A beginners guide to inbound marketing for professional services firms

By Kirsten Hodgson

Inbound marketing and marketing automation are two of the latest buzzwords in the marketing community and for good reason. Done effectively, and used together, they can help you:

- get on the radars of more of your ideal prospects and ensure you stay there until they are ready to buy your services
- keep your existing clients engaged via segmented client-only content.

While some professional services firms are using these techniques, they're often used on specific campaigns rather than holistically. That makes sense because you have to start somewhere but if you REALLY want to make inbound marketing (and associated automation) work for you it's a good idea to map out your content against the buyer journey and link things up so that you can move people through from leads to clients and from satisfied clients to delighted clients.

There are huge opportunities for you and your firm to much more easily achieve your business development goals by applying inbound techniques – here's how to go about it:

What is inbound marketing?

"Inbound marketing refers to marketing activities that bring visitors in, rather than marketers having to go out to get prospects' attention. Inbound marketing earns the attention of customers, makes the company easy to be found, and draws customers to the website by producing interesting content." (Wikipedia definition)

Effective inbound marketing means that, when you've subscribed to a piece of content, you'll received automated and personalised communications based on this and future actions you take, which are designed to move you further through the buyer journey and to increase your engagement with the content provider.

How does inbound marketing work?

Essentially, inbound marketing is buyer-centric and, done well, **ensures prospective clients find your helpful information when looking for answers to their questions online**. It involves:

- creating content for each stage of the buyer journey,
- offering some of this for free,
- gating other 'follow up' or more in-depth pieces – i.e. offering it to people for free in return for them providing their name and email address (minimum), and
- linking this all together.

What are the various stages of the buyer journey?

1. *Awareness* is the beginning of their journey where they know they have a problem or opportunity but aren't sure exactly what it is.
2. *Consideration* is when they've given a name to their problem or opportunity and are exploring their options.
3. *Decision* is when they've decided on a particular course of action and are evaluating different providers.

Given that many of your ideal prospects will not yet be at the 'decision' stage, you need to create content for those at all stages of the buyers' journey (the mistake many of us make is that we only have content aimed at one or two stages of the buyers' journey and so miss the critical link – meaning we don't get the best return on our hard work).

How to go about it

Step 1:
Understand your ideal prospects' and your existing clients' needs. This comes from creating buyer personas – something I haven't heard of many professional services firms doing!

Hubspot, an inbound marketing and sales platform that helps companies attract visitors, convert leads, and close customers, describes them as follows:

"Buyer personas are fictional, generalized representations of your ideal customers. They help you understand your customers (and prospective customers) better, and make it easier for you to tailor content to the specific needs, behaviours, and concerns of different groups.

The strongest buyer personas are based on market research as well as on insights you gather from your actual customer base (through surveys, interviews, etc.)"

Step 2:

Brainstorm content they'll likely be looking for at each stage of the buyer's journey (use long-tail keyword research to help you).

Step 3:

It's then a case of mapping the content and creating it – thinking about how you'll move people through their journey as they go. For example, someone's relationship has gone sour and they're looking at leaving their partner but still haven't decided to do so – at this stage they might be looking for info about how to get out of a relationship, things to consider before leaving, counselling and so on – they probably won't be looking for a divorce lawyer just yet – but a divorce lawyer could put together info that will help them here in order to position him/herself for if/when the person is ready to speak to a lawyer.

The lawyer could publish a blog post on how to get out of a relationship and then, at the bottom of that post, invite people to download an eBook '20 things to consider before leaving your partner'. The lawyer could then set up a series of autoresponders providing additional tips, inviting people to access other content they're likely to be looking for at this point such as 'How to ensure you don't lose out financially if you leave your partner'. The lawyer could also invite people to meet with them to discuss their situation and find out their options.

As the person moves through their journey, the types of content the lawyer would publish would change too. Of course it would all be available online so that those searching for content of this nature could easily find it.

You'd then apply the same principles to creating content for your existing clients. Doing so could really assist your other cross-selling initiatives. For example, you might identify a group of clients who would benefit from a mini-course, which you could then deliver in easy-to-digest weekly segments.

Other necessities:

Having great landing pages and effective autoresponders sitting behind the downloads will be key – as will having a good CRM that allows you to categorise people/prospects/clients according to the actions they take, enabling you to personalise communications beyond simply using their name!

This means that when someone has downloaded a piece of content they've found useful, you can ensure they receive a follow-up email that further explores the topic they're interested in – rather than sending them completely unrelated info.

It's also critical to monitor how each component is performing and to test the impact of making changes. For example, if a lot of people are clicking through to your landing page but aren't then taking action, then something on that landing page isn't working. Try changing one component at a time and seeing if that improves things – such as changing the heading and, if that doesn't work, changing the image, the colour of the sign-up button etc. The key thing is to only change one thing at a time so that you can pinpoint what works. This goes for each part of your inbound process – work out which part(s) isn't working as well as you'd like it to and address it by testing alternatives.

Bottom line: the way people do business has changed and we need to adapt too.

Yes referrals are still incredibly important but we need to look for ways to DEMONSTRATE our firm/team's expertise and build relationships with people BEFORE they've made the decision to call us (or one of our competitors).

A well-thought out inbound marketing strategy will help drive more of your ideal prospects to your firm and, because much of the process is automated, you can set it up and have it working for you behind the scenes while you focus on other things.

If you want to learn more about inbound marketing or improve the effectiveness of your approach, I recommend you sign up to Hubspot's free inbound marketing course and certification.