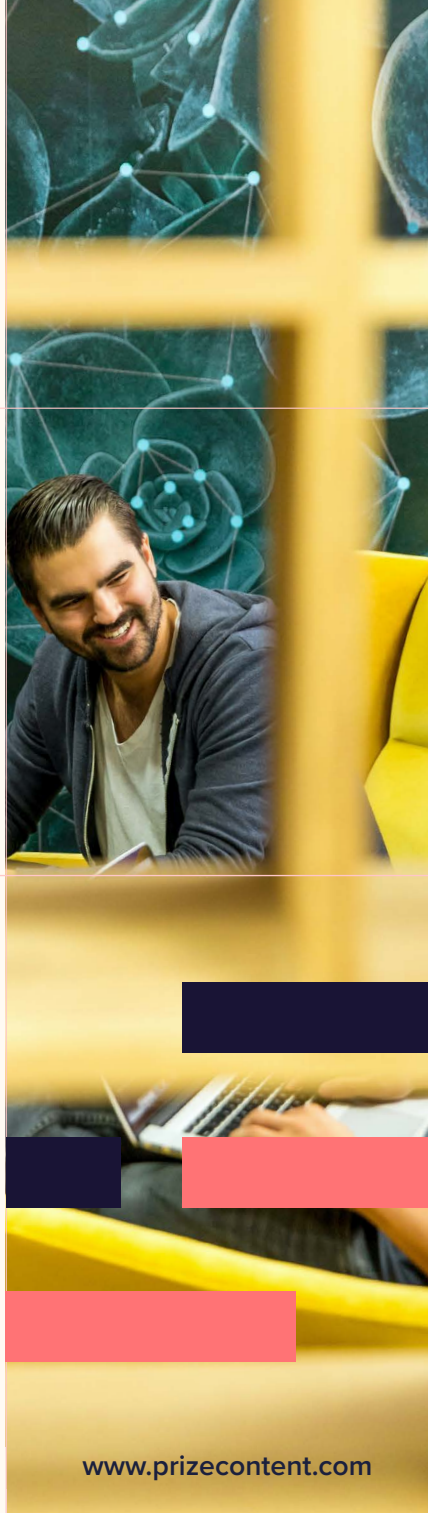




Supplementing the Sales Funnel with Content Marketing



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Customers; without them, your business is a sock without a foot, a bun without a burger, a solution without a problem.

You're probably already well-aware how important customers are to your business, and you're probably also familiar with the battle to find potential customers and convert them into loyal followers.

What you might not be so familiar with, however, is how you can use content marketing to generate leads and guide them through the sales funnel.

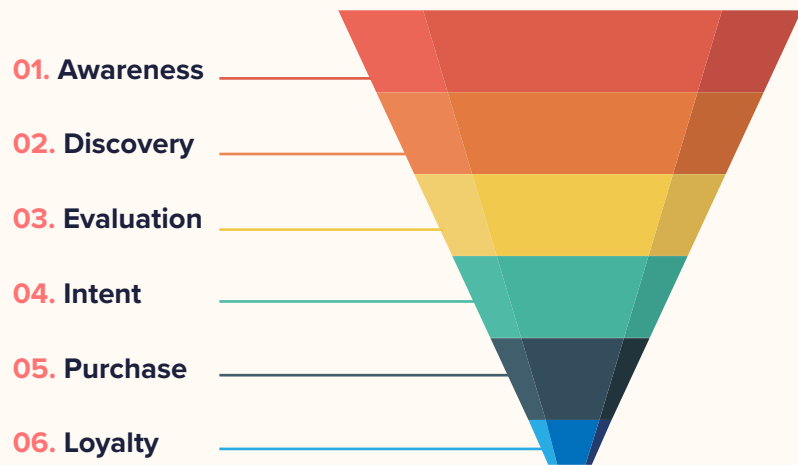
In this eBook, we'll cover each stage of the sales process and demonstrate how content marketing brings potential customers one step closer to your business.

First, let's look at the sales funnel.



Welcome to the Sales Funnel

From making a potential lead aware of your business through to them becoming a customer who's loyal to your brand, the entire sales process is covered in the funnel's six stages:



While acknowledging that leads will disappear and lose interest along the way, the sales funnel is a helpful point of reference for bringing potential leads increasingly closer to becoming customers, and loyal ones at that.

At every stage, your company's content can encourage customers to continue their journey and take the next step.

So, let's begin with stage one: awareness.

01. Awareness

Raise Awareness of Your Brand

The trouble with adverts

Traditionally, marketing and advertising campaigns directly promote the product or services of a company. They focus on their unique selling points, the features or price of their offering, and their expertise in the industry. These campaigns take many forms, from television adverts to website and social media ads.

As the world grew more accustomed to the proliferation of these campaigns, facing so many adverts had an unexpected side-effect on the population — 'ad blindness'.

Ad blindness

A phenomenon that has been popularised in the 21st century, 'ad blindness', or 'banner blindness', refers to the subconscious aversion to adverts. It is a behaviour that has been particularly highlighted by research into the routines of internet users.

The results of website usability tests, which involved tracking the gaze of their subjects, demonstrated that the majority of subjects instinctively ignored information

that was presented in banners. These findings suggested that this was a learned behaviour in response to these banners being used by most websites to display advertisements.

It's not just while using the internet that people set up their subconscious ad-blocker. How many adverts do you think you see every day? 50? 100? 500? Maybe even 1,000?

If you're shocked to find out that, on average, we see 5,000 adverts every day, your subconscious ad-blocker is working just fine.

'Ad blindness' isn't just a subconscious behaviour, either. When was the last time you sat through a full ad break of your favourite TV show without making a cup of tea or picking up your phone? Even if you stream your favourite programs, the chances are you tune out during the ads, or skip them when given the option.

In short, what we're saying is, if you're sending out adverts that look and feel like adverts, people are probably ignoring them. You need to consider a more indirect approach.

A more indirect approach

So, the subheader might be a little on the nose, but that's exactly what content marketing is — an indirect approach to raising awareness of your company.

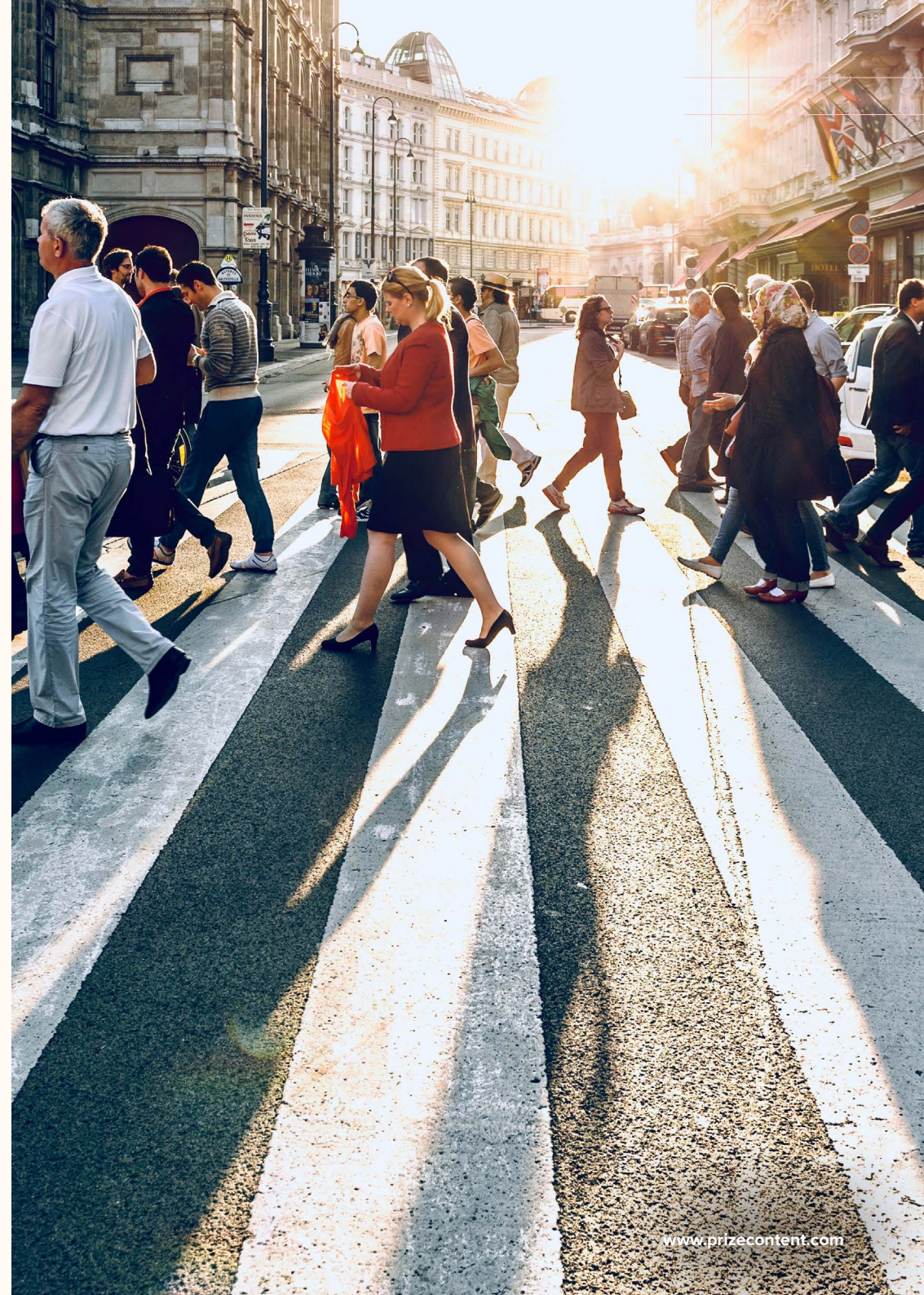
It's only stage one of the sales funnel, so you don't need to worry about hyping up your product or service, or pushing leads to convert too early. Instead, you need to seep into the minds of your audience through a method that doesn't seem like outright advertising or marketing.

Content marketing is a way of getting your messaging, and your company, in front of a diverse demographic, giving them something useful, and starting to sow

the seeds of trust. Through your content, you should offer the reader something valuable: a useful industry insight, a tip to overcome a common problem, or a list of helpful resources.

In doing so, you not only have a positive impact on the reader, but also make your content shareable and increase the chances of each reader referring it to a friend. As your content is shared, your company is being placed in front of an ever-increasing audience, and your brand is becoming more familiar to people who may have previously never heard of you.

And that is why content marketing is perfect for stage one of the sales funnel.



02. Discover

Help People Discover Your Brand and Offering

So, stage two — discovery. At this point, your audience is aware of your brand, having already seen, read, and used various pieces of your company's content. It's now time to help them learn more about your company and its values, as well as your offering.

You must still be careful, though, to make sure your content doesn't trigger their ad blindness!

Content about your company

No one knows your company better than you do; what it does well, what its values are, and what it cares about. These are the characteristics that make your company unique, and they are the details you should be communicating to people familiarising themselves with your business.

As we mentioned, your company is unique, and these characteristics can vary wildly from business to business. But, no matter what your business is about, there are endless topics you can write content on. Here are a few ideas:

Your company is committed to achieving a gender-balanced workforce — Write about the challenges you've faced in achieving the balance, how you overcame them, and the solutions you've found helpful in striving for 50/50.

Your company commits a portion of its profits to charity — Highlight some charities who you think are doing great work and then discuss the charities you actively support and why you support them.

Your company makes every effort to be environmentally responsible — Talk about the impact businesses worldwide have on the environment, the difference that can be made to minimise that impact, and the measures your company has in place.

Your company is always looking to innovate — Feature examples of successful innovations that have made people's lives easier, discuss areas which you believe would benefit from new methods and ideas, then detail the innovations your company is responsible for.

Don't be perturbed if none of those ideas are suitable for your business. They all follow a similar pattern:

1. Talk about the benefits of one of your business's characteristics, but in general terms and without referencing your company.
2. Highlight some examples of how it's been done well by others and the positive impacts they have had.
3. Discuss what your company has done and the results achieved.

If your company already has testimonials about its previous work, these pieces of content are also fantastic opportunities to promote them and encourage readers to visit your website (which we'll come to a bit later).



Point out pains and reveal the relievers

Every product or service relieves a pain point. If they didn't they wouldn't be necessary. From the humble window cleaner, who makes sure their customers have a clear view of the world outside their home, to Alexa, which allows Amazon to avoid the legal pain of spying on people while being disguised as a helpful household device.

The pains your product or service relieve should be an integral part of your general marketing efforts, and they're particularly useful in dictating the narrative of your content.

In much the same way as content that promotes the distinctive characteristics of your business, content that helps people discover your products or services can follow a familiar pattern:

1. Emphasise the pain that people will be feeling and the negative effects it has on their day-to-day life.
2. Draw attention to the solutions to their problems, and how their lives will change when the problem has been resolved.
3. Introduce your product or service, promote its features, and detail how it delivers the solution people are looking for.



If you're looking for examples, you're out of luck ... only kidding, we wouldn't do that to you. Here are a few generic ideas to get your creative juices flowing:

Your product makes a process much faster to complete — Talk about the old process, its faults, and the frustration of how long it took to complete; highlight how customers could spend their time better if the process was shorter; then introduce your product and how it has shortened the process.

Your product helps the customer save money — Emphasise the financial impact that customers have been dealing with and the spending restrictions it has put them under, then hypothesise about how that money could be better used if it wasn't being spent on the old product. Finally, introduce your product and focus on the cost savings customers will experience after purchasing it.

Your service includes a free consultation — Write about the importance of understanding exactly what the customer wants, the problems a lack of understanding can have, what can be achieved with a clear understanding, and how you dedicate the time necessary to ensure you know exactly what your customer is looking for.

These examples may not be particularly impactful, but that's because they don't hone in on a specific pain. When your content focuses on the circumstances surrounding a particularly painful problem that your offering removes, it is sure to make your product or service an attractive proposition.



Always direct the reader to your website

Calls to action (CTAs) are an important feature of any good content marketing campaign. There's only so much you can tell a reader in your content before they get bored or realise they've been reading for 10 minutes. The CTA is an opportunity for you to guide the reader to an additional resource; somewhere they can find out more or complete a desired action.

When you're trying to help people discover more about your company and your offering, what better place to direct them to than your website?

At the end of every communication, be sure to include a hyperlink back to a relevant part of your website. If your content tells the reader more about your company, consider directing them to your 'About' page, or a 'Values' page if you have one. When your content focuses on the benefits of your offering, send readers to your 'Features' page to learn more.

Even if you don't think your website has a page that expands on the information in your content, that doesn't mean you should abandon the CTA. Instead, use it to drive people to your contact page and encourage them to give you a call or send a message.

We're moving on to stage 3

Are people now aware of your business? Yes. And they're discovering more about your brand and its offering? Absolutely.

Okay then, it's time for us to move on to stage three — evaluation.



03. Evaluation

Make Evaluating Your Brand and Products Easy

We're now at stage three in the sales funnel, which means we're closing in on the halfway point of your leads' journey to becoming one of your loyal customers.

At this time, we'll be looking at evaluation: how people assess the quality of your brand and its offering, analyse the standard of your work, gauge how reliable your company is, and ultimately evaluate if they are making the right decision.

The evaluation stage is a tipping point for potential customers. If they don't like what they find, they'll make a swift exit from your sales funnel, and you may never see them again. However, if their evaluation results in a positive impression, they'll be on the cusp of making a purchase.

So, it goes without saying that preparing your company to be evaluated is essential. Without further ado, let's jump into stage three — evaluation.

What are leads looking for?

In short, they're looking for something to inspire their confidence in your business and your offering.

As people edge closer to making a purchase from your company, they search for reassurance that they're making a wise decision. Some of them will have been burned before by cowboys or rogue traders; others will have heard of such treachery and are wary of falling foul themselves.

Now, when you've guided people through the first two stages of the sales funnel, you have a head start. Your expert insight and useful tips have sown the seed of trust. Now is the time to nurture that seed and help it blossom into a beautiful trust tulip.

Where will they be looking, and what can I do?

In search of the confidence-building material they need, people will likely look in two places: your website and review sites.

Let's start with the latter.

It goes without saying that you have no control over review sites. If someone writes a negative review about your business, the best you can do is create an account for your company, respond to the review, try to make it right, and show that you care.

However, being active on several review sites is time consuming, especially for small teams. Instead, when you communicate with customers, encourage them to leave positive reviews and feedback. In transactional communications, such as confirmation emails, guiding the customer to a review site makes for a great CTA.

A waterfall of positive reviews will drown out negative comments, making them seem like outliers, and also have a positive impact on anyone evaluating your business.

Now, for your website. It's important for your website's static content to make a flawless first impression. Any visitor to your website should feel welcomed from the outset, be introduced to your offering, and given the time to proceed at their leisure. That means using warm, personable language and avoiding a pushy sales tone that can drive potential customers away.

It's not just about the content on your home, about, and services pages, though. Sure, they will help, but there's a lot more you can do.

Case studies

What could be more convincing for a lead than an example of your previous work that is thoroughly analysed and documented from start to finish? Not much.

If a potential customer reads a study about one of your previous projects that delivered a similar end result to what they're looking for, they could immediately move onto the next stage of the sales funnel, no questions asked.

Testimonials

The opinion of others is a powerful form of persuasion, and word of mouth can both sustain and destroy businesses.

When potential customers visit review sites, they're looking for the opinion of others. By adding a testimonials page to your website, you provide a platform for reviews and social proof that you control. It's a great place to showcase the views of your happy customers and convince others of your company's reliability.

Portfolios

If your company has been delivering high-quality products or services for a while, you're sure to have built up an attractive repertoire of previous projects. Showcasing them on a portfolio page through images and small descriptions is a consumable way to evidence the standard of work you deliver.

Whitepapers

Proving your expertise can take many forms. One of the most popular is a whitepaper.

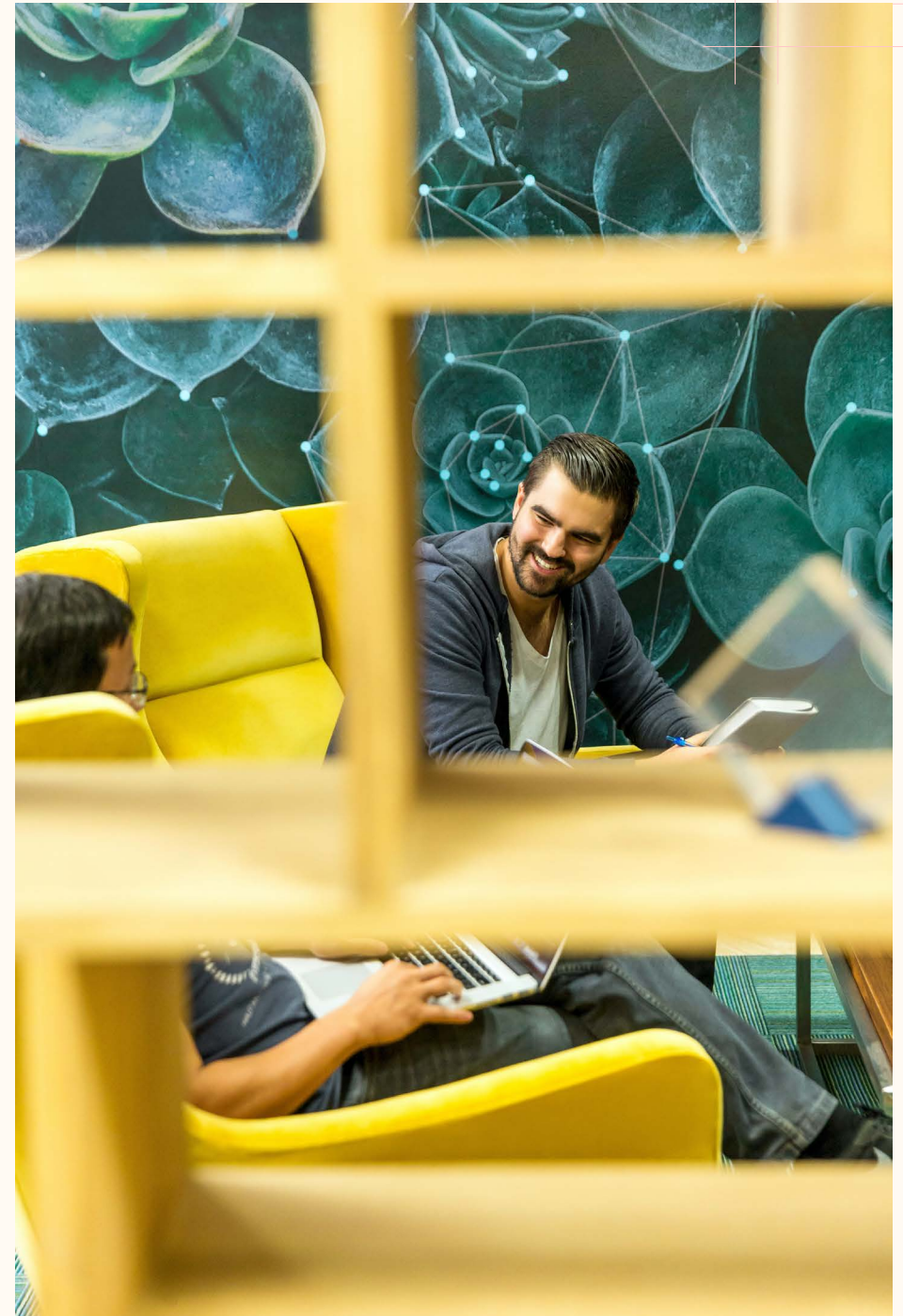
These documents are in-depth, authoritative reports on a particular topic that present a problem and provide the solution. Through the whitepaper, a senior member of your team will demonstrate their industry knowledge so that the report is not only valuable to the reader but also an advert for your expertise.

Content really matters

Content marketing is not just about blog posts and thought pieces; it's about demonstrating your company's expertise and the quality of your offering — sometimes explicitly, sometimes indirectly.

At the evaluation stage of the sales funnel, leads are looking for evidence that your product or service is right for them, and that they can trust your company to deliver.

Whether you find case studies best showcase the standard of your work or you have an endless collection of glowing testimonials, this reassuring social proof will go a long way to moving potential customers from the evaluation stage through to stage four — intent.



Capitalise on Prospects' Intent

As we move ever closer to guiding prospects from having never heard of your company to becoming loyal customers, we've progressed to the fourth phase — intent.

So far, your leads have become aware of your company, discovered more about your brand and your offering, and evaluated if they're making the right choice. Now, satisfied with their decision, it's their intention to order your product or purchase your service.

Up until this point, it's been your responsibility to draw the potential customer in, and a great job you've done. Your content has been focused on feeding them the information they need to progress to this point. It's now up to the lead to make the next move, but that doesn't mean your content no longer matters. In fact, it's quite the opposite

No room for complacency

You would be forgiven for thinking that, at this stage, as the customer is intent on choosing your product or service, it's job done ... it's not.

The nature of the sales funnel means that you lose leads at every stage. Until the customer has purchased a product, and later returned for more, you still have work to do.

Have you ever been queuing at the bar with the intention of buying your usual beer, only to change your mind after watching the bartender pull a crisp, cold pint of an unknown but irresistible nectar?

Just one online advert or recommendation from a friend can have the same impact on your lead, stealing away what you considered a sure-fire sale.

It's no time for complacency.

Take advantage of any contact

At this stage, your customer may be intent on choosing your product or service, but that doesn't necessarily mean they have all the information they need. In a lot of cases, they'll take the time to get in touch to ask a final question or secure a quote.

Every time a lead contacts you, it's an opportunity, and one you mustn't miss!

Prep, prep, prep

Everyone knows the Benjamin Franklin quote: "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." It's relevant to so many situations, and stage four of the sales funnel is no different!

Whether you're inundated with messages or receive just one, being consistent in your content is essential. By establishing workflows and writing content in advance, you have a scalable process in place that will still work efficiently when (not if) your company goes international.

Workflows

Put processes in place for responding to leads.

If you have customer service staff manning your social media channels and live chat, make sure they know exactly what to say

or where to direct people enquiring about your offering.

Once you've established these workflows, make them official by documenting them. In doing so, you have a point of reference for you, your current staff, and staff joining your company in the future.

Pre-written content

You don't have to prepare full statements or responses in advance. Although you can, especially if you want to schedule follow-up content, which we'll come to soon.

It's important to consider the final questions or requests you may receive from leads who intend to make a purchase. It could be regarding price, a request for a quote, maybe, or an enquiry about your availability. Though your response may differ depending on each unique situation, a substantial amount of your reply can be pre-written and templated.

For example, an email response to a quote request can be templated, leaving you with the task of simply adding a price into the email before sending it to the customer. And just like that, thanks to the template, a 10-minute chore becomes a 20-second task.

Following up: striking a balance

What do you do if, after making an enquiry or adding an item to their online basket before leaving the site, the lead goes quiet?

There's a fine balance between politely checking in with a potential customer, to see if a quote was acceptable or they found what they were looking for, and hounding them. Businesses have differing approaches to following up with potentially lost leads, and it's a choice for you to make on how your company proceeds.

If you choose to send follow-up communications, make sure they have a courteous tone and focus on offering

further support, rather than pushing the lead to complete the sale.

Strike the right balance, and you'll be perceived as helpful, respectful, and generous. But if you get it wrong, you'll come across as desperate or, worse, intimidating.

Within touching distance

Your lead is now close to becoming a customer. So close, in fact, that the next stage is actually called 'purchase'.

So, keep your cool, make sure your content still accurately reflects your brand and its values, and continue to give the lead all the information, support, and direction they need.

05. Purchase

Make Purchases Pleasant Experiences

And just like that, as we reach stage five of the sales funnel, you've made a sale!

Not long ago, people were only just discovering your business for the first time. Now, your content has helped them learn about you and your offering, and given them the reassurance and information they needed to make a purchase.

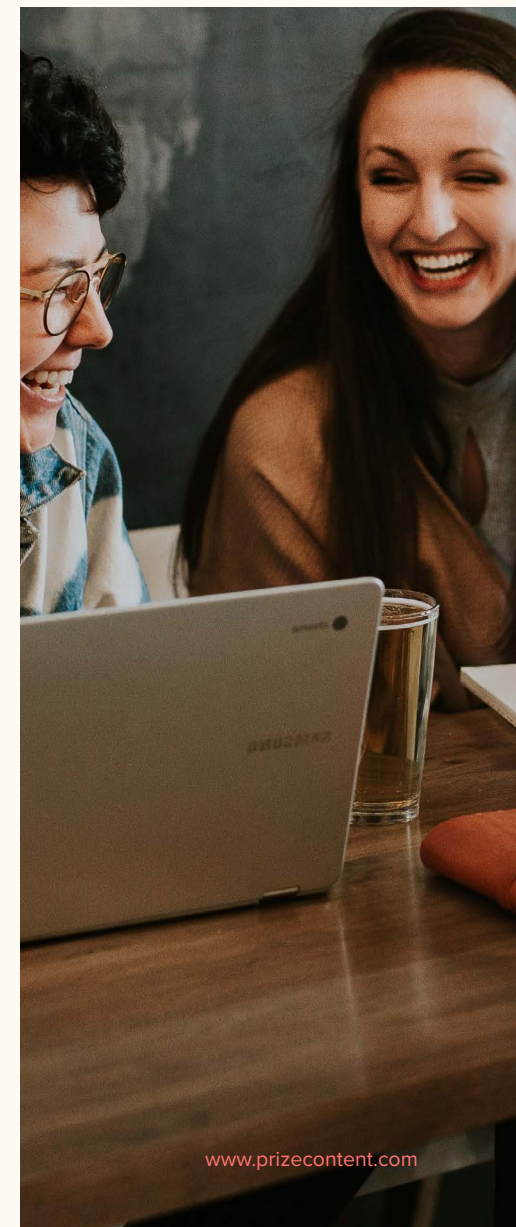
While you should revel in a job well done as the purchase is confirmed, your thoughts must quickly return to the lead, who is now a customer.

At the point of sale, your content remains an important part of your armoury. Here's what you can do.

Confirmation contact: obligation or opportunity?

There are two ways to look at a communication that confirms a customer's purchase:

1. A basic, necessary communication that confirms the sale and is accompanied by the invoice.
2. An opportunity to show your appreciation to the customer and build on your relationship.





Show your appreciation

When you thank customers for choosing your product or service, it strengthens your mutual relationship. Small gestures can go a long way, and showing the customer that you appreciate and value them may be returned in repeat custom, positive feedback, or a referral to a friend.

Take a look at the template you use for confirmation contact. Does it feel forced and transactional? If so, add a short sentence that thanks the customer for their business and wishes them well. You may notice an increase in positive feedback, or no difference at all — either way, you've got nothing to lose.

Offer your support

Your relationship with the customer shouldn't end the moment the purchase is complete. If your confirmation contact has an air of finality, it would be understandable if the customer felt a little betrayed.

Prove to the customer that you're still there to help. In the communication, offer your support. Even better, provide the customer with contact details in the event that they have a query or encounter a problem. It's another small gesture that can make a real difference.

Write content about the product

Is it your responsibility to help the customer get the most out of your product?

Contractually, no. Morally, maybe. For the benefit of your business, absolutely.

Whether you've sold the customer cutting-edge software or a pair of running shoes, they may not fully understand the product's many features or uses. By giving the customer all the information and guidance they need, you will improve their perception of the product, as well as the benefits they gain from using it.

There are many ways you can do this in your content, and some are more common than others. Here are a few suggestions:

A user guide

Though often found in the form of a dreary instructional handbook, user guides can actually be engaging pieces of content. On the face of it, the guide's purpose is to explain how to use the product properly, yet many people simply refuse to read instructions or user manuals. Why? Because they're dull, boring, and uninspiring.

The user guide is an opportunity for you to motivate your customer to use the product. By reflecting your company's personality in the content, and taking a step back from the numbered instructions that make typical guides so monotonous, you can produce a document that increases use and uptake, as well as informing the user.

A feature booklet

As technology advances, the capabilities of many products increases, and it's easy for consumers to get left behind. Just 20 years ago, a mobile phone was used to make a call or send a text. Now, it's a pocket-sized computer.

Can you honestly say you know absolutely everything your phone can do? You know every one of its features, and how they can make your life easier, or improve your productivity?

If your product has a long list of features that benefit the user, make sure they know all about them. It could increase the use of the product, provide the answer to a long-standing problem, or even make them order more. By highlighting each and every feature, you demonstrate the full potential of your product.

A list of suggested uses

Now, this isn't suitable for every product.

To hark back to an example we used earlier, there aren't many other uses for running shoes except sticking them on your feet and legging it. But for other products, there's no end to their potential uses.

Let's look at WD40; that's the well-known lubricant, not the Birmingham reggae band behind *Red, Red Wine*. WD40 is commonly used to protect metal against rust and corrosion, or to remove grease and grime from a surface. However, did you know it can be used to soften leather? Or unstick chewing gum? Or erase crayon?

If your product is multi-use, then let it be known. This is not only great content for customers who have purchased your product, but also highly effective sales content.

Get in touch after the sale

All too often, businesses see the sale as the end of their relationship with the customer. This approach — 'sale completed, job done' — is not only a missed opportunity to gain a loyal customer, but also a potential point of negative feedback.

Your contact with the customer shouldn't end abruptly at the point of sale. It's important to make your customers

aware they can rely on you, and that the relationship isn't over.

A great way to stay in their thoughts and offer your support is to contact the customer around a week after their purchase (or the delivery of their item, if applicable). In this content, you should:

- Thank them again for their purchase.
- Link to your content about the product.
- Remind them you're there to help.
- Provide contact details for your support team.

This thoughtful and supportive approach helps you to develop goodwill with the customer. Being in their good graces is not only useful in the event that something goes wrong, but it also increases the chances of the customer buying from you again.

Enter the final stage

On a few occasions, we've referenced customers becoming loyal to your company and making repeat purchases, which is apt, as the sixth and final stage of the sales funnel is 'loyalty'.

Your content really is crucial in preventing people from just making one-off purchases and actually developing into the sort of repeat customers that sustain your business.



Inspire Loyalty from Your Customers

We're sure you know that loyal customers are better than one-timers. But did you know that it costs five times as much to attract new customers as it does to re-engage existing ones? Or that the probability of selling to an existing customer is between 60% and 70%, a number that plummets to between 5% and 20% for new prospects?

The stats don't lie; loyal customers have the potential to sustain your business, especially when acquisition is challenging. On our journey through the sales funnel, leads have been lost at every stage. So, at the final stage, the customers you've guided through to the end are the people you need to turn your attention to.

The question is: how do you make sure new customers become loyal, repeat customers?

Incentivising them with loyalty programmes is a popular approach, and one which is often successful, but your content also goes a long way to securing their allegiance.

Don't disappear after the sale

At the end of stage five, we highlighted the importance of staying in touch with customers after the sale to make the purchase a pleasant experience. Being present once the deal is done is even more essential for gaining the customer's loyalty.

Going off the grid as soon as you have taken the customer's money is a sure-fire way to make sure they'll never buy from you again. But that doesn't mean it'll take a lot of time to stay in their good graces.

A templated email is all you need to come across as courteous and grateful. Be sure to include:

- A 'thank you' for their purchase.
- A link to any content you have written about the product.
- A reminder that you're there to help them.
- Your support team's contact details.

Make customers feel valued

Customers want to feel valued by businesses. As reported by Forbes, the top reason for customers switching brands is because they feel underappreciated. By demonstrating how grateful you are for their custom, you foster a stronger relationship between customers and your company.

Making the customer aware of just how much you appreciate them should be the goal of any content you create with the intention of inspiring their loyalty. One way you can achieve this is to show you value their opinions.

Ask for feedback, not just reviews

Every time you make a purchase, it's only a matter of time before an email asking you to leave a review finds its way into your inbox. The cynics among us know these reviews are for the business's benefit. After all, we looked at the importance of positive reviews in our review of the 'evaluation' stage.

What if, instead of asking for a review, you asked customers for their feedback? Opinions that are used for their benefit,

not yours. That's the approach of a company that cares what their customers think.

You could do this by replacing your 'leave a review' email with a 'send us your feedback' substitute. But to maximise its impact, why not tell your customers exactly how their feedback will be used.

Write content that explains your feedback process; and if you don't have one, now is the time to establish one. Explain to customers:

- How you encourage and receive feedback.
- Where the feedback is sent.
- Who reviews the feedback.
- How the feedback translates into measurable improvements.
- Examples of customer feedback being used to make progress.

Your customers will not only understand that their opinions are valued, but also appreciate your honesty and commitment to improvement. In turn, you'll receive truthful, helpful feedback and increase the likelihood of your customers buying from you again.

Show customers how their money is being used

Customers aren't interested in hearing how their money has improved your bottom line. But, if you're putting their money to good use in other ways, you should definitely shout about it.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an increasingly common tactic used by businesses to improve their image and inspire the loyalty of customers. That may sound underhanded, but it benefits so many charities and good causes and also helps companies be socially accountable.

Customers love knowing that, when they buy a product or service from a company, their money is contributing to a good cause. With research showing 75% of people are likely to start shopping at a company that supports an issue they agree with, CSR will help you with customer acquisition as well as retention.

So, where does your content come in? Well, to emphasise your CSR projects, you should do more than make passing references. In-depth blog posts and emails describing the support you offer to good causes will raise awareness of your work. A static page on your company website is also an effective way to promote your emphasis on CSR.

When it comes to writing the content, there is one crucial factor: make a clear connection between the customer's money and the great work being done.

By bringing customers closer to the process, and emphasising the role they have, you strengthen their emotional connection to the cause and increase their desire to contribute more. How do they do that? By making a purchase from you again.

You've reached the end of the line ... now what?

After six stages, a library of high-quality content, and a minimal amount of blood, sweat, and tears, you've reached the end of the sales funnel! It's been a hectic journey, but you should now have a new batch of loyal, repeat customers you can rely on.

What now? For as long as you need new customers, the only thing to do is keep filling up the funnel, so it's back to stage one.

Thanks for Reading!

We hope you found this guide useful.

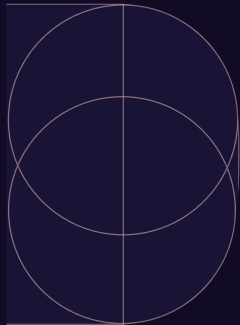
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