

# UNDERSTANDING INBOUND MARKETING:

Telling Stories People Want to Hear

*By Allan Gates*



**BONFIRE**

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# Boom. The web killed marketing.

The web made everything different.

That's no secret. The Internet – particularly Web 2.0 and social media – have fundamentally reshaped the way people interact with each other and with brands and institutions.

That has led to wrenching changes for marketers. How do we best reach people who no longer watch TV or read newspapers? How do we get people to pay attention to our product or service when they can watch, read or listen to whatever they want, whenever they want it? How do we market in this scary new world?

The harsh truth is that you don't do it the old ways anymore. Or at least you don't if you want to succeed. In today's context, most traditional advertising comes across as vacuous, smarmy, self-indulgent noise. No one cares. And even if they did, they aren't paying attention.

The changes resulting from the Internet are not new anymore. They are now ingrained in our way of life. A generation has grown up knowing nothing but the world of the web. Social media will change, but it's not going away. Mobile access to information is not going away. The explosion of information available to the average Internet user is not going away. This is the new normal.

That's scary stuff for any marketing or communications professional trying to navigate the roiling waters. Everything is moving, today's hot platform is tomorrow's joke (remember Ello's 15 minutes of fame?). The old rules are gone, and the new ones are uncertain.

So take pity on a marketer when they say, "What do I do now?"

There is no one simple answer to this question. There are lots of things you *can* do. Some of them might even work. But for many businesses, inbound marketing is proving to be a very successful strategy, one that uses the disruptions in communication channels to capture and engage customers. Inbound marketing, working hand in hand with social media, has become a cornerstone of sales and marketing efforts for B2C and B2B companies around the world.

But what does that mean? And how do I do it?

Defined simply, inbound marketing creates online content that people actually want to consume - stories, images, videos and more. You draw them to you to convey a message and incent behavior.

This book will introduce the concepts of inbound marketing and discuss how you can use it as part – even a key part – of your marketing program, no matter your business. This is a playbook – a pragmatic approach to understanding the changing face of marketing and using inbound marketing to help your brand and business succeed.

## From Interruption to Attention

Don Draper had it easy.

A decade or two ago, marketing used to be kind of simple, at least in execution. You created an ad campaign, tested it with a sample of your audience, ran it in a limited number of media channels, and waited for the resulting sales lift. Marketers thought in terms of campaigns that ran for months or longer. With enough money, brand awareness, and often sales, could easily be bought.

This was a time of scarce content and abundant attention. The average person consumed a handful of media – read a local newspaper, chose from a few radio stations, and watched maybe a dozen TV stations with any regularity. Thursday night was “must see TV” as millions of people huddled around their TVs at the same time to watch Friends or Seinfeld, and an advertiser could reach a massive share of their audience with a 30-second spot.

This was the **interruption** model of advertising. Advertisers interrupted the content people actually wanted to consume with ads. A certain percentage of those interrupted paid attention, and a smaller percentage still took action. But at scale, with millions of viewers, the interruption model worked reasonably well from the 1950s until the new Millennium.

That’s all gone now.

Today we live in an era of abundant content and scarce attention. The average person – tethered to their smartphone, tablet, laptop or web-based TV, has easy access to an almost unlimited world of content.

They choose what to consume, and when to consume it. Readership of daily newspapers has plummeted. The idea of watching the same TV show at the same time seems archaic to the Netflix generation. They decide when to watch something, not a broadcaster. These same people torrent and PVR content – do you think they are stopping to watch the commercials?

That's created a world of hurt for marketers.

Other than special events like the Oscars or the Super Bowl, the big audience in the same place at the same time is now history. Now marketers must try to reach their audience through countless channels – in addition to the old media standbys of print, radio, out of home and TV, marketers must also embrace the web, social media and new experiential techniques.

The change has been rapid. It's no surprise that many are struggling to catch up.

The old marketing aphorism "I'm wasting half my advertising budget, I just don't know which half" has never seemed more

Content is Abundant.  
Attention is Scarce.

relevant. Yet many marketers continue banging away at the old ways of doing things. They run print ads that no one notices, they buy TV ads based on GRPs and assume people are watching and responding to their ads. They buy display ads on websites even when no one is clicking. They continue to apply the old ways of doing things to the new realities.

Of course, they are failing while they do it.

Today marketers and communicators are dealing with an entirely transformed media landscape. Facebook is only a decade old, yet already more than a billion (!) people regularly use it. Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest are regularly used by hundreds of millions of people.

Today we are living in the **attention** era of marketing and communicating. This new universe is all about choice. As a consumer, you pick the content you want to engage in, when you want to engage with it. Almost everything happens asynchronously. And much content is shared peer to peer.

So any successful marketer needs to earn the attention of her or his audience. That means creating content that is as interesting – or even more interesting than the content they normally consume.

While there is still a place for traditional advertising in the marketing mix, successful brands know they need to do more than boring, predictable marketing.

Instead brands now have two fundamental choices: to **inform** or to **entertain**.

For some brands, they need to be credible partners, thought leaders in their space. Think accountants, technology companies, lawyers and more.

These brands become useful to their customers and prospects. They inform their audience, providing timely, relevant content that aids in understanding complicated or changing issues. This is often done through a corporate blog, guest posts on other blogs, or commentary in media – all leveraged through social media channels to drive views and engagement.

Two Choices:  
Inform or Entertain.

On the consumer facing side, many brands choose to entertain, seeking to attract consumers through fun and engaging content, competing on the same playing field as broadcasters or publishers. This content tends to be fun or emotive – videos, photos, inspirational stories.

## Proof Point – Red Bull Builds A Brand With Content

Red Bull created the “energy drink” category. From the start they focused on building an extraordinarily successful brand. That was driven largely by entertaining content creation aimed at its niche audiences.

Red Bull launched its Red Bull Media House in 2007. This has gone beyond a marketing arm of the company into a for-profit enterprise in its own right. It produces and syndicates its own content, delivered online and in established broadcast channels. It even has its own channel on Apple TV.



*A Big Leap – Red Bull Stratos*

Consider Red Bull's almost too-extreme-to-believe "world's highest skydive." In 2013, Felix Baumgartner leapt from a capsule perched 24 miles above the Earth's surface with only a parachute to break his fall. As he plummeted toward earth, Baumgartner reached speeds above Mach 1, becoming the first human to break the sound barrier without any kind of engine. He landed, successfully, in the New Mexico desert.

The world watched him drop to earth. The stunt dominated social media, YouTube and news media. The investment of \$30 million (a lot, to be sure, but only ten percent of the brand's annual sports marketing budget) drove extraordinary awareness.

When the Idea of the Brand Becomes More Important than the Product.

It held extraordinary risk too. No human had ever gone as high or as fast. There was the very real possibility that Baumgartner would have augged into the desert floor, dying as the cameras rolled. It was a risk they were willing to take (as was Baumgartner, for that matter), something rare in the normally risk-averse world of global brands.

Red Bull Media House is much more than one-off events like Red Bull Stratos. It produces events, develops broadcast and web content, and even creates entirely new sports like its downhill skating "Crashed Ice" series, a cross between roller derby and downhill skiing done on ice skates in urban cores.

This steady stream of content draws people to the Red Bull brand. In the process, they've made the idea of the Red Bull brand more important than the product itself. The subcultures Red Bull embraces become entwined with the brand itself, making the consumption of the product (and the content) a personal badge of honor and signifier of belonging to this community.

## We Are The Media



*A still from singer Amanda Palmer's successful Kickstarter video*

Every brand today has the potential to be a publisher and a broadcaster.

In the pre-Web 2.0 era, brands were constrained by the limitations of the channels available to them. There were two ways to reach your audience – “paid media”, generally advertising in print, out of home, radio or TV, and “earned media”, or coverage by journalists in print or on TV and radio.

Paid media was accessible but costly. It was all about repetition, hitting people with the same message over and over again until it sunk in, with a common rule of thumb claiming a person had to be exposed to a marketing message at least 7 times before it was absorbed. That made advertising prohibitively expensive for small businesses, yet many still ended up wasting money on one-offs or a handful of ads that yielded no results. (In fact, many still do.)

A bigger brand could invest in a heavy advertising campaign, particularly on TV, that delivered the required frequency. However, as the media universe expanded, the dominance of TV advertising began to erode. Think about the millions of dollars invested in Super Bowl TV spots each year. A 30-second spot cost \$4.5 million in 2015 when the New England Patriots pulled off (another) amazing come from behind win. That works out to \$150,000 per second. What's more, most high-end commercials cost millions to produce.

That's a major investment. Now try to remember more than one or two ads from the last few Super Bowls...drawing a blank? Exactly.

Advertising is kind of like Times Square in New York City – an endless battle for attention, always getting bigger and louder. But when everyone is screaming, it is hard to hear what is being said.

Earned media through public relations efforts was (and continues to be) very effective in building brands. It has more value than advertising because it is offered through a more objective prism than an ad. But trying to capture earned media comes with its own set of risks. Media coverage is hard to get, never predictable and sometimes goes sideways, ending up with a brand being part of an unflattering story.

Today things are different.



*Advertising: Everyone is screaming.*

Brands now have “owned channels” that can work hand in hand with “earned” and “paid” approaches to marketing. Brands have the same potential to reach their audience as any media outlet. The web and social media have stripped away the barriers and the intermediaries. Your Twitter account has the same potential audience as @NYTimes, and your web site could earn as many views as BuzzFeed.

That is the great democratizing hope of the web. We go past the gatekeepers. We have the power. Or as the singer Amanda Palmer says, “We are the media.”

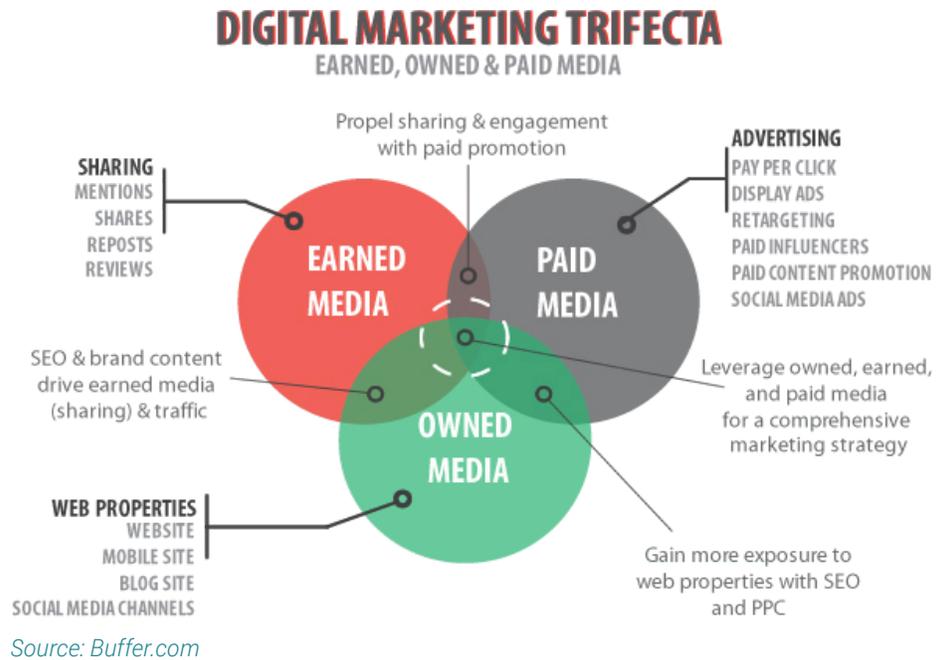
That's all true in theory. And we see the power of this technology over and over, from viral campaigns to revolutions in the streets.

Your "owned" channels include your web site, your blog (corporate and personal), your mobile app, your YouTube or Vimeo channels, and your Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram accounts. Those are all broadcasting or publishing platforms, easy ways to share your story with an audience.

**Using Owned Channels.**

Still, most business-owned channels like social feeds and web sites are probably not racking up millions of views every day. Many sit idle, lonely and unloved. That's because most brands don't think like publishers or broadcasters. They play it safe, pumping out boring, predictable and often inane sales content on their web site or social feeds.

Then they wonder why it doesn't work.



# Being Useful With Inbound Marketing

Fortunately, the same platforms that have destroyed the old ways of marketing have created new ones. With the brand as broadcaster or publisher, they can open a direct line of communication with their customers by - let's say it again - being informative or entertaining.

This approach – using content to attract interest – is at the heart of inbound marketing. It brings people to you with content that interests them, rather than interrupting them with ads they don't want to see.

It's one of the most powerful approaches to marketing and sales that exists today.

Inbound marketing helps build meaningful connections with customers and prospects, nurturing opportunities and helping capture “warm leads” – people who already know about the business, and are ready to take the next step.

Using Content  
to Attract Interest.

Inbound marketing works throughout the sales cycle, helping drive awareness of the product or service, connecting with prospects and ultimately helping close deals. By being **useful**, prospects welcome the contact. This stands in sharp contrast to the annoyance level found with outbound marketing. Do you remember the last print ad or TV spot you found useful?

Inbound marketing is equal parts philosophy and methodology. It means no longer relying on the megaphone of advertising to reach people. Instead effective brands become a useful part of their customers' lives. Inbound marketing turns strangers into visitors, visitors into leads, leads into customers and customers into promoters.

Being Useful.

There are many benefits that come with a strong inbound marketing program:

- Increases brand awareness
- Supports two-way communication with audience
- Drives ongoing engagement
- Enhances reputation of staff as experts
- Increases trust levels with prospects
- Captures more leads
- Decreases need for “cold calls”
- Steady movement in sales funnel
- Delivers targeted offers
- Improves Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Delivers targeted emails
- Leverages other channels
- Repeatable
- Lower cost than outbound marketing

For many companies, inbound marketing works hand-in-hand with traditional marketing and public relations, but builds something better, something stronger, something that delivers real and measurable ROI.

## Inbound Tools

If you're a business, social enterprise, or government department, you have a number of inbound marketing tools at your disposal:

**Blog** – A corporate blog is often the publishing anchor for an inbound marketing program. Blog posts can be as short as a few hundred words or as long as a few thousand. Make them conversational and easy to consume – break up the text with subheads, bullets or call outs and be sure to include images or graphics whenever possible.

**White papers** – White papers are more detailed discussions of important industry issues, often with more technical explorations of a subject.

**Infographics** – These data visualizations are very popular and a powerful way to convey a lot of information with simplicity.

**Videos** – Videos can be an important part of an inbound mix. They can offer opinions, guidance or more. Many organizations shoot and edit videos in-house to keep costs down. And short video clips delivered through Instagram and Twitter’s Vine are other ways to cost-effectively make video a regular part of the inbound program. Video has also become important for Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

**eBooks** – eBooks (like this one) are a great way to inform your prospects and demonstrate thought leadership.

**Research Reports** – People love original data, so a research report that covers your industry sector will always be popular.

**Podcasts** – Podcasts have enjoyed a surprising renaissance in recent years. Many businesses and thought leaders use podcasts to educate audiences.

These tools don’t all have to be used. Pick the ones that make the most sense for your business or industry. Mix it up a bit – a steady stream of 400 word blog posts will probably get a little tiring for your audience.

## The Gift That Keeps On Giving

There is another bonus to developing a strong content program – it becomes a gift that keeps on giving.

As content is posted and shared it gets indexed by search engines like Google. If you’ve used a good keywords approach, your content will be easily “findable” when people perform searches on the topics you cover. If it’s useful, people will share it which will help boost your search results.

That means the life of your content goes well beyond the few days after you post it or share it on social media. It can live on for years on your site, capturing interest and new leads with no new effort on your behalf.

Content lives on  
in Search Results.

But much of this content helps create recurring engagements as they are indexed in search engines. Ultimately, there is very little stopping a brand from using content to earn a competitive advantage.

# The Call To Action

A key component of inbound marketing, as with traditional outbound marketing, is the “Call To Action.” It is important to encourage the prospect to take a specific step to begin the sales process.

This is a particularly powerful tool when it comes to inbound marketing. That’s because digital platforms allow brands to easily capture user data to engage with them directly.

A Call To Action (or CTA) is a vital part of the inbound marketing methodology. Each piece of content should encourage a next step where the lead provides contact information. It can be as simple as a name and email address.

So if you are offering an eBook, for example, then the prospect should be required to submit their email address in order to download it. An inbound marketing system like HubSpot will then establish this person as a lead and identify the source of the lead for future marketing efforts.

Some content, like a blog post, doesn’t always lend itself to this data capture. In this case, you would have a CTA like “Want to learn more? Set up a product demo.” or “Subscribe to our blog.” Again, if you are being useful, as opposed to intrusive, prospects are more likely to share their personal information because you are providing **something of value** in exchange for their time.

By capturing the interest of customers and prospects, you can move them through the sales cycle until they ultimately become your promoters.

HubSpot defines its process as Attract/Convert/Close/Delight – attracting strangers to visit your blog or site, turning them into leads, converting them into customers and finally, promoters for your brand.



Source: HubSpot

# Defining Personas

Is your audience the “general public?”

That’s a problem because there is no such thing as the general public. It’s lazy thinking. For most businesses, customers can be logically grouped into similar clusters based on shared characteristics or values. You need to speak to these clusters.

With inbound marketing, as with all marketing, it is important to define the “personas” of your audience. Who are you selling to? What do they believe? What values do they share? What motivates their behavior?

There’s no such thing as the general public.

Describing the background, behaviour and personality of your audience is how you establish personas. Personas can help guide your content by ensuring you focus on the topics and use the language and images that will resonate with your audience.

Things to consider in developing your audience personas are:

- Job – role and responsibilities
- Demographics – what is their age, gender, education and location?
- Challenges – what issues does your product or service help solve?
- Goals – what are her or his goals in work and life?
- Desires – what does she or he want?
- Story – who is this person, what makes them real?

You can give each persona a name and a personality “Susan the CEO” or “Bill the CMO” or “Helen in Purchasing” – whatever makes sense for your business.

Personas help you figure out how to create the best performing content. If Susan is the CEO, what topics will be of most interest to her – leadership? Finances? Strategy? Think about what helps her with her job, or her life? Produce your content to match her persona. Give her some mindless sales drivel and she won’t give you her time; give her something she will care about and she will pay attention.

Unless your business is very narrowly focused, you will probably have multiple personas. There will likely be commonalities across these personas, but also things that make them distinct. Don't fall victim to the "lowest common denominator" approach – you will end up with bland, indistinct content. Instead, make sure your content strategy speaks to your personas directly. Different pieces can address different personas.

## I'm In – Now What?

So, let's say you are sold on the power of inbound marketing to build relationships and drive sales. You are, right? Great, now what?

Leveraging owned media to build a business or advance a cause is about much more than having access to the channels. Everyone has access to the channels – that's the point.

There is no barrier to setting up a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram account. All you need is two minutes and an email address. Even a web site or blog is easy; setting up a generic WordPress site can be done while having a cup of coffee.

Content = Story.

There's no magic in the channel. The magic happens with your story.

Storytelling is an overused phrase these days in marketing, but it does capture an important truth. Your content is your story, and stories capture human interest.

A good story is vital to driving successful inbound marketing campaigns. But that good story isn't your sale price or your limited time offer. It is something more human, something that engages the emotions of your audience.

Good storytelling goes beyond the transaction of sharing a piece of content. It builds relationships between customers and brands. That relationship means customers will return to you again and again for more information or entertainment. In their curation of their content stream, you have been invited inside.

That creates another major advantage. By being a trusted source of relevant information, you create an audience that you actually “own.” These people have opted into what you offer because they get something out of it – something of value. Once you acquire that audience, you don’t need to reacquire them again for your next communication. They will visit your blog, or they will see your post in their social streams.

Compare that to “renting” your audience with traditional marketing. You don’t own that audience, you are merely renting it from the publisher or broadcaster. They didn’t come for your content, or to further your relationship with them. Instead you are interrupting what they came to consume with something they might find intrusive or annoying, if it registers at all.

Remember what it takes to capture interest. Your audience has an unlimited choice of content. You are not fighting just your industry competitor, you are fighting the relentless pace of Twitter, cute kids on Facebook, breaking news on CNN, cat videos on BuzzFeed and everything else the web has to offer.

What will you do to truly engage with your audience and build relationships? And become an owner, not a renter?

Many organizations fall in love with the idea of blogging and social media. They begin programs with great enthusiasm, and a couple of solid posts, but quickly it begins to lag. Soon the initial burst of enthusiasm wanes, and gaps between posts grow, before the effort fizzles away or simply limps along without delivering much in the way of results.

It’s often described as everyone’s job to contribute to the storytelling and content development. Of course, in many businesses if something is everyone’s job then it is really no one’s job. If you want it to be successful, a content program is a commitment – not a “corner of the desk” project that people jump on when they have time. That doesn’t work.

It also does not need to be a lot of “net new work” for an organization. As an inbound marketing program takes shape, it will eliminate the hours dedicated to other tasks. With more inbound, there will be less advertising, less traditional PR pitching and less cold calling.

# Finding Stories with Brand Journalism

Finding useful, informative or entertaining stories to share is the key to a successful inbound marketing program. If your content is boring and predictable, why would anyone click? Would you?

No one opts in to being bored. They come because the stories mean something to them, no matter what format the story is delivered in.

To capture and share those stories, you need to embrace the idea of brand journalism. That means acting like a reporter to find and tell stories that people will care about.

Don't Be Boring.

People don't care about sales talk – it's just blah, blah, blah. And they don't want to wade through reams of corporate or technical jargon to try to figure out your meaning.

Consider TV news. It tells highly effective stories in 90, 60 even 30-second chunks. It uses imagery and metaphor to convey complicated ideas more simply. It is inclusive – you don't need any kind of special knowledge or language to understand the nightly news. But you can still learn, and take away meaning, from your 60 seconds.

When reporters write for newspapers, they work hard to make the language simple and easily understood. In fact, a common journalistic rule of thumb is to write for someone with a grade 8 education level.

Simple is good. That doesn't mean you can't explore more complicated or even technical topics. But it does mean you need to carefully consider how you present them. So use more conversational language, don't be afraid to use contractions, and avoid those fancy 50-cent words that creep regularly into corporate speak.

And make sure your audience can't make a quick win on "buzzword bingo" when reading your content. Write like a human being. Real people don't "actionize" or "incentivize" or "proactively go forward." In fact they don't even "utilize" – they "use."

Simple language is always better – when you are done your first draft, go back through and see what words you can cut or replace with something shorter.

Keep it reasonably short. Remember that we all have limited attention spans these days. A blog post can be good at 600 words, though most people find the sweet spot is somewhere between 600 and 1000 words.

Simple and short doesn't mean it is easy. In fact, it can be harder. As Mark Twain once said, "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."

Still, you need to find those interesting ideas to drive your content. Some things to consider as you do:

- Where did you start? What's your "creation myth"?
- What makes your business or organization special?
- What problem do you solve for your customer?
- How can you help them use your product more effectively to do their job better?
- What are you experts at?
- What special knowledge or data do you have?
- What tips can you share that will help your customers?
- Where is your industry going?
- What trends are affecting your customers?
- What big change will happen next in your industry? Why?
- What is happening in your business?
- What are leaders in your industry doing?
- What trade shows are you attending?
- What's new in your product line?

These are all useful jumping off points. But brand journalism is a collaborative process.

Brainstorm ideas with your entire team. The reality is that an organization's best stories are not in marketing – they're woven throughout the fabric of the company. To get those stories, you need to speak to the product manager who understands where the industry is heading, the customer service rep who knows what makes customers happy (or mad), the salesperson who went above and beyond to close a deal, or the C-Suite exec who has a long-term vision.

Creating a  
Culture of Content

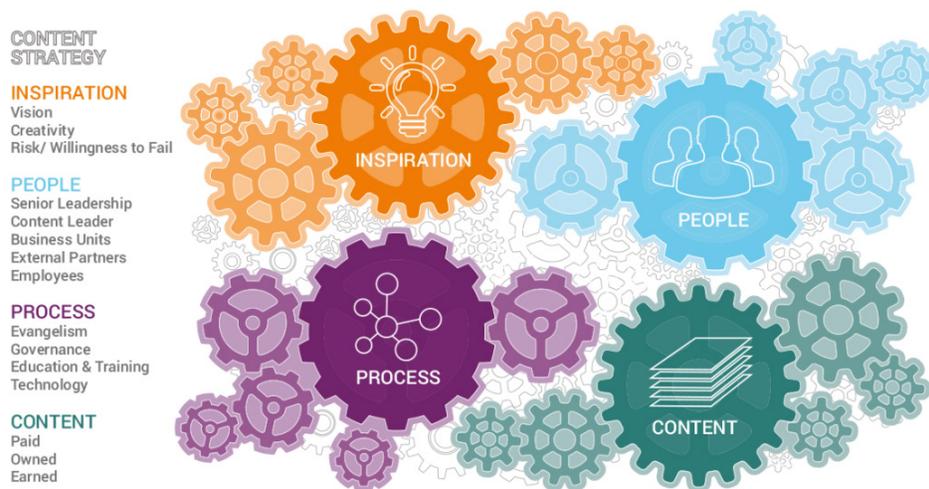
Those are good stories – compelling, interesting, provocative and human. That’s the true content of an organization. Your marketing team works best when it can draw this kind of authentic content from within the organization. Rely only on your marketers’ stories and you will inevitably end up with marketing-type posts – often too heavy on sales talk and hyperbole, and short on substance.

The goal is to create, in a phrase coined by the Altimeter Group, a Culture of Content. This exists when “the importance of content is evangelized enterprise-wide, content is shared and made accessible, creation and creativity are encouraged, and content flows up and downstream, as well as across various divisions. A formalized yet not immutable content strategy is the framework upon which to base culture.”

It’s simple really. Corporate storytelling needs to be part of the corporate culture. Storytelling defines and builds brands. It motivates staff, customers and prospects. Content needs to be everyone’s responsibility.

Successful inbound marketers need to establish a culture of content. That culture is people driven. The organizations that do it best focus on people with an aptitude for it. That doesn’t mean everyone in a company needs to be a writer, but it does mean that people need to understand the context of these stories for the business, and be excited to share them within the company and beyond.

**FIGURE 1** A CULTURE OF CONTENT IS AN ENGINE OF CONTENT



Source: Altimeter Group

Content needs to go beyond the “Top 11 Ways To Build A Better Widget” posts. In a culture of content, companies identify the stories that need to be told, from the highly technical to the highly emotive. And then there need to be mechanisms, both formal and informal, to ensure those stories surface from within the organization and become part of the inbound marketing program.

Remember, you can demonstrate a personality in your content – serious doesn’t have to equal professional. But a word of caution – funny is hard. Make sure you give your funny posts careful consideration to be certain they aren’t offensive to someone in your audience. It can often be a fine line and we live in a world where people are quick to outrage, and quick to howl if they feel slighted.

## Pictures Make It Better

Good inbound marketing requires a commitment to visuals. It’s been proven over and over again that blogs and social media posts with visual content – photos, images, infographics or videos – outperform text-only posts.

So be sure to include a visual of some sort in your blog posts, and on as many social media posts as you can. This can be a simple photo. If possible add some brief text to convey an additional message.



*“Stock photos can be cheesy sometimes.”  
– Vince Vaughn, Actor.*

As with anything, working with a professional designer will make your content look more engaging and professional. But if your budget doesn’t allow you to engage a designer on a regular basis, don’t despair. There are good tools out there that can help you. If you’re not familiar with design software like Photoshop or InDesign, consider something like Canva.com – an easy to use web-based platform for creating blog and social media images.

But don't treat your content imagery like some people treat their PowerPoint presentations. Just because you can do something with the software doesn't mean you should. So no silly fonts (cough, cough, Comic Sans) or bad clip art. Keep it simple and try to convey a single message with power and clarity.

Bear in mind that while, yes, you can "borrow" almost any kind of photo through a Google image search, you might get busted on copyright grounds. Or you can find a stock photo for almost any situation on one of the many stock photo sites, but stock photos tend to share a similar look and have become visual background noise, not nearly as effective as they once were before their newfound ubiquity.

## Finding An Audience In Social Media

One common trait of successful inbound marketing programs is leveraging content multiple times across multiple platforms.

That starts first with the channels you use. It's not enough to do something and share it only once on one platform. If you have a good blog post, you need to share that across multiple social channels. Which channels you will use depends in large part on the nature of your business.

If you are a B2C business, Facebook probably matters to you. With 1.3 billion regular users, Facebook is the world's most dominant media platform. Haters are always claiming that Facebook is about to crumble. So far that hasn't happened.

Indeed, following a successful push to make Facebook a mobile-first company, Facebook seems to be stronger than ever. And those who claim it only reaches kids? More than 50 percent of seniors who use the Internet belong to Facebook. That represents about 31 percent of all seniors in the United States. It is likely a similar number in Canada.

LinkedIn is second to Facebook for the number of American users, with 23 percent of online Americans over 18 using the site. Often described as the “Facebook for Business”, LinkedIn is a mandatory channel for anyone in B2B. You can share links to your blog, or embed your content in your LinkedIn post. You can also share it on your company page.

About 22 percent of online Americans use Pinterest. This is another great platform for B2C companies. Pinterest is heavily skewed toward female users, with about 42 percent of female Internet users belonging to the site. So if your audience is largely female, and if your product has great visuals, Pinterest is for you.

A remarkable 21 percent of online Americans use Instagram. The photo-focused service is particularly popular with younger people with more than half of Internet users between 18 and 29 using the site. Equally important, nearly half its users use Instagram daily. (Instagram was acquired by Facebook in 2012, but so far the integration has been relatively modest, with Facebook shrewdly letting the Instagram brand grow.)

Somewhat surprisingly, Twitter lags behind these other social media platforms with about 19 percent of Americans using the site. Still, Twitter has a powerful presence in popular culture and the brains behind Twitter have been effective at integrating it into the last two bastions of TV power – breaking news and live events. Twitter is how we take part together in events we are not at, “livetweeting” or even “hatetweeting” events as they happen.

So you want to use these channels to share your content. As you do, consider the particular etiquette of each social media channel. On Twitter, reposting a Tweet several times in a day, and again a few days later, is a commonplace tactic. Yet on Facebook, repeating the same content over and over will likely come across as spammy and upset your audience – something you will hear about in the comments.

To make things more efficient, use a tool like Hootsuite to schedule your posts, and follow the response. If someone comments or shares your comment, make sure to thank them. You can also reshare their shares to extend the life of your post.

# Content as Ad Units

Inbound marketers can also go beyond “organic” reach (that is, unpaid posting and sharing). Remember, “marketing” is the second half of inbound marketing. You need to promote your content, create awareness and drive clicks in your direction. Consider using promoted posts on Facebook and LinkedIn and promoted Tweets on Twitter.

The ad platforms on these social channels are self-serve and easy to use. You can define your audience, sometimes quite precisely, based on geography, interests or even job title.

You may not want to promote every post, but those that are high value (like an eBook or research report) will be best leveraged with adding some promotion to your mix.

Think of your content as ad units. A solid, useful content post will be much more relevant to your audience than an online banner ad or a magazine ad. In fact, according to one estimate, you are more likely to survive a plane crash than click on a banner ad.

Most social media networks have self-serve advertising platforms that will allow you to turn your post into a “promoted post” that will appear in the streams of people you target.

On LinkedIn, for example, you can share an update targeted to an audience based on geography, industry, job title, seniority, company size and so forth. You can get quite precise. There are similar, equally easy options for Facebook and Twitter.

The screenshot shows the LinkedIn targeting interface for an ad campaign. The title is "Who's the audience for this campaign?". It is divided into three main sections: Location, Companies, and Job Title. The Location is set to Singapore. The Companies section is set to "By category (industry, company size)" with selected options for "501-1000 employees", "1001-5000 employees", "5001-10,000 employees", and "10,001+ employees". The Job Title section is set to "By category (job function, seniority)" with selected options for "Engineering", "Information Technology", "Purchasing", "CXO", "Director", and "VP". On the right, the "Audience" summary shows 4,098 LinkedIn Members with the following criteria: Location: Singapore; Company Size: 501-1000 employees, 1001-5000 employees, 5001-10,000 employees or 10,001+ employees; Job Function: Engineering, Information Technology or Purchasing; Job Seniority: CXO, Director or VP. At the bottom, there is a link for "More targeting options (Schools, Groups, Skills, etc.)".

The cost of promoting posts is often a fraction of what it would cost to run an ad in a newspaper or trade journal. For as little as \$75, you might be able to reach a significant portion of a relevant audience. That low cost makes promoted posts a no-brainer for most inbound marketing programs.

Promoted posts can drive visitors to your blog or landing page where you can convert them into leads.

Of course, the same rules apply when you are promoting your posts. If your content is boring or poorly done you end up delivering a negative message to your audience and ultimately harming your brand and sales prospects.

## Proof Point – Charity: Water

Inbound marketing works for all types of organizations, even social enterprises and non-profits. That's important because there are more than one million non-profit organizations in the US. That means there is plenty of competition for mindshare and donor dollars.



One non-profit took a different tact. Charity: Water is an American non-profit that seeks to bring clean drinking water to less developed countries. Rather than using traditional marketing techniques to connect with donors, Charity: Water uses inbound marketing techniques to build its brand, connect with donors directly, fundraise and help solve big problems.

Charity: Water doesn't advertise. Instead it uses social media and inbound marketing to spread its message and engage with donors. This includes a section of their web site dedicated to storytelling. They also produce videos and effectively use Instagram to tell stories that demonstrate positive outcomes in the communities they help.

Charity: Water understood that ensuring they earned the trust of donors was key. They committed to sending 100 percent of the money donated to projects in the field. To do this, they assigned each donation to a specific project and donors received a custom report by email that showcases the results.

With this approach, Charity: Water has engaged its supporters in the storytelling process, making them part of the story, (and ultimately part of the solution) not just consumers of it. They have made their marketing and communications much more personal using inbound marketing. And giving is personal.



1340 likes  
charitywater Sukumari Behera faced opposition and abuse as she fought to bring clean water to women in her village. Now that they have clean water, her family and community could not be more proud of the women there. #waterchangeseverything

## Measuring Results

The great thing about marketing today is how measurable it has become. Of course that measurement means there is nowhere to hide if your campaign fails.

Still, with inbound marketing you seldom commit to one piece of content for an extended period of time. That means you can nimbly adjust your inbound campaign in real time based on the near instantaneous feedback you will receive.

Is your content useful? Does it create traction with your audience?

You will find out pretty quickly based on your analytics. How many people visited your blog? How many came to your landing page? What was your conversion rate? What is the open rate and click through rate on your emails? How many of those prospects did you convert to customers?

HubSpot, for example, has a marketing dashboard that gives you insight into your inbound program. You can also use the metrics on social media platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter to measure your results and your audience. And Google Analytics is of course a solid standby.

So pay attention to the results from the very beginning. Think about A/B testing – measuring how one headline or image works compared to another. Fine tune your efforts based on the results and you will find ways to continuously improve.

# Get Rolling

So there you have it, a quick and dirty primer on inbound marketing.

What's holding you back? Get started and see how it works for your business or cause. There's very little stopping you.

Inbound marketing is clearly a better use of time and money than traditional interruption-based advertising. By being useful, by informing or entertaining, you create a fair trade for your audience's attention. You build a relationship that can turn a stranger into a customer, and a customer into an ambassador.

These are still very early days when it comes to inbound marketing. As a brand publisher or broadcaster, the ground will change quickly. What is relevant or important today may not work tomorrow. A social network that reaches your audience today may fade away.

Remember this one vital fact – it's not about the channel. Anyone can write a blog and post it on Twitter. That's easy and by itself undifferentiated. There is already an ocean of noise online as people try to find an audience.

The magic happens when you have something interesting to say that will attract and engage an audience. How you do that will be based almost entirely on your business and the realities of your audience.

But one sure way to fail is to follow the traditional corporate path of communications – being safe and stilted in a badly conceived bid to appear “professional.” That's not professional, it's just boring.

No one will embrace your stories if they are poorly told. You need to think like a publisher or a broadcaster – what will resonate with your audience that still meets the needs of your organization?

So don't be boring, don't be officious and don't be verbose. Good storytelling has heart. It means something to your audience.

Every organization has a compelling story to tell. Find yours and then tell it. Don't be afraid and don't be constrained. You can do this, and do it well.

Get rolling.

# Inbound Marketing Launch Checklist

So what do you need to get your inbound marketing campaign rolling?  
Here's a checklist of activities:

- Research your market and audience
- Select and implement your Inbound Marketing platform
- Research and select the best Social Media channels
- Develop cover images, avatars etc. for your blog and social channels
- Develop relevant content themes
- Establish goals or KPIs
- Assign roles and responsibilities
- Develop a rolling 90-day content calendar
- Use analytics to measure early impact
- Refine your approach based on results

# Resources

Setting up an inbound marketing program can seem like a daunting task, but don't worry, you've got this. Here are some of our favorite tools that will help you get started and succeed.

## **Inbound Marketing Platform – HubSpot**

The go-to resource for thousands of inbound marketers, HubSpot brings together a blogging platform, landing pages, email campaigns, analytics and even CRM into one integrated, user-friendly platform. Pricing starts at \$200 per month. [www.hubspot.com](http://www.hubspot.com)

## **Social Media Management – HootSuite**

HootSuite is a social media management platform that allows you to easily schedule and post content to multiple social media accounts. You can start teams to manage social media, including setting up approvals within HootSuite. You can also develop analytics reports on your social media performance. HootSuite is a “freemium” product with pricing for the business version of the service starting at \$9.99 per month. [www.hootsuite.com](http://www.hootsuite.com)

## **Easy Design – Canva**

Canva is an online design platform that makes creating images, text blocks and social media avatars easy. It's no replacement for a professional designer, but it will allow you to develop reasonably professional-looking images for your inbound marketing efforts. Canva is free to use, but some image elements must be purchased for \$1. [www.canva.com](http://www.canva.com)

## **Project Management – Base Camp**

Base Camp is a project management and collaboration tool that allows for people to work together on projects and content development. It's used widely in the marketing and web development industry. Pricing starts at \$24 per month for the Basic Plan, covering ten separate projects. [www.basecamp.com](http://www.basecamp.com)

## **Video - Wochit**

Video is a powerful inbound marketing tool, but it can be expensive to outsource. Wochit is one of the new services that lets you easily produce a decent-looking video. [www.wochit.com](http://www.wochit.com)

## About Allan Gates

Allan Gates is an experienced marketing and communications professional who has worked with a number of top agencies in Canada and the United States. He cofounded Bonfire. You can find him at [www.allangates.com](http://www.allangates.com) or [@AllanGates1](https://www.instagram.com/AllanGates1).

## About Bonfire

Bonfire Communications Inc. is a marketing and communications agency with a focus on inbound marketing based in New Brunswick, Canada. Bonfire tells stories for brands at the intersection of social media, PR and advertising. You can find out more at [www.bonfirestories.ca](http://www.bonfirestories.ca) or [@BonfireStories](https://www.instagram.com/BonfireStories)



### Understanding Inbound Marketing:

Telling Stories People Want to Hear

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