a steady stream of new, qualified prospects. **Good lead generation supports a bigger sales pipeline, more closed deals, and higher revenue.**



Email Marketing

THE PLAY:

B2B marketers have been using email for more than 20 years because it's affordable and effective. The goal today is to win your prospects' attention and persuade them to engage with your company by using targeted, convenient, and relevant offers, such as content or promotions.

Helpful technologies:

- **Email Service Providers (ESPs)** - These are designed to simplify and automate, but some can do much more. A best-in-class email service can test email to ensure it won't get caught in spam filters, analyze response rates and website activity, supply templates that use best-design practices, and segment subscriber lists, among many other features. With so many prices and qualities, it pays to carefully consider the features you need today – as well as those you might need tomorrow as your company grows.
- **Integrated Solution (i.e., Marketing Automation):** - While many email marketing tools are stand-alone software as a service (SaaS) applications, others are packaged with marketing automation or CRM solutions, or are designed to integrate with them. Integrated solutions are often much more robust than ESPs and enable you to take email marketing to the next level.

RISKS:

Stand-alone tool- Needing to add other tools, each of which carries a separate budget and time cost. They also produce data that may be hard to integrate and reconcile.

Integrated platform- Overbuying. Although they do look enticing, you probably won't need every bell and every whistle.

REWARDS:

Email still delivers the highest return on investment: 4,300%, according to the Direct Marketing Association. In addition, email is overwhelmingly the way prospects and customers (77% of them) prefer businesses like yours communicate with them.

Social Media Marketing



THE PLAY:

It's tempting to view social media as a frivolous activity. Social has changed, though, and is now a valuable tactic to integrate into your marketing strategy. Ask your best customers about their social media habits. If you find significant usage, then you should be active, too. Ask your marketing manager to browse the social channels looking for the types of businesses and customers you sell to, or would like to sell to. This can help you determine if and where you should be engaging.

If you're not using social yet, your competitors probably are: 84% of all B2B firms are using social media in some form and according to the Social Media Examiner, 90% of all marketers indicated their social media efforts have generated more exposure for their businesses.

Pro Tip:

Check out the social media engagement and monitoring tools that can help you. For most B2B companies, getting LinkedIn right should be the first priority.

RISKS:

Without a thoughtful social media marketing strategy, it's easy to spin your wheels and burn many hours with not much to show for it. Make sure every social activity serves a well-defined goal beyond trying to get as many "shares" or "likes" as possible. Also, because social media moves so fast, one careless post can become a PR debacle. It takes experience and judgment to do social well – so don't risk your social branding by handing this program to the new intern. Give it instead to someone with seasoned judgment who's articulate about your business and values ... They can learn the technology.

REWARDS:

Social media marketing can turn followers into brand advocates. It can also amplify your content and website investments, allowing you to reach more potential buyers at a lower cost per lead. The key to social marketing success is to use it as a tool for achieving specific goals.





Content Marketing

THE PLAY:

According to a recent study, 86% of marketers now use content marketing – described by the Content Marketing Institute as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.” That’s because it’s a proven, highly effective tactic for engaging buyers throughout the decision-making process and establishing your brand as a trustworthy information source to build relationships with key influencers. Good content helps searchers find you, helps prospects understand your brand and offerings, and helps close deals. It’s the fuel of both inbound and outbound campaigns.

What it takes: A full-scale content marketing commitment means investing in quality content and effective campaign planning. It means understanding your buyers’ content preferences and business needs, and using a systematic approach to distributing and promoting your content. But fullscale isn’t your only option. If money or time is a limiting factor, content marketing can be as simple as a regularly updated blog that keeps your buyers current on topics where your firm’s expertise shines.

RISKS:

The biggest risk is being too ambitious. Some B2B firms give up on content marketing because they can’t launch an all-out campaign with dozens of assets. Start small: Even a few quality pieces of content, or a regularly updated blog, can pay big dividends. Outsourcing, and getting poor quality assets created by vendors who don’t understand your market, is also risky. Reduce your content risks by spending the money to create one good white paper or eBook, and then turn it into multiple blog posts and perhaps a few webinars, which you can record and place on your website.

REWARDS:

Quality content can help prospects discover your company, products, and services, and then moves them through the decision-making process. You can adjust content to appeal to buyers at all stages of the process, including your existing long-term customers. Quality content also gives your brand a stronger identity, and, if you distribute it well, extends your brand’s reach. Best of all, it offers an incredible value: Content marketing costs an average of 62% less than traditional marketing and, per dollar spent, generates about three times as many leads.

Pro Tip:

Document your content strategy. Marketers who document their strategy are more effective in all aspects of content marketing than those who have not.



Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

THE PLAY:

Most B2B buyers first look for business solutions by searching the Web. Showing up prominently in search engine listings (especially Google's) will have a profound impact on your marketing results.

Optimizing your content for the searcher, the name of the SEO game. Google and the other engines relentlessly tune their algorithms to improve results and make search results harder to game. The only dependable constant is high quality content. That's what searchers want most, so it's what search engines prize most.

Ranking factors are in constant flux. At least one member of your marketing team should be assigned to stay on top of the latest SEO best practices, especially those concerning content creation. If you're having serious SEO problems, such as sudden, surprisingly lower search result rankings, it might be time to call in a professional to analyze your site and content and look for hidden problems. Learning at least the basics of [optimizing your content for SEO](#) success will keep you in the game and perhaps even give you a leg up on your competition.

Search

RISKS:

Taking shortcuts (like buying links) will come back to bite you. Don't fall for SEO firms that promise quick miracles to improve your search placement. Credible SEO experts can certainly help, especially with off-page factors. But if you focus consistently on the fundamentals – quality original content and keyword research – you're on the road to positive long-term SEO results.

REWARDS:

The top 10 listings in Google's organic (non-paid) search results get **91% of the traffic**. Enough said.

PLAY 6:

Online Advertising



THE PLAY:

Like all forms of advertising, online ads aim to encourage or persuade a defined target audience. With online advertising, however, your team can run three versions of the play, each with its own strengths and weaknesses; pay-per-click, display ads, and native advertising.

Pay-Per-Click (PPC):

A great example of PPC ads are the all-text ads that look like search results. These show up above the top search results on Google and other search providers. In fact, Google AdWords represents about 80% of the PPC market. As the name suggests, you pay based on the number of viewers that click on the ad.

RISKS:

PPC can be expensive if you simply throw money at a campaign without researching your audience and tracking results. Every keyword can and should be tracked against the leads and revenue it generates in a PPC campaign.

REWARDS:

A PPC campaign can give your firm great visibility on the first page of search results and the ability to reach a large, but targeted, audience. In addition, firms that manage their PPC spend as data-driven business investments backed by careful keyword research and analytics can expect quality leads and higher revenue.

Display Advertising:

These are the banner ads you see on websites. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and some support audio, video, or other rich media offerings. Generally, you pay based on the number of times the ad is displayed (not clicked on) on host sites.

Online Advertising (continued)



Display Advertising (continued)

RISKS:

Many firms buy display ads the same way they buy traditional ads: in broad and non-specific terms. As with PPC spending, a display ad campaign not backed by careful research and constant tracking can be expensive.

REWARDS:

Online display ads can be extremely effective at engaging prospects, thanks to “retargeting,” where viewers who have visited your website see your ads as they visit other sites. Retargeting can boost ad response by 400%, and website visitors who are retargeted with online ads are 70% more likely to convert on your website. With help from tracking tools, online display ads can be an important part of your B2B marketing strategy – and a measurable source of leads and revenue.

Native Advertising:

The newest kid on the advertising block, native advertising takes forms such as the “recommended reading” boxes you’ll see on some news and information websites. These ads are designed to look like editorial content, and they often promote other content such as articles or videos created by consumer and B2B brands. **Native ads will drive 74% of all ad revenue by 2021.**

RISKS:

Some users don’t like viewing native advertising when it looks too much like traditional content because they consider it deceptive. Your choice of retargeting networks can go a long way towards addressing this risk. Also, it is important to disclose your sponsorship of the native ad. Federal regulators have been taking notice and have been issuing fines for brands that don’t.

REWARDS:

Using native ads to promote content assets can be a good way to combine advertising and content marketing. The ability to measure your ROI from leads and revenue generated is an important benefit that traditional media ads still cannot match.



Sales Acceleration

THE PLAY:

“Alignment” isn’t just another buzzword. Success at tasks from qualification to closure is impossible unless sales and marketing work closely together – speaking the same language and defining success with the same numbers. In fact, according to SiriusDecisions, B2B firms with tight sales and marketing alignment enjoyed 24% faster three-year revenue and 27% faster profit growth.

Lead scoring is an important part of the shift towards sales and marketing alignment (see sidebar). So is the process of deciding what constitutes a “qualified” lead that’s ready to be handed off to sales. Some organizations even set formal standards – service level agreements, or SLAs – for the number and quality of leads generated.

In addition, if sales and marketing teams don’t share clear goals, your marketing team risks delivering ineffective sales enablement content that doesn’t get used. Often, when that occurs, sales will make their own materials, which may not represent your brand well.

Several digital marketing solutions are available to help the B2B marketer with sales enablement activities, including those for scoring and nurturing leads, managing content, and tracking and measuring the conversion of marketing-qualified leads into closed deals.

The most important sales enablement tool, however, is a shared commitment to work together toward a single set of goals.

Pro Tip:

Sales and marketing alignment is far more likely to succeed when the lead scoring process gets visible and vocal executive-level support. Given the potential payoff, it’s worth your time as a B2B CEO to make this a high priority.

RISKS:

Sales and marketing alignment is easier said than done. At many companies, the two teams must overcome mutual mistrust and old rivalries to find common ground. And change is never easy. The beginning could be rocky.

REWARDS:

Sales acceleration and enablement activities can generate higher-quality leads, move those leads more quickly through the sales pipeline, and drive higher revenue. Typically, sales and marketing teams that learn how to work together enjoy 38% higher sales-win rates and 36% higher customer retention rates.

The Promise of Lead Scoring

LEAD SCORING

The process of linking numerical values with attributes and behaviors to identify and prioritize hot, sales-ready leads.

For example, leads who have the right titles, work in the right industries, or demonstrate behavior that indicates sales readiness – such as downloading content from your website or requesting a demo – should score highly and warrant sales' immediate attention. On the other hand, a lead who identifies as a student or works in a country you don't do business with can generate a negative score that sales should not waste time on.

[\(See How to Prioritize Your Leads\)](#)

DIGITAL BODY LANGUAGE

Can be observed using **website visitor tracking** and evaluated using **marketing automation**. The automation system will pass the lead to the sales team for follow-up when a prospect's lead score crosses a certain threshold, and it may also send sales an alert when a particular prospect visits a particular page.

As you can see, lead scoring can be a great tactic to help your sales team decide where to focus its most precious asset – **TIME**.



Lead Nurturing

THE PLAY:

At any given time, only a small fraction of your team's leads are ready to engage with sales. What happens to the rest? How do you keep those leads interested and moving along the sales funnel until more of them are ready to buy?

Lead nurturing can answer these questions. This is the communication process of delivering consistent messages and relevant content to inform and educate a prospect. It can also help identify when a lead has become sales-ready.

Lead nurturing requires B2B marketers to understand their buyers' pain points and business needs, which is the key to creating quality content marketing. This means understanding a lead's buying process to deliver the right messages and offers at the right time.

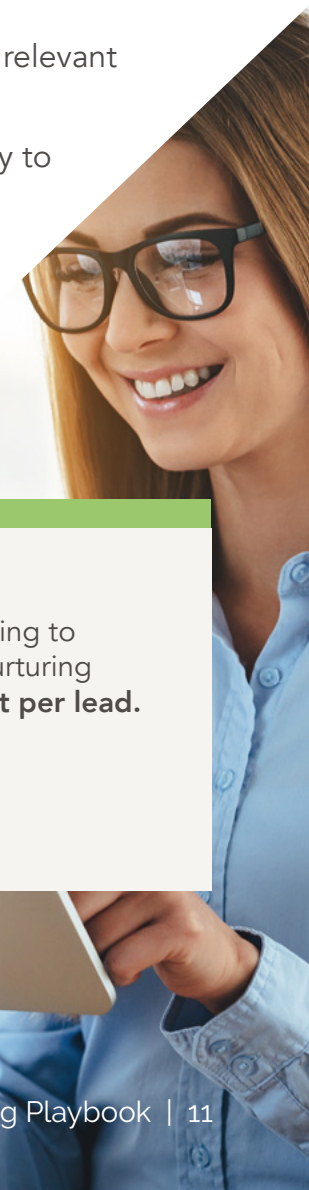
A lead-nurture campaign may require more or fewer contacts, or "touches," based on a variety of factors. In many cases, lead nurturing is combined with some form of lead scoring (see sidebar) to track a potential buyer's interest and readiness for a sales conversation. The complexity of scheduling and timing multi-touch campaigns makes lead nurturing one of marketing automation's most common and fruitful activities.

RISKS:

A lead-nurturing campaign will likely fail if your marketing team doesn't have a **good understanding of your buyers' business needs, buying processes, and content and cadence preferences.** Put these fundamentals into place before you consider investing in a lead-nurturing strategy or the tools that support it. And, start with a simple program. Don't get fancy without careful testing.

REWARDS:

Nurtured leads are better-educated buyers. According to Forrester Research, companies that excel at lead nurturing generate **50% more sales leads at 33% lower cost per lead.**





Marketing Analytics and ROI Calculation

THE PLAY:

Until recently it was impossible to know for sure which marketing tactics worked or what their ROI might be. Today, marketing has escaped the dreaded “soft ROI” category.

Lead scoring, marketing automation, and web analytics data, for example, can tell a B2B marketer precisely which activities turn prospects into sales-qualified leads and, eventually, into closed deals. As a result, it's now possible to know how many deals close through marketing activities, as opposed to sales prospecting or other sources.

That's a powerful draw for executives who want hard data to justify marketing budgets. It also puts more pressure on marketing teams –because, for the first time, it's possible to know when and how they're getting results.

Even a small B2B marketing team can use basic web analytics, such as those provided by Google, to track the performance of key pages and assets. On the high end, advanced analytics tools and big data analysis can uncover insights from website, email, social media, and other sources, delivering buyer intelligence that marketers could only dream about 10 years ago. But there are some amazing things being developed to continue to make marketing tasks easier. [Adaptive marketing](#) leverages big data and machine-learning to make it simpler for marketers to enable buying journeys that automatically adapt to individuals based on their behaviors and preferences.

RISKS:

Some tools can be extremely expensive and time consuming to implement, and things to measure (such as lead-nurture campaigns) adds more cost and complexity. For most B2B firms, marketing analytics is an area where slow-but-steady progress makes more sense than buying into an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink solution. To start, pick just a few key performance indicators that map to revenue. And when choosing marketing technology such as marketing automation, be aware that a two key predictors of success are ease-of-use and time-to-value.

REWARDS:

Analytics that tie marketing activity to sales pipeline and revenue finally put a B2B marketing team on a solid footing for making rational investment decisions. That's a big reason why firms are expected to increase their spending on marketing analytics 73% in the next three years.



Mobile Marketing

THE PLAY:

You already know that your smartphone is a powerful tool for everyday activities like learning, playing, and shopping. Yet many CEOs are surprised by just how big a role mobile now plays in the B2B buying process. Consider:

- 74% of marketers now say **mobile-optimized websites** are “very effective” or “somewhat effective” in increasing conversions.
- 56% of B2B buyers use **smartphones to access business-related content**, and 42% use tablets for this purpose.
- **Google** announced in the fall of 2016 that it would begin a “**mobile first**” **indexing** for all its search rankings.

In other words, B2B buyers see mobile content as a valuable tool for making buying decisions – and they also think vendors aren’t doing enough to accommodate their mobile preferences.

The term “mobile B2B marketing” covers everything from tradeshow apps to mobile search and banner ads. The biggest opportunity, however, lies in making content accessible to B2B buyers using mobile devices. In an always-on marketing environment, your content has to adapt to users’ needs. So, websites, email offers, landing pages, and content assets must look just as good on a smartphone or tablet as on a desktop.

Creating mobile-friendly websites and content can require a significant time and money investment, but the process is less expensive than ever. And, if your site isn’t mobile-friendly, you’re giving your competitors a huge advantage.

RISKS:

Mobile optimization can be expansive and complex. Look for content, analytics, and marketing automation tools that include built-in mobile capabilities, and you’ll achieve your mobile marketing goals and increase the tools’ ROI. Programs are also easy to over-complicate. Begin simply and don’t get fancy without careful testing.

REWARDS:

B2B buyers now depend on their mobile devices to research and make buying decisions. Get your content in front of these buyers, and your firm can win a major competitive edge.

CONCLUSION:

Making the Right B2B Online Marketing Choices

We've covered a lot of ground here. We hope we've answered some of your questions about which online marketing tactics might be right for your company at this time.

Your next step is to meet with your B2B marketing team to discuss online marketing options. Define goals, outline priorities, and chart existing capabilities in key tactics like content marketing, online advertising, and marketing analytics. If you have limited resources, look for tactics where low-cost options can deliver better results.

Remember: Online marketing is always evolving. Pay close attention to what's coming over the horizon – next year's list of top tactics will likely feature a few new entries to consider.

THE RISKS

of under-using online marketing: missing out on new leads, disengaging with prospects, underserving your existing customers, being invisible to the media – and being outstripped by your competition.

THE REWARDS

of online marketing: more leads, better-qualified leads, more satisfied customers, greater brand awareness, more effective recruiting – and greater bottom-line revenue.

Additional Resources:



- eBook: [C-Suite Perspective: 5 Ways Marketing Automation Can Optimize & Grow Your Business](#)
- eBook: [The Business Case for Marketing Automation](#)
- eBook: [Beyond Sales & Marketing Alignment: Add Customer Success for a Winning Team Trifecta](#)
- Datasheet: [How Marketing Automation Fuels Scalable Growth](#)

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About Act-On Software

Act-On Software is a marketing automation company delivering innovation that empowers marketers to do the best work of their careers. Act-On is the only integrated workspace to address the needs of the customer experience, from brand awareness and demand generation, to retention and loyalty. With Act-On, marketers can drive better business outcomes and see higher customer lifetime value. The Act-On platform provides marketers with power they can actually use, without the need for a dedicated IT resource.

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