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Best Practices for Working Leads



When a potential new customer expresses interest in your business, it's a reason to celebrate. Your efforts and your outreach have grabbed someone's notice. Now it's time to pick up the phone and make a call.

Ideally, you hear a voice on the line. It belongs to a person who did their homework, who knows exactly what they want, and, naturally, you're at the top of their shortlist. Success! Because they arrive ready to buy, you wouldn't call this prospect a lead. They're an "opportunity," because right off the bat, they intend to buy and are just one step away from closing.

Your next steps: Qualify and nurture

Rather than dismissing these so-called "dead-end leads," commit yourself to finding what may be hiding in plain sight. In this batch, there is likely a subgroup of leads that are sales qualified. They may not have the budget to buy yet. They may need to do more research. They may not even fully understand their options. However, they're just the right size, or their industry is an excellent fit for you. That means they'll one day be excellent clients for your business.

Take a step back and ask questions to discover which are high-potential leads and align yourself with your lead's timeline. Then you will, with some likelihood, convert these into future sales. When this happens, you've successfully nurtured a lead.

Nurturing a lead means asking qualifying questions, establishing a connection and keeping the conversation going with content and valuable information. Keep your company top of mind so that when the lead is finally ready to buy, they'll feel comfortable going to you, because you took the time to build trust and a relationship.

Everyone would love to see a higher volume of ironclad opportunities come in the door. While focusing your efforts on attracting more of these

However, when it comes to leads, what usually happens is you quickly hit a wall, a dead end. Maybe you're in the middle of your phone pitch, and your contact cuts in: Would you email the information? Far more likely, they won't answer the phone in the first place.

It's not just you. Leads usually fall under that "dead end" category. They rarely show up as sales-ready opportunities. However, don't make the mistake of overlooking the need to establish a relationship with all prospective customers.

is a worthy goal, it's also equally worthwhile to invest time and effort into lead nurturing.

With the help of this guide, you'll understand how the process works, so you can close more deals and grow your business.

3 reasons why lead nurturing is worth it

- **27% of all leads are sales-qualified. The other 73%, even if they're not ready to buy yet, are still worth pursuing.**
- **Nurturing leads can give you the edge over your competition because many sales reps give up on leads very early. 44% of sales reps give up after one failed follow-up.**
- **Nurturing leads generates a 20% increase in sales opportunities, and takes as little as 15 minutes a day. Think about what a 20% increase in sales could do for your business!**

Source: [Salesforce](#)

The sales funnel

Nothing illustrates the gap between lead and opportunity quite like the sales funnel. As prospects move from awareness to consideration to intent to purchase, they will move through the stages of the sales funnel. But what are the stages and who is in each stage?

STEP 1: PROSPECT

A prospect is someone you meet, who you are educating about your business. Perhaps your prospect saw your online ad, read your guest column for an industry publication, or handed you a business card at your booth at the trade show. Thanks to your outreach efforts, they're now aware of you.

STEP 2: LEAD

A lead is someone who raises their hand and shows an interest in your business. Whether they gave you a business card or filled out an online form, they have signaled interest in your product or service.

STEP 3: MARKETING-QUALIFIED LEAD

A lead becomes marketing qualified when they have engaged with your emails, content and more. This stage is something you would set internally as part of your evaluation process. Using the information provided by your lead, you'll decide if they meet the criteria to pursue further engagement or to hand off to a sales teammate.



STEP 4: SALES-QUALIFIED LEAD

This lead may not be ready to buy today but has a demonstrated need for your product, authority to make a purchase decision, and the budget to purchase it. Once a lead has reached this stage, sales can have a very meaningful conversation. Are the prospect's goals and your solution in alignment? Are you a good fit? Once you sales qualify a lead, sales initiates a focused pursuit of connecting and educating to move the lead into the opportunity stage.

STEP 5: OPPORTUNITY

An opportunity is a buyer with intent to purchase. When the sales-qualified lead is ready to buy, sales makes a pitch and focuses on closing a deal.

STEP 6: BUY

Once a prospect moves through the funnel from awareness to consideration to purchase, they become a buyer. Now that you've closed the deal, your company's efforts are focused on providing excellent, high-quality service.

The first rule: Speed wins

Once a lead gets in the door, it's time to get busy and respond. Because the first rule of following up with a lead is speed wins. You'll want to respond to your contact immediately. As in, right now. Don't go to lunch yet.

LEADS COOL OFF QUICKLY

While not all leads convert into a sale, research shows that a quick response to that first attempt at contact helps your cause. A lot. When someone serves the ball, you must be ready to jump into the game. However, if you're doing the equivalent of searching for your gear and changing into your racquetball garb, by the time you're ready to return the serve, you may be disappointed to find the lead has already left.

Here's what's known about the value of speed. Research by the [Harvard Business Review](#) shows what happens when online leads get a response within the hour. The seller is seven times more likely to qualify the lead than those who waited an hour or more. Fast responders are 60 times more likely to qualify the lead as those who wait 24 hours or more.

Here's where you have the edge: Most leads are left waiting around, so getting a jump on it is well worth your while.

- Only 26% of leads get a response within 5 minutes.
- The average response time for leads is 42 hours.

When you think about it, responding quickly is common sense. A lot can happen to your lead in an hour or a day. They could move on to another project, get up and go to a meeting, or worse, start talking to your competitor.

The takeaway here is once that lead rolls in, don't wait. To return to the racquetball analogy, you'll need to get your gear ready so you can jump on the court anytime. Preparing scripts and templates in advance can free up time for you to gather information about your lead so you can develop a customized response.

Expect many touches

So your lead didn't pick up the phone, despite showing interest in your business. As surprising as that is, don't be put off. It can take multiple attempts over several weeks before you connect. Here are some stats that illustrate that it takes persistence to connect with a lead.

- **Before you even connect with a buyer, it takes an average of 18 phone call attempts.**
- **Because less than 5% of voicemails get returned, it's critical to keep calling.**
- **Connecting with a prospect can take an average of 16 touch points over 2-4 weeks.**

Is there any advantage to this dogged effort? Research suggests yes. Most sales reps make no more than two attempts to make contact with a lead. Go above and beyond and you will increase the likelihood of connecting with your prospect.

Nail the message at first contact

Successful sales executives always begin with the end in mind. Without creating a map and a plan, you won't get anywhere when it's time to connect with a lead. That's why scripts and templates that help you create and polish your qualification questions are essential to establish a connection and kick off the nurturing process.

PHONE CALLS

Calling a lead is not far afield from making a cold call. Even though your lead initiated contact, don't pick up the phone assuming they're ready to buy. That lead could land anywhere in the sales funnel. The first step is to learn all you can, so you can devise the right solution. When you make contact, don't launch into a pitch (unless they already indicated they're ready to buy). Introduce yourself, make a brief value statement and ask detailed questions to qualify the lead. Your goal is to have a meaningful conversation. Here's a sample script:

Hi, (name). This is (your name) from (your company name). I'm calling today because based on the information you shared with us, I'm seeing a possibility that we can reduce your costs by implementing XYZ. If you don't mind, I'd love to go over a few questions with you so we can find out how we can be of help to you.

Your goal is to have a meaningful conversation with your lead. Instead of forcing the prospect to sit through a sales pitch they may not be ready to hear, you get a chance to listen and learn so that you can formulate the next steps.

10 sales qualifying questions

Naturally, you'll want to shape and revise these to match what you know about your lead.

1. What prompted you to get in touch?
2. What's the problem and what does the solution look like?
3. What is your main barrier to achieving your objective?
4. What's your current spending?
5. Have you worked with a vendor for this issue in the past, or do you take it on in-house?
6. What is your budget to handle this problem? If you don't have one at this time, when would you expect the funds to become available?
7. What does the decision-making process look like at your organization?
8. What is your timeline? When would you like to have a solution in place?
9. What happens if you do nothing?
10. What does success look like to you?

How to write attention-grabbing emails

If you don't reach your lead by phone on the first try, the next step is to send a follow-up email. Before you do, keep in mind that with 293 billion emails sent every day, according to Statista, your contacts have a full inbox. If a mere quarter of your leads open the email, that's considered a high open rate. That's why it's worth taking the extra effort to make your email stand out in a crowded inbox.

Craft a subject line and first sentence that punches through the clutter. Everyone sees the subject and first sentence first. In seconds, they'll decide whether your email is worth opening, or if it gets the delete treatment. So filter everything you write through the recipient's perspective.

- "Why should I care?"
- "What's in it for me?"
- "So what?"

So often, the headline is the last thing we write. Spend extra time on the subject and first line.

Stats and tips to help you write attention-getting subject lines

- **33% of email recipients open emails based on subject line alone, according to Convince and Convert.**
- **Increase your open rate by nearly 30% by including the recipient's first name in the subject line.**
- **Keep the subject short, succinct and easy to digest in 3 seconds — 3-4 words is ideal.**
- **Use promising but "no strings" concepts in the subject, like "demo," "opportunity," "connect," "conference."**
- **Be mindful of the time of day. Five minutes before the top of the hour is an excellent time for an email sendoff: You'll catch people as they wait for their next meeting to begin!**
- **Finally, hold the line on credibility, advises Zac Johnson in *5 Things You Can Do to Get More Customers to Open Emails*. Make sure those email subjects deliver exactly what's promised in the subject line. Otherwise, if you go for the gimmick, destroying trust is not worth the onetime spike in open rates.**

3 ways to get more oomph from your outreach efforts

Nothing takes the place of a live interaction when pursuing a lead. Still, there's something to be said for a well-timed, well-crafted email sent between phone calls. Consider using these tools and techniques to add value to your efforts.

TAKE THE TRIPLE-TOUCH APPROACH

Taking advantage of social channels can boost the effectiveness of your email and phone communications. Adding a LinkedIn component (or whichever social channel is most relevant to your industry) can help your prospects recognize your name when you email or call them. More than **4 in 10 sales professionals** (42%) say they've added 2-5 touches via LinkedIn communication. Taking on this "triple-touch" approach pays off, with a 28% higher progress to sales-qualified lead than those who rely solely on phone and email.

MASTER YOUR MESSAGE WITH A/B TESTING

It's easy to get attached to a clever email title, or an artfully worded value statement. However, beware of attachment because it can create blind spots. That's where A/B testing comes in. It sounds like a complicated marketing concept, but A/B testing is easily accomplished right at your desk. All you have to do is make a side-by-side comparison: Did more candidates respond to your email when they saw subject line A or subject line B? Which reach-out on LinkedIn performed better? Which value statement does a better job of keeping prospects on the phone? Set up a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, grab a notebook or even a whiteboard, and start tracking the outcomes.

STREAMLINE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS WITH SALES AND MARKETING TOOLS

Sales and marketing tools can help you tighten up the management of your sales communications. In the end, these can help you get more done, so the qualification process is much less labor-intensive, and adds touches to your clients. In recent years, sales reps cited up to **37% growth** in the number of touches with each contact, thanks to the use of sales and marketing tools.

- To streamline your phone strategy, automated tools like SalesLoft and Outreach eliminate many of the labor-intensive, repetitive tasks that go into building that perfect game plan to connect with your prospects. You can create templates for follow-up messages and define your cadences ahead of time, so you can stay on track and on schedule while connecting with your leads.
- Marketing automation tools, such as MailChimp, Active Campaign and Constant Contact, eliminate the guesswork from your next communication. At a glance, you can see which prospects are showing further interest, and which have fallen silent. More advanced automation tools like Salesforce Pardot and Marketo also can "score" prospects based on their responses, and will automatically deliver a targeted message based on that response, vastly reducing the labor from your email campaign.

Use these strategies and tools to help you get more done in less time, while achieving greater traction with your prospects.

b.

Maintain empathy for your lead and respect their journey

Persistence is always an admirable trait. However, when your goals are out of sync with the lead's, what happens? The prospective client gets annoyed and stops responding. That's when you'll want to bring a dose of empathy to the process.

Think of your buying behavior. If you're not ready to replace the deck in your back yard, there's no sales tactic (other than "free") that would hasten the yes. If your prospect doesn't have the budget, can't begin the project yet, or hasn't hired the seasonal help, your repeated attempts to deliver a pitch is a waste of their time, stressing them out with unwanted pressure. To ease this pain, they'll cut you loose. That's where you'll want to bring patience as a counterbalance to your persistence. If a sales-qualified lead isn't ready to buy, it's important to respect that. Here are a few tips for maintaining contact and building the relationship.

DON'T GO OVERBOARD ON TOUCH POINTS.

Keep a spreadsheet or monitor tasks in your CRM, and take notes of the pattern. While you may hear an often-cited one-size-fits-all level of, say, 18 touch points, maybe 7 is best for your industry.

BE TRUE TO YOUR WORD.

Let's say your prospect says the very earliest they'll be taking proposals is a year from now, and you promise to reconnect in nine months. Make good and sure you're not calling back six weeks from now, dialing for dollars. That's not only annoying, but it also tells the prospect you're willing to prioritize your needs over theirs.





GO BEYOND THE PHONE AND EMAIL.

As critical as connections are, a touch point can be defined as making contact. With the plethora of digital tools at your disposal, there are limitless ways to reach out and continue the conversation, while keeping it all effortless and authentic. If you have their mobile contact and opt-in approval, send a friendly but professional message with a code to an exclusive deal they can use right now.

FOCUS ON BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP.

Deploy friendly but pressure-free ways to stay in touch. Leave a positive comment on their social media post or their latest blog. Congratulate them on a new product launch. Is there a conference coming up? Don't fail to make time for an in-person meet-up to discuss the latest in

the industry or make introductions. Add value to what your prospect is interested in now and set the stage for the future. Remember, people do business with people they know, like and trust.

BE HELPFUL AND CONVERSANT.

Identify topics your prospect would find interesting. Think like an editor of an industry publication, and occasionally send an email with links to articles that speak to their professional interests. Even better, craft a monthly newsletter to clients and prospects that keeps them abreast of the latest.

When nurturing a lead, you're nudging the process forward, without force. The above tips are ways to maintain "light touches" while you're waiting for your lead's time to buy.

Keep it going after the lead “goes dark”

So for whatever reason, your sales-qualified lead isn't ready to buy — yet. That's where developing a library of timely, helpful content provides the win-win.

When firms deploy content marketing to generate leads and nurture prospects, they see six times higher conversion rates than firms that use other methods, according to the Content Marketing Institute.

Here are a couple of reasons why.

- As your prospect prepares to buy, they'll be doing their homework. Think of it as the B2B equivalent of a patient Googling their symptoms before they show up at the doctor's office. When they're looking for answers, your content can connect the dots for them.
- Content gives purpose to the nurturing process because the prospects get something in return. You're not just bugging them for a sale. You have a whitepaper that addresses one of their biggest challenges. Because your content provides something of value, it's a gesture that comes across as authentic and genuine.

Now that you know how content can do much of the heavy lifting during a less active stage of client nurturing, you'll want to collaborate with your marketing team to develop high-quality content your prospects will love. [Business.com](https://www.business.com) has some tips to help you get started with a business content strategy from scratch:



- Know what your audience cares about. Keyword research lets you see what your prospects are looking for. Developing personas puts you in the buyer's shoes.
- Answer the core concerns you uncovered with a variety of content. Emails, case studies, whitepapers, articles are all formats that serve up answers.
- Make your content discoverable. Put together a promotion plan so your prospects can put their hands on the answers they're seeking. Things like LinkedIn shares, sales cadences and webinars are all good ways to activate the content-reader connection.

Each lead is different, so make sure you map out the various problem-solution scenarios they face and use these as the premise for your content.

Blogs

Demonstrate thought leadership in your realm with posts that tackle all manner of subjects, from evergreen topics that never lose their relevancy to the trends of the day. When done right, blogging lets your brand show up on search engine results, and establishes your expertise in your space and specialty, building trust through the nurturing process. When creating content, think of how it can be of use to your target audience in the **moment they're contemplating a purchase**.

Whitepapers

Whitepapers tackle a topic in-depth. By focusing on presenting your expertise rather than the products and services you have to offer, this content can provide tremendous value to your prospects. Building a library of this gated content and posting it on your site is a “traditional” method to help you generate leads. For example, a robust and informative how-to guide is attractive to just about any audience, whether you're talking about consumers or a B2B scenario. Then, distribute items like stress balls from a trade show booth. When you initiate a “How's it going?” email during the nurturing process, be sure and throw in a link to your latest eBook.

Newsletters

The weekly or monthly newsletter is a great all-around tool for staying in touch with, well, everyone, from loyal customers to new prospects. Thanks to e-mail marketing tools, managing your content and a subscription list is simple and straightforward. Then, create content that gets to the heart of your prospects' core questions. Ideally, you'll send links with intros and headlines to original blogs that live on your site. However, you can also throw in some links to industry news and updates, accompanied by your analysis. Don't forget, there's plenty of room here for promotional material as well. (As mentioned earlier, use an A/B test to see which subject lines inspire more people to open your well-crafted email.)

Industry Publications

Another way to stay top of mind is to submit articles to industry publications. By positioning yourself as a thought leader and adding value and insight, both prospects and customers will take note. Each publication will likely have its own editorial guidelines, so be sure to review those before you craft your article.

Let your customers tout your value

Finally, rather than doing all the talking, take a step back and let your customers sing your praises. Ask your customers to write you an online review, or provide a testimonial or case study that you can share with your prospects.

GOOD ONLINE REVIEWS BOOST YOUR REPUTATION

At some point during the buying process, your prospects conduct online research about your company. The last thing you want is to allow the handful of clients who didn't work out to artificially drive down your overall star rating. When a project succeeds, or a client comes back for renewal, don't fail to encourage your client to hop online and give you a star rating and a quick review.

REVIEWS ARE EFFECTIVE

If someone is willing to take time to tout your greatness, that sends a strong message to prospects. A whopping 92% of B2B respondents said they're more likely to purchase after reading a review from a trusted (named) source.

TESTIMONIALS ARE VERSATILE

Testimonial statements and case studies from real customers and businesses can liven up your website. These can also be repurposed into social posts. Also, for those who are looking for something meatier, a library of case studies can showcase your best work (and the value you deliver to your customers). Tip: The most influential case studies use a simple format that makes for quick but impactful reading with three elements: the problem, the solution (that's you) and the outcome (also you). For best results, make sure the outcome is something concrete with measurable results.

Communicate value in your customers' words

- Testimonials, reviews and case studies can be more effective than hearing a salesperson explain the value of your company's services.
- If you don't have testimonials or case studies, get in touch with your star clients.
- Simply ask your customers what they like about working with you.

Best of all, a testimonial is a no-cost way to show off your value at any stage of the sales process. All you have to do is ask.

The mastery of lead-nurturing techniques can help you identify high-potential clients and where they're at in the buyer's journey, so they get the right message in front of them at the right time. Focus on building connections and developing relationships, and eventually, you'll start seeing higher conversions and growing your business.

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To learn more about how business.com can add value to your lead generation and outcome marketing efforts, connect with our team at sales@business.com.