

# How to Build a World-Class Inbound Lead Conversion Engine



## Building the lead conversion engine of your dreams is easier than you might think.

When it comes to lead generation, more doesn't mean better. Too many revenue organizations focus on lead quantity over quality, resulting in wasted time and effort following up by the sales team, growing data quality problems in the CRM, and worst of all, no return on investment for one of the most important - and expensive - pipeline contribution initiatives.

Fortunately, times are changing and marketing organizations are waking up to the fact that quality trumps quantity when it comes to lead generation. A recent [Ascend2 Report](#) found that 58% of all B2B lead generation efforts are focused on improving lead quality. Lead scoring and qualification have become priorities for these marketing teams.

The critical challenge now is ensuring lead generation programs deliver enough qualified opportunities for the sales team to close in order to achieve revenue targets. That means producing high-value leads and building a world-class conversion process to turn them into customers. Building the lead conversion engine of your dreams is easier than you might think.

# What Does a High Quality Lead Look Like?

***Here are some factors to consider when assessing the quality of a lead:***

## **Is it from a company that fits your ICP?**

Successful companies know what a good customer looks like, and they've taken the time to define the Ideal Customer Profile. If a lead doesn't work for a company that fits that ICP criteria, is it really someone you want to be doing business with?

In the best case, that lead may represent an opportunity to expand the definition, but more often than not it represents a potential waste of time for the poor sales rep who will have to disqualify them, eventually.

## **Do they have a title that corresponds to a high-value buyer persona?**

Just as defining the ICP helps companies target their marketing efforts, it's important to understand the buyer personas that drive revenue. By analyzing closed won - and closed lost or disqualified - opportunities, companies can understand the ideal entry points for a sales conversation. Buyer personas will cluster by title, role, and seniority.

Companies typically find this is a Goldilocks proposition: your best buyer personas will be neither too high nor



too low in the company. Outside of SMB markets, the C-suite is rarely involved early in sales decisions, and frontline employees don't have the authority to advance a sales conversation. Identifying the ideal starting point for opportunities will help you ensure your leads are worth chasing.

### **Have they taken an action that indicates an area of interest or degree of intent?**

The best leads are those that have taken an action that indicates some specific area of interest as well as a degree of intent. At the highest level, this can mean initiating a chat session on a website or filling out a "contact us" form.

On the other end of the quality spectrum are Marketing Qualified Leads (MQLs) generated through "lead scoring," the process of inferring interest and intent based on more passive activity such as browsing a website or engaging a piece of content. Beware of vanity metrics like "impressions" or "site visits."

Accurately gauging interest and intent will help you prioritize follow-up, ensuring that reps focus their limited time and attention on the most valuable leads, and leveraging

automation to convert lower quality prospects.

### **Does the lead data include an accurate business email and phone number?**

Poor data quality in the form of missing and inaccurate contact information can create a number of headaches. Filling your CRM with bad data can create a long-term nightmare for your RevOps team, frustrate sales reps responsible for follow-up, and confound future marketing initiatives. Bad emails will also create bounce issues that can degrade your sender reputation score and cause other emails sent from your domain to end up blocked by SPAM filters.

Fortunately, there are services that can validate emails before putting your domain at risk, and data providers that can supplement and correct inaccurate lead contact information.

### **Are there enough of them to matter?**

Yes, quality is more important than quantity when it comes to evaluating lead sources - but quantity still matters. If a lead source doesn't produce enough high-quality leads to meet pipeline contribution targets,

that's a problem.

You can either invest more to produce a higher volume of leads or pursue other lead channels. Don't let the focus on quality blind you to the perils of inadequate lead flow.



# How does a high-quality Lead become an Opportunity?

Acquiring high-quality leads is the main ingredient for a successful demand generation program, but what you do once you get them is equally as important. Following up quickly, persistently, and intelligently will turn your inbound channel into a powerful pipeline contributor.

## Quick Follow-up

After a lead is generated, how long does it take your sales team to initiate contact? Lead Response Time is one of the most important indicators of conversion success. [Hubspot reported](#) that the average response time for B2B companies is 42 hours, with only 37% of companies responding within an hour. Yet, [research shows](#) that the odds of successfully connecting are 100 times greater when first contact occurs within 5 minutes compared to 30 minutes after the lead is received; the odds of converting that lead to an opportunity are 21 times greater.

Companies that make contact even an hour after the lead is received are 60 times as likely to convert the lead into an opportunity as those that wait 24 hours or longer. When it comes to successfully converting high-quality leads into opportunities, speed matters.

It's important to note that these lead response time recommendations apply primarily to "hot" inbound leads - so-called "hand-raisers" that have filled out a contact request form, engaged in an online chat session, or otherwise indicated a high-degree of interest and intent. Response time

is less of a factor when it comes to converting MQLs that have entered the sales funnel based on some combination of low-intent engagement activities (website visits, content downloads, webinar registrations, etc.). MQL follow-up is certainly important, but make sure you take care of your hottest leads first - and fastest.

The best way to ensure prompt follow-up with a hot lead is to leverage technology to automate the process. An automated reply from a Marketing Automation platform can be triggered upon receipt of the lead, and will let the prospect know it's been received and when to expect a follow-up call from a sales rep.

Even better, these leads can be routed instantly to the CRM, assigned to a rep, and sent to a Sales Engagement Platform (SEP), where the prospect will be placed in an appropriate inbound conversion sequence. The first touchpoint in the Sequence is an automated email from the assigned sales rep set to fire off immediately, followed by a high-priority phone call task.

Sales Engagement Platform provider Outreach.io uses this process to respond to their own

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# “How much money must companies be leaving on the table due to negligent inbound lead follow-up?”

TOPO Research Report

INBOUND AND OUTBOUND TOUCHES PER PROSPECT



inbound leads. With it, they are able to consistently meet a first-touch SLA of [two minutes](#).

### Persistent Follow-up

Following up quickly is important, but sticking with a lead after that first touch will often mean the difference between success and failure.

Research shows that it takes an average of [16.7 touches](#) to convert an inbound lead into an opportunity. The average sales rep makes [2 follow-up attempts](#). TWO. Let that sink in for a minute. How much money must companies be leaving on the table due to negligent inbound lead follow-up?

Again, the best way to enforce persistent follow-up is through the use of technology. Sequences (or cadences, depending on your SEP of choice) plan out follow-up actions in advance, mixing emails, phone calls, and social touches to produce a multi-touch, multi-channel engagement campaign designed to maximize conversion.

In addition to ensuring sales reps execute the appropriate number of follow-up touches, sequences also allow you to control the frequency (interval between touches), combination (mix of touchpoint

types), duration (length of follow-up engagement), and purpose (objective at each stage of the engagement) of your follow-up touches.

Following up with appropriately timed touches will ensure that your prospects feel neither neglected nor overwhelmed by your sales reps. Too many touches in a short period of time will result in a high percentage of opt-outs; too few will risk losing prospects to a competitor. Though opinions differ about the right number of follow-up touches, it's wise to think about a sequence in three phases.

In the first phase, the week after a lead is received, plan for at least 6 touches. As soon as a lead is received, start with an email, sent immediately upon placement in the sequence, followed immediately by a phone call to be made at the rep's first availability, then a LinkedIn touch to learn more about the prospect.

Follow up later the same day, or early the following, with a second phone call, followed immediately by another email. Call again the day after, then send another email 1-2 days after that, then another phone call.

In the second phase, 6-15 days after the lead is received, begin to space your follow-up touches out a bit. Plan for 5 more touches, a combination

of emails, phone calls, and LinkedIn engagement activities, executed every other day. Test combinations and intervals to determine the appropriate mix for your customers.

In the final phase of the sequence, 16 to 30 days after the lead is received, plan 6 more touches: 3 emails sent 4 days apart, phone calls on day 29 and 30, the last call followed immediately by a last email letting the prospect know you're going to give them a break for now but will be available when they're ready to talk (the so-called "[breakup email](#)").

You'll note that this recommended sequence structure includes combinations of emails, phone calls, and social touches. These combinations are designed to create a "stacking effect," amplifying the effectiveness of a single touchpoint through reinforcement, and ensuring that you reach out to the prospect in their preferred communication channel.

As an example, the first three touches in the sequence - an automated email, phone call, and LinkedIn touch - introduce the prospect to the rep (email), followed by a more personal attempt at a conversation (phone call), and then a social greeting (when you visit the prospect's LinkedIn profile page, they'll see that you've visited and have a face to put with the name in their inbox and voice in their voicemail). This combination of touches humanizes the rep and lets the prospect know that an

## High Touch vs. Low Touch Sequences

High Touch	Low Touch
Reserved for high priority prospects	For lower priority prospects
More than 50% manual touchpoints	Up to 100% Automated touchpoints
Personalized with variables including persona, industry, and specific prospect or research details	Personalized with variables including persona and industry
Designed to add value at each step	Designed to prioritize territory coverage
Multi-channel: Email, Phone Call, Video, LinkedIn, other social, etc.	Mostly automated email

actual human being is attempting to connect with them. It also delivers the message in three distinct ways, increasing the likelihood you'll reach the prospect in their preferred channel.

How long should the follow-up effort last? To execute the 16+ touches required to maximize conversion without overwhelming your prospects, I recommend a 30-day sequence. While this is an appropriate length for high-value hot leads, shorter sequences may be more appropriate for lower-value MQLs.

30 days may seem like a long time to continue following up with a prospect that has been unresponsive, but it's based on a customer-centric view of the buying process. Even hot leads may be early in the evaluation process. They may have visited several potential vendors, and are now inundated with requests to meet.

Perhaps they were on an information gathering mission at the behest of their manager and aren't ready to formally engage. Maybe this is the first step in an evaluation that will begin in earnest sometime in the near future. Whatever the case, this longer sequence will ensure that you remain engaged with the prospect long after your competitors have given up, and increase the likelihood that you'll still be in contact when the prospect is ready to meet.

The final factor to consider in creating your follow-up sequence is the purpose at each stage of the engagement. During the first phase, your primary objective is to be responsive and demonstrate your interest in the prospect. Multiple touches at short intervals show you really want their business and are eager to assist. In the middle phase, your objective is to create a sense of urgency and motivation to act. Messaging will focus on the business impact of failing to solve the problems inferred from their contact request. The final phase relaxes into a more nurturing posture. Emails will provide information designed to educate and inform, and calls-to-action will be replaced by unconditional offers of assistance. Varying your purpose will ensure your prospect doesn't feel hounded by the rep or pressured to act before they're ready.

# Intelligent Followup

## TIMELINESS

Time is a valuable commodity, and sales reps have only so many hours in the day to dedicate to lead follow-up. Prioritizing leads into high and low-priority buckets will ensure reps focus limited time and attention where it matters most.

To turn a lead into an opportunity, follow-up must be quick, steady, and smart. Intelligent follow-up means delivering the right message, to the right prospect, in the right channel, at the right time. The first step in the process is segmenting leads by channel and prioritizing follow-up based on desirability, interest, and intent.

As noted earlier, all leads are not created equal. Some of your lead channels will consistently produce high-value leads - the right buyer from a sought-after account coming inbound with a request to meet. Partner channels may deliver leads that require priority follow-up based on agreed upon SLAs or a desire to maintain a strong partnership.

For these high-value channels,

build specific lead flows and follow-up sequences that reflect the importance of these leads: automated routing to an SEP to ensure prompt follow-up; sequences that include at least 16 touches over 30 days to maximize conversion; lots of manual touches to increase personalization and improve sequence performance.

Some of your lead sources won't deliver enough high-quality leads to justify a significant investment of a rep's time following up. MQLs that have a low-intent score may require more qualification in the form of automated email follow up with few phone calls and other manual touches. Lower-value leads from high-value channels (less desirable in terms of buyer persona or account priority, for example) may also require "low-touch" sequences - comprised primarily or exclusively of automated emails.

## TARGETED MESSAGING

Intelligent follow-up requires that messages be targeted and tailored to specific prospects. While it would be great to research prospects

individually and craft personalized emails for each, your sales resources would be spread far too thin to be effective, and lead response times would plummet. Time is finite, so ensure your reps can deliver effective messages at scale by adopting a persona-based approach to personalization.

Companies typically think of Buyer Personas in two dimensions: Title (Director) and Function (Marketing). In reality, personas are multidimensional, including Industry (Retail), Market Segment (Mid-Market), Region (North America), and Role Specialization (Demand Generation).

Email subject lines, value propositions, and proof points can be customized for each buyer's interests and priorities. Email tone can be matched to a buyer's personality profile to ensure messages resonate. This approach balances the need for personalization with necessities of communication at scale. Done well, this approach will deliver maximum return on your demand generation efforts.

## High Touch Sequences

- Reserved for high priority prospects
- More than 50% manual touchpoint
- Personalized with variables including persona, industry, & specific prospect or research details
- Designed to add value each step
- Multi-channel: Email, Phone Call, Video, LinkedIn, other social, etc.

## Low Touch Sequences

- For lower priority prospects
- Up to 100% automated touchpoints
- Personalized with variables including persona & industry
- Designed to prioritize territory coverage
- Mostly automated email

# Ensure your Demand Generation Efforts

## WARM OUTBOUND

Finally, an intelligent lead follow-up process recognizes that the person who came inbound may not be your actual buyer, or the best starting point for a sales conversation. If your inbound lead was sent on a fact-finding mission by their boss, a shorter path to conversion might require reaching out to the boss directly.

Warm Outbound prospecting is an Account-Based approach to pipeline generation that relies on inbound leads as a signal of account interest. Knowing a person from a particular company came inbound likely means the account is interested in your products or services.

Instead of pinning all your hopes on converting that one prospect, identify other potential buyers at the account for placement in a Warm Outbound sequence. This will allow you to multiply your odds of successful conversion and increase the likelihood that Opportunities begin at the best possible entry point for success.

## Revenue Returns of your Dreams

Building a world-class lead conversion engine requires high-quality leads and high-impact follow-up processes. Following the formula laid out in this article will result in both, and ensure your demand generation efforts deliver the revenue returns you've been dreaming of.