The B2B Content Disconnect: What Companies Believe vs. How They Behave

In partnership with   **TOP SALES WORLD** INSPIRING THE GLOBAL SALES COMMUNITY   **Type A** Communications   *Marketing* INTERACTIONS

SUMMARY

The Story of a Stat

Fifty seven percent or more—that's how far along in the buying cycle companies are before they engage a salesperson, according to many leading analyst firms. In a marketing and sales environment teeming with figures and data points, this one seemed to take on a life of its own, receiving unusual levels of buzz and fanfare and sending shockwaves across the business-to-business world. For many marketers, it was cause for celebration, a sign they were poised to become the primary influence on the customer conversation. ("We own more than half the buying cycle!").

But even as marketers bask in the afterglow of the "57 percent stat," it's still worth asking:

Is the stat actually true? Do B2B professionals believe it?

Corporate Visions surveyed more than 400 organizations to determine support for this stat and find out to what extent it's changed how companies execute on content. In addition, the survey took a closer look at companies' success with content-driven lead conversion.
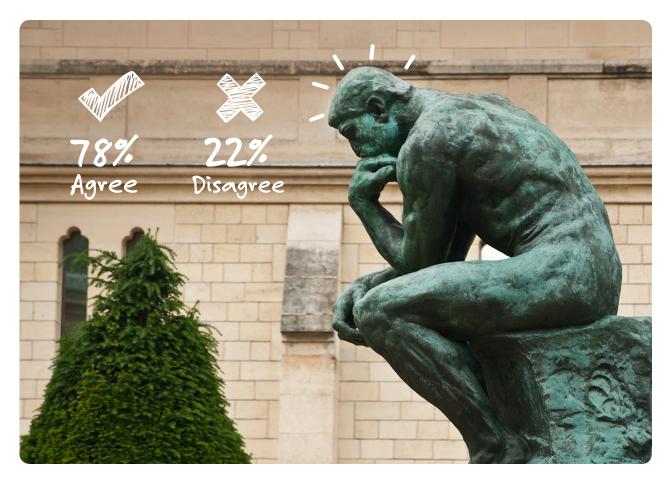
This State of the Conversation Report **examines the challenges companies are facing at the intersection of content strategy, sales enablement, and lead conversion**, and explores how companies can improve performance across these vital areas.

Does the industry believe the 57 percent stat? In a phrase, yes—big time.

Most marketing and sales leaders agree that customers are at least 57 percent of the way through the buying cycle by the time they engage a sales rep, according to the Corporate Visions survey. In fact, of the respondents who'd heard of the stat, 78 percent say they agree with the premise, while 22 percent say they disagree with it.

That the market generally agrees with the statistic isn't too surprising. What is surprising, though, were the responses to a question—posed to those who agree with the statistic—about what kind of impact it's had on their messaging and content programs.

Read on to learn about the extent, if any, to which this statistic has driven changes in companies' marketing and demand generation activities.

78% Agree   22% Disagree

To What Extent Have Marketing Teams Changed the Way They Operate?

This statistic—in its various forms—has been at the epicenter of B2B marketing debate and conversation since it emerged in the market a few years ago. And, the large majority of survey respondents believe that it's true. So, how has this belief shaped the way organizations go to market?

It would be easy to assume that a statistic of such significance, with such impact on belief, would have created a sea change in the way marketing departments function, causing them to dramatically rethink the way they execute on their message development and content programs. But according to the survey, a sea change hasn't happened. In fact, the results suggest the changes have been largely incremental.

Only 24 percent of respondents who agree with the stat have made major strategic shifts in their demand generation and sales enablement content strategies as a result of it. That means more than three-quarters of respondents have made small or no changes to these content strategies.

Interestingly, when it comes to converting content-driven leads to pipeline, performance appears to be less than stellar. Below are **two key challenges** identified in the survey results:

- **Only 11 percent of respondents believe their conversion from content-driven leads to pipeline is "excellent."**

- **Nearly half (47 percent) of respondents describe their lead conversion efforts as "sketchy" or failing to drive trackable impact.**

Tim Riesterer
Chief Strategy and
Research Officer

Sales Takeaways

The 57 percent stat has its share of believers, but there's data in the market that conflicts with it…specifically, the finding that **60 percent of qualified pipeline deals end in no decision**, according to *Sales Benchmark Index*. Another analyst firm found that it takes 6.8 people to come to consensus to make a purchase decision in B2B deals. So even if you assume that one of those decision makers is 57 percent or more of the way through the buying cycle when a rep enters the picture, where does that leave the other five-plus? If they're brought into the buying process and are individually starting at zero percent, that means the salesperson has a lot of selling to do. If you do the math, with 5.9 people at zero percent and one person at 57 percent, then the cumulative number says the deal is less than 10 percent of the way done when the salesperson shows up. Needless to say, that salesperson still has a lot of heavy lifting to do to drive consensus in the buying committee.

I OUT OF 4
have made major strategic shifts
in their content strategies

Leslie Talbot
VP Content
Corporate Visions

Content Takeaways

It's surprising that a statistic so celebrated has brought about major strategic shifts in less than a quarter of companies. And it begs the question: If the stat is such a big deal, why have the shifts been so minimal? After all, it suggests marketers no longer own just the high-level, demand generation portion of the inbound customer conversation, but also conversations that happen much further downstream in the buying cycle.

Regardless of who's "in charge," the messaging responsibilities have expanded for marketers. Content is needed all along the buyer's journey, and that's creating new demands on your content strategy. Marketers now need to excel at creating messaging and content for both sides of the lead handoff – demand generation and sales enablement. That means helping to build consistency between your provocative campaigns and the conversations your salespeople have when they follow-up the lead.
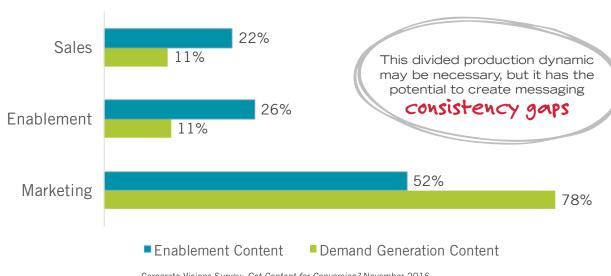
Content: Who Owns What?

Overwhelmingly, the research shows marketing teams own the production of demand generation content: 78 percent of companies say marketing is responsible for creating their inbound content such as blogs, infographics, ebooks and webinars. No surprise there. But, interestingly, we learned marketing also plays a significant role in the production of sales enablement content that reps employ in direct customer conversations (these assets might include presentations, playbooks, proposals, or other customer "leave-behind" collateral). Fifty two percent of companies responding to the survey say marketing is primarily responsible for creating these types of sales- and customer-facing assets—significantly higher than sales enablement (26 percent), and sales departments (22 percent).

That marketing appears to be engaged at many companies in the creation of both demand generation and sales enablement is a good sign—certainly from the standpoint of messaging and content consistency. But even though marketing owns more of the sales enablement content responsibility than any other individual group, more than half of all sales content is still produced in other departments.

This production dynamic—where one department creates demand generation content, while another creates sales-facing assets—may be necessary at many companies. But it has the potential to create messaging consistency gaps between your demand generation and sales enablement stories. And that could spell trouble for your conversions.

CONTENT OWNERSHIP - Demand Generation vs. Enablement

Sales: 22% (Enablement Content), 11% (Demand Generation Content)
Enablement: 26% (Enablement Content), 11% (Demand Generation Content)
Marketing: 52% (Enablement Content), 78% (Demand Generation Content)

This divided production dynamic may be necessary, but it has the potential to create messaging *consistency gaps*

■ Enablement Content   ■ Demand Generation Content

Corporate Visions Survey: *Got Content for Conversion?* November 2016

What Type of Content Are Companies Producing For Each Side of the Lead Handoff?

Insights-centric content is the *least used type of messaging* in both areas of content production

The impact of demand generation and sales enablement content is only as good as the messaging it contains. With that in mind, Corporate Visions identified four types of messages that companies typically build into their demand generation campaigns and sales enablement assets, and asked respondents what their content most often focuses on:

Company-centric content designed to promote the company vision and brand promise

Product-centric content emphasizing competitive differentiation and features and benefits

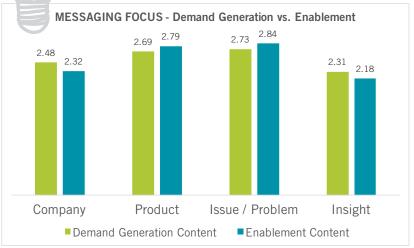**Problem-centric** content addressing needs identified in voice of the customer research

Insights-centric content introducing unconsidered needs and a disruptive perspective

The survey results show that companies most often focus on product-centric and problem-centric messaging in both their demand generation and sales enablement content (these two categories were a virtual tie). Meanwhile, **the creation of insights-centric content finished last** in both areas of content production, behind even company-centric content.

MESSAGING FOCUS - Demand Generation vs. Enablement

	Company	Product	Issue / Problem	Insight
Demand Generation Content	2.48	2.69	2.73	2.31
Enablement Content	2.32	2.79	2.84	2.18

Scores represented above are aggregated based on rank order.
Corporate Visions Survey: *Got Content for Conversion?* November 2016

Sales Takeaways

Erik Peterson
EVP Consulting
Corporate Visions

At most companies, marketing creates the demand generation content used to develop and nurture leads in the digital customer conversation. Meanwhile, more solutions-focused content is being created—more often than not—by different departments, to help enable field salespeople. This division of labor is a deliberate feature, not a "bug," of the content creation process at many companies. But here's the problem…

Most of the demand generation content is geared for what I call the "why change" conversation. This is the status quo-busting message you tell in your campaigns to convince prospects to do something different than what they're doing today. Meanwhile, your sales enablement team might be creating selling content—such as brochures and playbooks—geared to the later stage part of the buying cycle, or what I call the "why you" conversation (why you instead of your competitors?).

As a result, the story told by marketing to generate leads is often different from the story salespeople are telling in the field.

This creates something I call the "conversion gap." This happens when buyers get amped up about your demand generation campaign, only to lose interest after the lead handoff, when salespeople don't pick up the threads of the story that got your prospect excited. Make no mistake: The conversion gap is real. Forrester Research found that 89 percent of first sales calls are failures. That suggests a serious messaging quality and consistency problem, potentially undercutting your ability to make the pipeline impact you need.
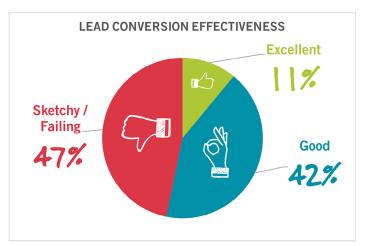
Insight-Driven Content: What Is It?

The relatively low deployment of insights-driven content—i.e. content that presents a distinct point of view and introduces unconsidered needs into the conversation—could explain some of the challenges companies are having in the area of lead conversion. As noted above, only **11 percent of companies describe their ability to convert content-driven leads as excellent, and nearly half of respondents (47 percent) say their lead conversion efforts are sketchy or failing to drive trackable impact**.

So how might you define an "unconsidered need?" Typically, they come in three forms:

- **Undervalued Needs** – These are rapidly approaching trends or problems whose impact has been underestimated by your prospect. Your job is to underscore the seriousness of these potential problems, and show how the risks associated with them could hold your prospects back from achieving their most important business objectives. You can do this by using provocative insights and research that amplify the size and speed of these problems, turning them in your prospect's eyes from afterthoughts into urgent priorities. After that, you can link these considerations to your unique strengths.

- **Unmet Needs** – These are needs your prospect or customer doesn't realize they have because they've used stopgap measures or other workarounds to try and conceal the pain. But the pain is very real, and it's your job to show how their current situation is unsustainable because of it. Once you've done this, lead your audience to the idea that you've developed a more viable, long-term solution.

- **Unknown Needs** – These are often longer-range issues that come to light when a vendor has a fix for a problem the prospect didn't know they had. You can enhance the value of your deals by identifying these "off the radar" problems and bringing them into the lifecycle of the buying decision.

LEAD CONVERSION EFFECTIVENESS

Excellent
11%

Sketchy / Failing
47%

Good
42%

Corporate Visions Survey: *Got Content for Conversion?* November 2016

Only 11%
of companies describe their ability to convert content-driven leads as "excellent"

While **nearly half** all respondents consider their lead conversion efforts to be "sketchy" or altogether "failing"

Tim Riesterer
Chief Strategy and Research Officer

The Most Important Conversation Reps Aren't Prepared For

The lack of content that speaks to prospects' unconsidered needs—i.e. challenges or missed opportunities they don't yet know about—is likely making the conversion gap challenge worse for many companies. This kind of messaging is proven in **research** to create more urgency to change and differentiation. And, once you build that "why change" story into your demand generation content, you need to carry it over into your sales-facing assets.

A past Corporate Visions survey found that respondents identified "opportunity creation" conversations—interactions that established clear, need-driven buying intent—as the most important for achieving quota. But the same survey revealed that only half of salespeople feel prepared for this critical conversation. Essentially, salespeople are least prepared for their most important conversation. For this reason, salespeople need specific conversion gap enablement content for that early-stage, opportunity creation conversation, helping them improve conversion to pipeline starting with those crucial first conversations in the field.

Four Types of Insights

"Insights" is a big word right now in B2B marketing and sales. But it's also a subjective one, with a range of different meanings and understandings often attached to it. The murkiness around this term raises some obvious questions: What actually constitutes an effective insight? And how do you know what types of insights make the biggest impact in your demand generation and sales content?

Maybe most importantly: How do you know if the insights you're leveraging are actually driving action, or just recycling already-known facts and data points?
In a past survey, Corporate Visions identified four types of insights that companies tend to create and deliver:

• **Anecdotal Insights** – Typically created in-house, these focus on more tactical, day-to-day issues like best practices or lessons learned.

• **Authoritative Insights** – These insights incorporate the work of credible third-party sources like industry analysts.

• **Current Insights** – These are centered on original, company-generated research and surveys.

• **Visionary Insights** – These insights leverage in-house expertise and look to the future of the industry to define what's next.

Polling more than 400 B2B marketing and sales leaders, the survey found anecdotal insights—typically the easiest to develop—appear in content most often, but are considered by respondents to be the least effective at generating positive selling outcomes. Interestingly, visionary insights, which appear the least in content, are viewed as the most effective insights category.

Content Takeaways

Tim Riesterer
Chief Strategy Officer
Corporate Visions

Companies are applying an inverse logic to insights and content, and it's causing them to rely most heavily on the types of insights that have the least impact. When it comes to creating the urgency needed to compel prospects to leave their current situation, you need content that leans more toward the visionary end of the spectrum, where you can shape the conversation and introduce your prospects to challenges they aren't yet aware of.

In my mind, visionary insights are:

Original. They leverage first-party research that you conduct and that's statistically sound and relevant.

Exclusive. They include unique data points you harvest from your research which ideally present counterintuitive alternatives to conventional industry wisdom.

Forward-looking. They should help you create a content-driven narrative that explores the emerging issues, challenges and trends that your findings support.

The best insights reveal inconsistencies or uncertainties in the way your prospects are doing business today. To have that effect, they've got to be edgy, they've got to be forward-looking, and they've got to be backed by tested and proven research.

Conversion Gap Content, and How It Can Improve Your Lead to Pipeline Performance

Erik Peterson
EVP Consulting,
Corporate Visions

Challenges with converting marketing-driven leads could reflect a missing element in content programs at many companies—what Corporate Visions calls "conversion gap content." This type of content, geared for the first and second sales calls after the lead handoff, needs to do a few things well. First, it needs to connect the dots between the change management story told in companies' marketing assets to their field sales conversations. But it also needs to tell a story of its own, playing up the risks and threats of a prospect's current situation, and showing how those challenges can be resolved. In sum, this content should tell prospects why they should change, and why they should switch to you.

Here's a four-stage framework for structuring a story for this critical opportunity creation conversation. It's based on a specific choreography designed to lead prospects from an insight to a better future alternative.

1. **Insight** – Show and tell prospects something they don't know about a problem or challenge they didn't know they had (this is the basis of the "unconsidered needs" approach to messaging). This insight should highlight an inconsistency or deficiency that a prospect is experiencing today.

2. **Unsafe** – Use visual storytelling content to show why a prospect's status quo is untenable, and to reinforce why sticking with their current situation could prevent them from achieving their most important business goals.

3. **New Safe** – Show how a prospect can transition from an unsafe current scenario to a "new safe" alternative by showing contrast between the two, and demonstrating how the issues hurting them today can be resolved through change.

4. **Proof** – Finish with a story highlighting a comparable scenario in which another company resolved their challenges by switching to a different and better alternative. The content should accentuate the contrast between the pain of the unsafe situation and the relief of the new one.

Four-stage story framework

Sales Takeaways

A compelling stat or data point is the start of an insights-based message. But it's just that—a start. To really have an influence on buyer behaviors and emotions, your message and content needs to do more than create risk—it needs to show how you can resolve the risks you've identified with a new and better future alternative.

That risk-resolution structure can be the difference between creating excitement and inciting real buying action, so your conversion gap content needs to include it. In fact, Corporate Visions **research** found that an insights-based message that pairs risk and resolution, versus one that only creates risk, can give you a statistically significant edge in terms of impacting your prospects' behaviors and emotions.

What this boils down to is that you need to go "beyond risk" in your insights-based message, and develop enablement content that helps salespeople show how you can resolve the business risks you introduced.

Leslie Talbot
VP Content
Corporate Visions

Content Takeaways

If you're in B2B, you probably hear a lot about the value of sales methodologies and training programs, and how they can improve some of the most pivotal moments in your customer conversations. But what gets way less fanfare is its counterpart on the marketing side. Why is that? Why shouldn't companies have a marketing methodology that's just as steeped in core principles, and just as purposefully developed and applied as their sales training program?

Having a common messaging framework is the exception rather than the rule: **Less than 30 percent of companies actually follow a well-established message development process for their campaigns and content**, a Corporate Visions survey found. And that could be taking a toll at a time when content needs to move further downstream to enable salespeople and create the urgency to change.
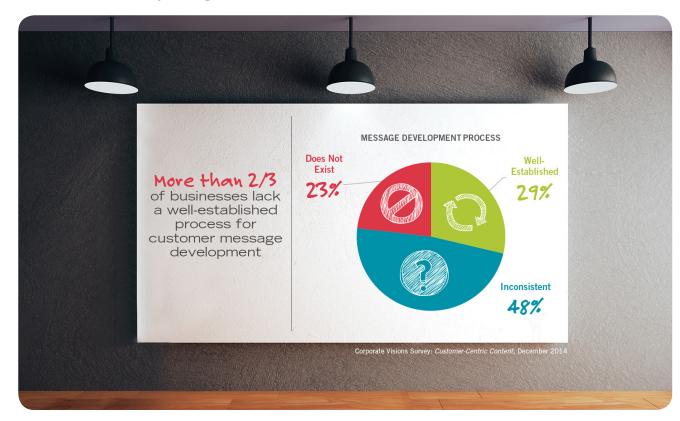
Your messaging and content are too important to leave to chance, or to hope your design and copy superstars will keep you on message every time. A messaging methodology that guides and certifies message creators across your company with a common approach—based on how buyers make decisions—will give you a competitive advantage with your story.

How a Messaging Methodology Can Help

The lack of distinct, insights-driven perspectives and good handoff content to sales are contributing to some of the problems with lead conversion identified in the survey. But both these challenges likely stem from a broader issue: the lack of a consistent customer messaging methodology. That means a common, repeatable approach to your marketing and sales enablement messaging and content. A prior Corporate Visions **survey** found that:

- **Only 29 percent** of companies follow a well-established message development process for their campaigns and content.

- **More than two-thirds** of companies either don't have an established message development process, or have one that's inconsistently applied to their message and content creation.

A messaging methodology can help companies drive consistency across their demand generation and sales enablement content, while ensuring that marketers and sales enablement professionals are fluent at creating differentiated, sales-ready messages.

More than 2/3 of businesses lack a well-established process for customer message development

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Does Not Exist **23%**

Well-Established **29%**

Inconsistent **48%**

Corporate Visions Survey: *Customer-Centric Content*, December 2014

Conclusion

As the survey shows, many companies are seeing subpar results with their marketing lead-to-sales pipeline conversions. Some of the biggest challenges appear to be related to messaging, and specifically, to the fact that companies aren't creating enough insights-driven content to drive action. After all, content is only as impactful as the message it conveys. The relative lack of insights-driven content—based on identifying "unconsidered needs" and linking them to your unique strengths—could be holding companies back from creating meaningful differentiation.

Another challenge area is lead handoffs. There's a need to equip salespeople with content that helps them link their conversations to demand generation messaging so they can master initial field conversations.

And, possibly aggravating both of the content problems above is the lack, at most companies, of a consistent, repeatable approach to creating sales-ready messaging and content—i.e. a messaging methodology.

Three potential fixes companies can make as they look to improve the performance of their content programs:

1 **Create more insights-driven content** based on "unconsidered needs" that link to your unique capabilities, and package that message in your marketing and sales enablement content.

2 **Develop specific lead "handoff" messaging and content** that follows a prescribed framework for better follow-up between campaign leads and first sales calls.

3 **Establish a common messaging methodology** that drives consistency across demand generation and sales enablement content, gives you a repeatable approach to creating sales-ready messages, and ensures marketers and sales enablement pros are well-versed at creating content that aligns to your point of view.

Authors

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Tim Riesterer is Chief Strategy & Research Officer at Corporate Visions. In that role, he sets the direction and develops products for the company. His books, Conversations That Win the Complex Sale and The Three Value Conversations, focus on improving market-ready messages, content and skills that marketers and salespeople can use to win more deals.

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About Corporate Visions

Corporate Visions is a leading marketing and sales messaging, content, and skills training company. Global B2B companies come to us when they want to:

- Develop compelling messages to break the status quo and differentiate their solutions;

- Deploy that message in the field through demand generation and sales enablement content; and

- Deliver sales skills training that helps salespeople confidently use these messages and content to create, elevate and capture more value in their customer conversations.

Corporate Visions helps clients such as ADP, Motorola, Philips, UPS, Cisco and others align marketing and sales with a repeatable approach for developing and delivering winning customer conversations.

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