You've all heard the statistics that show lead nurturing is harder than it looks. In fact, Marketing Sherpa research found that 64% of Sales and Marketing executives were dissatisfied with the results derived from their nurturing programs. Quite possibly, this is because it's also been found that as many as 79% of marketing leads never become sales opportunities. The nature of how buyers buy has changed and unless marketing and sales changes along with them, these outcomes are unlikely to improve.

Some of the factors affecting the sales process include longer buying cycles, unprecedented information availability and delaying conversations with sales until the end of the decision process. Efforts to push buyers faster than they're ready to move don't work and show a focus on quantity over quality.

Nurturing programs are designed to mitigate the risk of driving your prospects away by aligning your content and communications with their needs across their buying cycle. Nurturing is based upon building a trusted dialogue with prospects who want to hear from you…one step at a time.

At the recent Sales 2.0 Conference in Chicago, it was stated that 72% of nurturing falls under the responsibility of the sales department. This means that salespeople need to rethink how they're approaching these early-stage relationships to build engagement across the entire buying process—at the buyer's pace.

The Nurturing Cycle

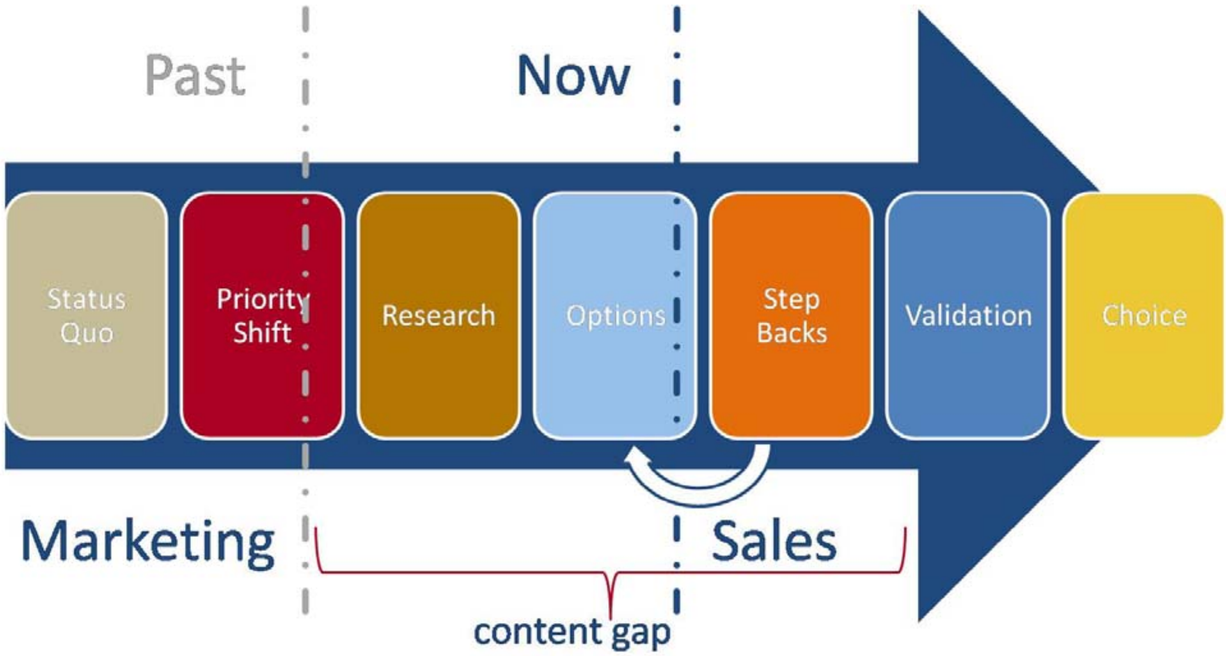
Nurturing is different than lead generation as it begins after you've received permission to contact the person. The process is based on keeping their attention by setting and delivering on expectations that move prospects forward based on need and interest. By increasing the relevance and value of the content provided during nurturing, you'll also be increasing your prospects' anticipation in hearing from you. And, that's just where you want them to be.

When prospects are looking forward to hearing more from you because you've become a trusted resource for the knowledge and insights they need to solve a specific problem, it's natural for them to make progress in their buying process. As they take next steps—interacting with your content and communications—you'll see patterns of behavior develop that help you pinpoint exactly when it's the right time to escalate the sales conversation.

In this guide, you'll learn how to create a nurturing program in parallel with the way a prospect moves throughout their buying process. I'll demonstrate how to get to know your buyers better and develop a content plan to engage them at each stage of a considered purchase decision. You'll learn how to create a framework for nurturing program execution and how to measure the results of your efforts.

The benefits of nurturing well are many. Research is revealing that nurturing drives outcomes including increasing pipeline by double digit percentages, increased revenues per sale and shortening sales cycles, to name but a few. Embracing best practices in your nurturing programs has definite payoff potential.

The Buying Process



The buying process, pictured above, shows the gap between how companies have communicated with their prospects in the past and how much farther into that process nurturing must reach before sales activities are generally requested or agreed to by buyers. The Web has jumped squarely in between your sales team and your customers, delaying conversations and even eliminating the need for many of the early-stage discussions that used to establish 1-to-1 relationships from the start.

What this reality requires is that we get smarter about delivering the information our prospects need to build the confidence to make an informed decision through digital means. You'll notice that in the figure above the buying process has been divided into seven stages. Most diagrams only include three or four stages, but to get closer to your prospects and connect more often with the right information at the right time, it helps to get more granular about how you evaluate the way your customers buy from you.

The 7 Stages of the Buying Process:

Status Quo: Prospects have not yet recognized the problem as one they need to solve.

Priority: The problem has been recognized but prospects are unsure which route is best for solution.

Research: Prospects are now actively engaged in learning what they need to know, building confidence.

Options: Learning about solution sets that will best fit immediate and future needs is underway.

Step Backs: Something has arisen that's made the prospect return to an earlier stage to verify beliefs.

Validation: You're on the short list and now the prospect wants to know if you can deliver on promises.

Choice: The decision to buy must move from intent to reality with the purchase and implementation.

Traversing the seven stages of the buying process in step with your prospects requires that you show, instead of tell. You must educate them about what they need to know, apply your company's unique expertise in addition to your product and prove you walk your talk through the sharing of evidence. This does not mean you rush out and create content that includes the kitchen sink. Instead, you need to match your content to their needs at each stage, telling the story over time as prospects are ready to learn more.

Buyer Stage Q & A

Moving from the bottom upward, you'll see an example of the types of questions buyers will ask as they move through each stage of their buying process. In addition to your lead definition, answering these questions (and others like them) will show you just how to construct the storyline that will engage your prospects over time. In fact, each answer you come up with in response will show you the topics and types of content necessary to create a well-structured nurturing program.

It's imperative to make sure you step into your customers' shoes when you do so. What you think is likely not equivalent to their mindset. You already know too much about solving the problem. To answer these questions effectively, you'll need to simplify what you know to make it easier for your prospects to grasp the ideas. The point is to base your nurturing program on a problem-to-solution scenario you know your customers are grappling with and set out to become the trusted resource for solving it.

Remember that it's likely your prospect is dealing with a problem beyond their core competency—or the decision as to how to handle it would already be made. When you answer these questions, do so for each stakeholder who can influence the decision and look at the problem from their perspective.

Salespeople often focus only on the decision maker who signs the checks, but without consensus from each person on the buying committee, a decision in your favor is unlikely. Depending on your reach within your prospective customer companies, this may mean you need to create several nurturing tracks to increase relevance for influencer roles, or you'll need to consider how to help your prospects initiate the conversations themselves to persuade the influencers that your company is the best choice.

Create a Style Baseline

Because sales cycles are lengthening, this means that to nurture across the buying cycle will require the development of consistent content over time. The best way to ensure each content resource is telling an extension to the last touch point in the storyline is to create a style baseline. A style baseline serves as a cheat sheet to ensure your content doesn't slip back into the company-focused messaging that's second nature for all of us.

A simple example of a style baseline is shown to the right. You'll notice that it includes a reminder to focus on the buyer by making them the subject of the content. The difference you're aiming for is to close the distance between your buyers and your content. Content that references the company doesn't involve your prospects, but holds them at arm's length. However, when content is developed around their perspective, prospects become invested and can visualize themselves playing an active role in your story.

A Style Baseline Includes

Element	Use	Don't Use
Subject	You, CIO, IT, etc.	Us, We, Our, Company
Problem	Words prospects use, focus on internal biz challenges & benefit value.	Product names or external benefits that don't directly impact their business.
Keywords	Long-tail search terms and phrases	Jargon or buzz words innovative, leading, etc.
Value	reduce or increase X	Intangibles – improve effectiveness
Proof	Customer success examples	Stand-alone statistics about feeds and speeds

The style baseline shows you which words and phrases to use in comparison to the ones you want to avoid. This tool comes in very handy when you're working with several different nurturing programs at the same time to help you keep your content on track.

One of the most important things that can differentiate your company's content from competitors is to eliminate the use of jargon, buzz words and intangibles. If you're tempted to use the phrase "improve effectiveness" for example, go ahead, but make sure you also define exactly what the context is. Apply the concept to a concrete example that simplifies the effort your prospects have to expend to understand the real meaning. Ambiguous takeaways don't leave a lasting impression. But equating effectiveness to processing 25% more orders per hour has impact that will be remembered. Just make sure the context matches your buyers' frame of reference.

When it comes time to show proof, be careful of those wonderful statistics all companies like to use. "Customer X achieved ROI within 2 months of implementation" can mean a lot of different things. If the goal is to encourage consensus, make sure you give your prospects the insights they need to turn your impressive statistics into conversations that have recognizable and relatable impact to the members of the buying committee. The impact is twofold: increasing interest and shortening the time to sales.

Develop a Content Plan

There are three types of content most effective in nurturing programs: education, expertise and evidence. If you've done the Buyer Q & A, you'll already have an idea of how these content types will fit into your content development plan.

Education: Your prospects likely have a lot to learn before they can make a considered purchase decision. Education is essential in the early stages of the buying process. Focus on revealing why the issue must be dealt with, industry trends driving the solution of the problem and what types of setbacks to their business objectives could result if they choose to put off addressing the need.

Expertise: It's likely that another similar product is easily available. Since most products are commodities—especially true from your prospects' perspective—it's imperative to show what difference your company's *secret sauce* will bring to their project. Buyers are looking for vendors that are partners who deliver a value add in addition to the capabilities their products and solutions bring. Showcase your expertise through thought leadership and become the coach they rely on to get the results they're charged to deliver.

Evidence: No matter how good your product offerings sound, it's unlikely that your buyers will just take your word for it. You need to present the proof that your company delivers on promises. Since customer success stories are also a valid sales tool, consider creating two versions. The first version is usually the two-page story that highlights your customer's company, problem and the solution. The late-stage success story should include more detail about the project—issues not apparent at the start, obstacles overcome during implementation, overlap discoveries that impact other departments, and more, that will help your prospects see that your expertise is truly an added value they won't get if they buy from your competitors. Analyst reports and media mentions are also worthy evidence that your company can be relied upon to be there when the rubber hits the road.

Map Content to Buying Process

As you roll out your nurturing program over time, you'll see there's a flow to telling your buyers a story that keeps them engaged and helps them to buy.

Transitioning a lead to a sales opportunity is also reliant on how your buyers view their future once their problem has been solved after your product has been implemented. Set them up to see how they're now prepared to conquer future needs by choosing your company to solve their existing ones.

Sample Content Plan

Drip	Description	Type/Format	Stage
1	Discuss the Problem– Pros and Cons of Solving	Education Article	Status Quo
2	Business Value of Proactive Change – Industry Trends	Education Article	Status Quo
3	Talk with Industry Expert about the business impact of the issue – reasons to solve	Education Webinar or Video	Priority
4	Transcript of Webinar with addition of your expertise	Expertise White Paper	Priority
5	Best Practice approach to addressing the issue	Expertise How-to-Guide	Research
6	Approaches from #5 in action – business value	Evidence Case Study	Options

The drawback to executing nurturing programs over the long term is often due to the amount of content needed. However, if research is right that it now takes an average of 12 touches to gain attention, then it stands to follow that nurturing should be the new imperative for engagement.

The graphic to the left depicts a simple content plan for the first stages of a nurturing program.

What's important to grasp is that the plan is designed to make content development easier. The very nature of telling a story over time means that the same research conducted to create one content resource will often provide what you need for some of the others. The first two "drips" or touches build momentum as standalones, but the next four are all connected. You can see that the same thread or focus is used throughout as the story builds over time.

Drip 3 is a webinar with an industry expert or analyst about the business impact of the issue.

Drip 4 takes the transcript from that webinar and expands it to include your company's expertise.

Drip 5 takes your expertise and expands those insights into a How-to guide format.

Drip 6 takes the approach from the How-to guide and applies it to a customer story in execution.

Simply stated, once the webinar is in the can, the next three resources can be created all at once based on your company's methodology and existing customers. If you wanted to take it farther, you can likely pull standalone articles from the white paper and several blog posts from the How-to guide.

Invite Interactions

Beyond developing your themes and topics for nurturing content, you must never lose sight of the fact that interactions are what transition prospects to the next stages of their buying process. Each content piece needs to be designed to create an interactive experience with your prospects. This means you want to encourage their involvement. In the beginning this means to get them to click on your links and follow the story you're sharing. Over time, the interactions should increase in effort expended. Examples are opting in for a download, registering for a webinar and watching a video on the topic to learn more.

The willingness of prospects to interact with you and share more information about themselves and their level of interest is a direct result of their interpretation of your content's value and relevance.

Measure Prospect Engagement

	Opens	Email Clicks	Other Web	Related Content	Inter-active
Email 1	15%	50	12	4	1
Email 2	18%	62	20	11	4
Email 3	22%	73	37	22	9

Expand Interest & Value

Get Beyond Standard Metrics

Because nurturing across the buying cycle is a long-term proposition that likely won't match up to the quarterly focus on actual closed sales, you need to measure improvements to engagement.

Nurturing programs are created to continuously pull attention back to your company and extend interest across buying cycles. This means that both interactive opportunities and metrics must evolve beyond those that have been standard in the past. Only monitoring for opens and click-throughs related to an email send won't get you there. In fact, if you're only measuring based on the email send, then you'll have very little idea of the overall interest level of your prospects. If you're relying solely on your nurturing emails to drive qualified leads, it will take much longer than it should.

When your prospects click on the link in your email and then view other web pages, that's a good sign they're interested in learning more. If you've made it easy for them to click on other links to related content, you can evaluate their urgency in relation to the issue. Nice to know means they read and leave. Intent upon solving the problem means they proactively try to learn what they need to know.

Because you're designing your nurturing touches to inspire interactive responses from your prospect, measuring those goals against their behavior will help you tune your calls to action as well as evaluate those that work the best so you can create more of them. Never forget that your prospects' willingness to interact with your company is an indication of your credibility and the trust level you've created.

Over time, as you evaluate which interactions lead to sales conversations—and when they happen in over the course of your nurturing programs—you can evolve your programs to do so faster and better, resulting in added pipeline that converts into customers reliably.

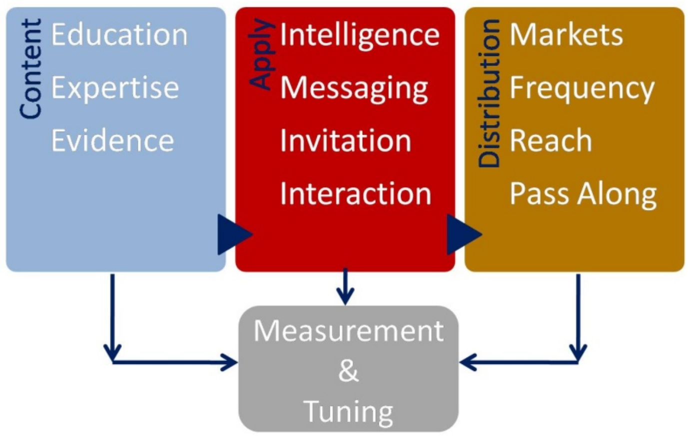
Measure Sales Opportunities

The end goal of nurturing is, of course, sales conversions. Measuring conversion points is critical to creating consistent pipeline growth. In the graphic to the right, it may seem counterintuitive to list disqualified leads, but this step is critical to ensuring your salespeople stay focused on prospects who have the highest potential to buy. The better you get at disqualifying leads, the better you will get at qualifying the ones most likely to buy. Notice the difference across all categories of transfer over time as you get closer to your buyers.

Description:	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3
Leads Disqualified	5	16	36
MQL hand offs to sales	20	32	58
Sales Accepted	7	12	45
Returned to Nurturing	13	20	13
Marketing Driven Sales	0	1	5

Nurturing Framework

Designing a nurturing program to drive sales requires a repeatable, consistent framework to help you ensure your strategy is aligned with your tactics for execution. All of the steps we've covered during this guide result in the framework you see below.



Content is the foundation of your nurturing program as applied to your prospects' perspective, needs and priorities. You'll need each of the content types to create a nurturing program that addresses the right-time, right-information needs of your prospects across their buying process.

The application of messaging and interactive invitations based on the intelligence you learn about your prospects' behaviors in response helps to evolve your nurturing programs over time.

Distribution considerations include segmentation and frequency. Pay strict attention to waning attention spans and adjust accordingly so as not to fatigue your leads. Their other responsibilities don't evaporate just because they have a new problem to solve. In fact, their roles may just get more demanding depending upon the type of problem they're encountering.

Focus on expanding your reach within your target prospect companies to increase your opportunity to influence all the stakeholders on the buying committee. If that's not possible, design your content to provide pass-along value by enabling conversations about the reasons the problem must be solved and the impact of your value in doing so. Another method to create pass along is to generate content specifically for other stakeholders and then invite your leads to forward the information along.

The most important thing you can do is measure your efforts and apply what you learn to improve your nurturing programs. This not only includes analytic insights but feedback from your salespeople who are face-to-face with the prospects you've put them in conversation with.

Nurturing programs are an ongoing, holistic process that must evolve over time in step with the changes to your prospects' needs and wants. Markets shift faster than ever before. The days of "set it and forget it" communication programs are over. But that doesn't mean companies can't compete effectively for the attention of new customers. Best-practice execution of nurturing programs provides access to the buying process that's now being controlled by your prospective customers. This coveted access powers the necessary growth in engagement to consistently deliver impressive increases in customer acquisition and revenues.

About the Author

B2B marketing strategist Ardath Albee helps companies increase their marketing effectiveness by generating more and better leads for their sales organization. She helps them develop contagious content and e-marketing strategies that catch the attention of website visitors and target markets, propelling them through the buying cycle until they are "sales ready."

Ardath has a unique ability to develop content strategies that work hand-in-glove with overall corporate and product positioning to deliver hard hitting e-marketing programs and tools that compel customers to buy. Her blog posts are referred to often by other industry leaders and her articles are syndicated by The Customer Collective, Alltop and Junta 42, and have been published in university ezines, CRM Today, Selling Power, Rain Today Special Reports, Marketing Profs e-newsletters and Enterprise CRM News.

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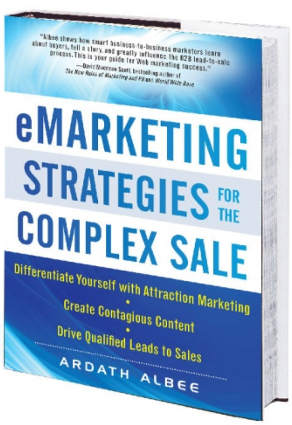

Visit the Book Website: http://www.emarketingstrategiesbook.com to download the first two chapters.

Read an early review of *eMarketing Strategies for the Complex Sale*:

"It used to be so darned easy: Do a few tradeshows, maybe publish a white paper or two, and have the salespeople follow-up. But the always on, YouTube-infested, Twitter-centric world makes the B2B sale much more complex today. Ardath Albee shows how smart business-to-business marketers learn about buyers, tell a story, and greatly influence the B2B lead-to-sale process, driving significant new business as a result. If you manage a complex sales process, stop making excuses! eMarketing Strategies for the Complex Sale *is your guide for Web marketing success."*

- David Meerman Scott, bestselling author of *The New Rules of Marketing & PR* and *World Wide Rave*