

Inbound Marketing Basics for Accounting Firms

By Sarah Johnson

Imagine for a moment that you are at your partner meeting. You have had a great year. Business development is finally a priority and your people are involved and active in the process, but you are still missing your growth goals. What gives?

If you are like many firms, at some point you will hit a roadblock in your growth. Individual partner participation in business development won't be enough to reach and sustain your growth goals.

Unless you are large enough to have partners who can shed client work and focus solely on business development, your growth will be limited based on your capacity. Individual selling is important, but there is only so much time each person has to identify, build, and pursue opportunities—even if those opportunities are coming from referrals.

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Why inbound marketing?

Sustaining growth rates requires more than just getting partners involved in business development. It also requires a strong inbound marketing strategy that can help the firm develop more opportunities than it would have the time to develop otherwise.

A solid inbound marketing strategy will help you get in front of more potential buyers of your services than networking and referral generation could do alone. It will also help you nurture those potential buyers until they are ready to actually buy. It keeps you visible, helps to qualify buyers, and allows you to focus your time more productively in the sales process.

How inbound marketing works

Inbound marketing can seem overwhelming and a little scary. However, just like business development

or an audit, there are some clearly defined steps and a process:

- create/maintain a powerful website;
- create content;
- generate traffic;
- convert traffic to leads; and
- convert leads to sales.

Create/maintain a powerful website. Your website is critical in inbound marketing. It is a centralized hub for the rest of your marketing and business development efforts. You need to maintain a website that is designed and built for search engine visibility. It needs to be professional and *must be* mobile-

and tablet-friendly. You also need a website that can be maintained easily yourself. Updates to content are not enough. You (or your marketing department) need to be able to include features, such as adding graphics to your blog, adding “calls-to-action,” or creating additional pages.

Create content. If you are not creating your own content, you need to start. Inbound marketing in professional services needs some sort of content. A landing page with a “contact us” form will not cut it. How you build that content is up to you. Some of the most common forms of content include:

- blogs;
- whitepapers;
- articles;
- guides; and
- survey results.

The most successful inbound marketers clearly tie their content strategy to key buying triggers. These are the issues that cause someone to begin to look for a solution. For example, people who feel they are paying too much in taxes may also feel they are *not* getting the best advice. Therefore, they may research ways to lower their taxes and come across an article or other content on tax credits.

Generate traffic. Once you have developed your content, you need to generate traffic. After all, people can't buy what they don't know exists. Today, many inbound marketing strategies are rooted in digital channels. These might include search engines (organic search results through search engine optimization or paid search), social media, and email marketing.

However, we find that CPA firms should also consider additional channels to generate traffic. This might include referral-source channels, writing for external blogs and print publications, and leveraging existing events you may already sponsor, such as a roundtable.

Generating traffic is all about messaging and visibility. The more channels you use to increase your visibility, the more potential traffic you will generate. Just remember that messaging does need to be tailored appropriately to the channel and audience.

Convert traffic to leads. The next critical step to supercharging your business development is to convert your traffic to leads. This is one of the most common mistakes in marketing. Marketing generates high visibility and brand awareness, but fails to convert this traffic to leads.

Converting traffic for an inbound marketing strategy requires a couple of items. First, you need to have landing pages to give visitors the specific information they are seeking, based on the keywords or links they used to arrive at your page. Second, that landing page must ask them to do something specific (*e.g.*, download or view a piece of content, click to the next page, or request a meeting or quote) and must be relevant to their current stage of the buying process.

Convert leads to sales. Once potential buyers are in buying mode, they enter the sales process. The buying mode can often be identified when the potential buyer accepts

an offer to schedule a meeting, requests a proposal (not the same as an RFP), signs up for a trial, or views a demo.

This is typically the stage where partners get involved to qualify and nurture the prospect. However, we find that people who are at this stage are often ready to purchase now and aren't just price shopping. This can mean a shorter sales cycle.

The process doesn't stop here, and it is by no means as linear as we have presented it. In fact, the first few steps can often be a bit more cyclical. Prospective buyers move through the process at different speeds, meaning you need content and a system that can continue to nurture these buyers.

Just like your audit or tax return, there is software that makes inbound marketing easier. It allows you to automate these processes and gives you the analytics to measure your results. Measurement at each stage will give you key indicators as to whether you are on track with your inbound marketing program.

Getting started with inbound marketing

Want to get started with inbound marketing? Here are some questions you can ask to gauge your readiness:

- Does your website meet most or all of the requirements mentioned above?
- Is a significant portion of your website traffic coming from referrals and search engines?
- Have you built permission-based marketing lists?
- Are you currently developing your own content?

If you answered "yes" to all of these questions, you are most likely ready to begin using inbound marketing. If you answered "no" to any of these questions or aren't sure how to evaluate these, you have more work to do.

About the Author: As the Chief Growth Strategist with Inovautus, Sarah Johnson helps CPA firms identify and implement strategies to help them grow their firms and distinguish themselves in the marketplace. Connect with Sarah to learn more and obtain a free assessment of your inbound marketing potential at 773-208-7170, sjohnson@inovautus.com, or www.linkedin.com/in/sjohnson. ✦

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