

## Demand and Account-Based Marketing: Planning Assumptions 2021

Forrester SiriusDecisions research has identified six areas of opportunity that should drive the agenda of demand and account-based marketing (ABM) leaders in 2021

The future success of demand and ABM teams depends on their ability to invest in technology, programs, and content that can detect, measure, and enable buying groups

Marketers unable to develop programs that collect and analyze buying group signals and use these insights to tailor buyer responses will fail to meet buyer expectations

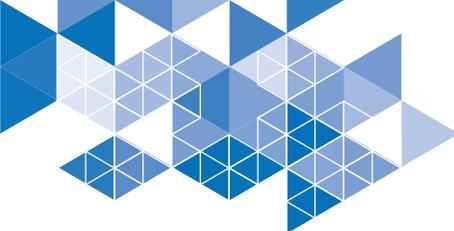
Benjamin Franklin once said, “Out of adversity comes opportunity” — a sentiment that rings true for many B2B demand and account-based marketing (ABM) leaders today. With many of 2020’s marketing plans having been discarded or disrupted almost immediately due to the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic upheaval, marketing leaders are understandably cautious about planning for 2021.

However, the recent disruptions to the B2B buying process have actually increased the focus on how demand marketing and ABM programs can support the achievement of growth objectives. B2B buyers have accelerated their use of digital interactions and are signaling they want more from sellers. The use of customized content is increasing, and measurement is expanding beyond traditional marketing KPIs. ABM and demand marketing technologies continue to advance rapidly, and ABM and demand marketing teams are being empowered to work together in new ways. In this brief, we identify six trends that will affect the priorities of demand and ABM leaders in 2021.

### **One: Adopt Buying Group Metrics to Avoid Becoming Irrelevant**

B2B marketing teams have long focused on performance metrics such as the number of marketing qualified leads (MQLs) and the amount of marketing-sourced pipeline as the central components in their dashboards. Over time, however, focusing exclusively on these metrics has not yielded the desired results, and issues such as low-quality leads that fail to convert or are ignored by sales have persisted. At the heart of these issues is the mistaken notion that individual buyers (represented by individual leads) make buying decisions. In reality, B2B buyers rarely make buying decisions on their own. Instead, buying groups — multiple people working together to solve a business need — make these decisions. While performance metrics that look at individual leads may provide a sense of accountability and attribution, because these metrics fail to reflect buying group behaviors, they actually alienate sales and drive significantly poorer business results.

Transitioning from a view of demand based on individual leads to a buying-group-centric view is the single most impactful way for marketing to increase the conversion of demand to revenue. The good news is that increased awareness of this issue and greater availability of enhanced ABM and demand marketing technologies are driving adoption of metrics and systems focused on buying groups. Now is the time for marketing and sales to organize around a common goal: the identification, engagement, qualification, and successful



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winning of opportunities. Joint accountability across marketing and sales for this entire process is the way forward. New metrics that provide insight into buying groups and the health of each opportunity include the volume of interactions and the influence that these interactions exert to accelerate the buying process across different buying group members.

*SiriusAction: Introduce buying group measurement with a series of steps. Start with interaction data within current systems to identify engagement by individuals who may belong to a buying group, as marketing programs and websites frequently generate engagement from multiple members of a buying group tasked with researching solutions. Once interactions are identified, consolidate them into a buying group view and make them visible to business development reps (BDRs) who can follow up with the group as a whole. Consider adding a buying group engagement score to the measurement strategy (see the brief “Moving From Leads to Buying Groups in One Easy Step”). Finally, create meaningful incentives for BDRs to deliver opportunities to sales that include multiple qualified members of each buying group.*

## **Buying Signals Are Everywhere — Stop Ignoring Them and Start Acting on Them**

B2B marketing has always been based on the simple concept of signal and response — i.e., receiving signals from prospects on the basis of their reactions to a marketing stimulus and then delivering the proper response. ABM and demand technologies are now available to significantly transform the value of this signal-response sequence. Signals traditionally found within a prospect’s interaction data still provide a rich source of insights that enable marketing and sales to deeply understand buyers; their needs, challenges, and desires; and where they are in their journey. The scope of these signals, however, is expanding, reaching beyond a single individual (e.g., a contact who completed a form) to include the ability to capture and align named and anonymous signals of interest at the individual, buying group, and account levels. These signals can be sourced directly from first-party intent (i.e., signals from owned properties and programs), second-party data sources (i.e., a partner or provider’s first-party data), or third-party topic-driven sites that are approved for use by in-house data privacy experts such as the legal, risk management, and data privacy teams. The combination of signals from multiple sources aggregated at the account and buying group levels can provide detailed insight into a buying group’s true propensity to buy.

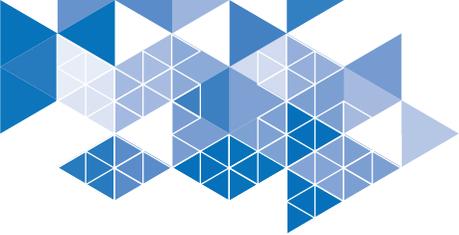
The sophistication and precision of the response marketers can generate through the use of these signals have also improved dramatically. ABM and demand marketers can now leverage analysis and signal interpretation techniques to guide buyers to the next best action. To achieve this goal, marketers must be able to constantly examine old and new signals and use them to guide their buyers. Planning, execution, and optimization must therefore be iterative — driven by an evolving understanding of buyer expectations, enhanced by regular activation of new data sources and insights, and powered by ongoing advancements in technology.

*SiriusAction: Understand the different types of signals generated by buyers and buying groups as they move through different stages in the buyer’s journey, where to capture those signals, and — most importantly — how to classify and connect those signals across data sources, program activation systems, and demand management workflows (see the brief “Identifying and Overcoming Buying Group Blindness”). Next, calibrate ABM and demand systems and processes to properly ingest, process, and respond to these signals (see the brief “Sirius Innovations: Artificial Intelligence to Drive the Next Best Action”). Implement a content measurement system and leverage measurement data to create a feedback loop of content-based intent signals to help understand and augment buyer personas, provide insights for content activation and adaptation, and deliver hyper-relevant buying experiences (see the brief “Introducing the Content Contextualization Continuum”).*

## **Expect ABM and Demand Infrastructure to Converge and Disrupt the Status Quo**

ABM and demand marketing technologies, as well as the related infrastructure, are moving toward convergence, driven by mergers and acquisitions as well as point solutions that have grown into broad solutions by adding features that overlap with other technologies. For example, marketing automation platforms (MAPs) are adding more ABM features, and ABM technologies are adding more MAP features. This combination introduces opportunities and risks for B2B companies. Broad-based vendors promise their solutions can provide multi-feature compatibility, seamless data flow, and fewer integration points than separate solutions.

These features can improve the customer experience and internal business operations as long as feature overlap is minimized. For example, many organization using MAPs, ABM technologies, sales force automation platforms, sales



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engagement platforms, and customer success applications have overlapping data management, advertising, email, personalization, and reporting capabilities. Overlap is inefficient and can hurt the customer experience (e.g., by inadvertently sending the same person conflicting emails from two different systems or missing an opportunity to personalize a website visit on the basis of previous interactions that were tracked in a separate system).

Infrastructure convergence extends beyond technologies. It also promises to make data easier to acquire and access, but accessing the data is only the first step. Interpreting data within and across systems is key to applying insights across accounts, opportunities, buying groups, and individuals while not misusing personally identifiable information or filling buyer profiles with duplicate or erroneous data. To realize the true benefits this data can bring, marketers must be trained to use AI functionality to interpret data and design programs that deliver buyer enablement in real time.

*SiriusAction: Reassess marketing strategies and define the associated requirements and technology capabilities. Develop a scorecard of capabilities, features, and benefits, focusing on selecting technologies with capabilities that will help create the best customer experience and help buying groups buy. To create a competitive advantage, invest in a core of consolidated platforms with flexible integration points that allow best-of-breed point solutions to plug in, and then use point solutions to handle specialized tasks to support the organization's unique customer experience. Leverage a scorecard to guide assembly of the consolidated platforms and flexible specialized solutions (see the Business Requirements Guides "Demand Marketing Program Design and Activation: Business Requirements," "ABM Strategy, Goals and Alignment: Business Requirements," and "Account-Based Marketing Program Planning and Execution: Business Requirements," the Core Strategy Report "Demand Waterfall Activation Requirements," and "Introducing the SiriusDecisions Revenue Technology Model").*

## **Good Things Come in Small Packages — Atomize Content to Enable Advanced Activation**

To support and advance hyper-personalization capabilities and optimize responses to buying signals, B2B marketing teams must work together in the coming year and beyond to prioritize, adopt, and mature their content atomization capabilities. Content atomization, also known as modular content, is the practice of turning content elements such as

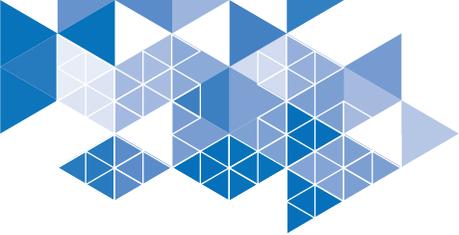
titles, paragraphs, images, and slides into discrete, tagged components within systems that enable them to be created, managed, activated, and measured at the completed-asset level as well as the individual component level.

B2B organizations that become more sophisticated with content atomization and metadata management practices can build customization capabilities with scale and agility and support AI-driven activation scenarios in which machines autonomously customize content by combining different content components on the basis of profile, activity, and derived data (see the brief "Introducing the SiriusDecisions Demand Content Articulation Model"). Content atomization also can support more intelligent and effective automated conversations through chatbots and virtual assistants. Even without automation and AI, content atomization approaches applied during content creation can increase flexibility in customizing content assets to support demand orchestration on the basis of persona, industry, geography, or other attributes that would drive personalization needs.

*SiriusAction: Componentize all web page templates within web content management (WCM) systems and update the back-end WCM fields to enable atomization best practices during the web content publishing process. When embarking on this process, partner with and learn from peers who have more experience with structured content principles and related metadata requirements — e.g., content operations, knowledge management, and/or technical content teams). Next, ensure metadata and taxonomy best practices are applied to atomized content elements to enable accurate activation and analytics (see the briefs "Content Atomization, the Sirius Way" and "Introducing the SiriusDecisions Taxonomy Lifecycle Framework" and the event presentation "The Keys to the Content Kingdom: Unlocking Your Content's Potential With Metadata, Taxonomy, and Semantic AI").*

## **In the Era of Buyer Enablement, Stand Out in the Crowd**

The speed and extent of changes to B2B buying habits in 2020 has meant that many organizations were unprepared to deal with the magnitude of the shift to digital. As a result, buyers relying heavily on digital interactions to support their buying decision processes have often been frustrated by the quality of their vendor interactions. Buyers want more than just click-based interactions; they expect organizations to support open, connected, intuitive, and immediate exchanges designed to support the whole buying group (not just engage lone buying



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group members) as they move through their collective buying decision process (see brief “Introducing the SiriusDecisions Buyer Empowerment Model”). ABM practitioners and demand marketers who can pivot from buyer engagement to buying group enablement will win.

With the expectation that in-person interactions will remain limited in 2021, ABM and demand marketers must be creative in identifying and experimenting with compelling ways to drive buyer enablement. Shifting from buyer engagement to buyer enablement starts with understanding the requirements of delivering respectful, relevant buyer interactions with all buying group members in accounts of any size (see the brief “Milestones for Delivering Respect and Relevance in the Age of the Customer”). The second step is understanding each buyer’s context and intent within the buying group to drive valuable recommendations (see the brief “Introducing the Content Contextualization Continuum”). Finally, marketers must connect all available touchpoints and insights from the entire buying group to ensure every interaction moves the conversation forward (see the brief “Five Opportunities for Innovation in Demand Marketing”).

*SiriusAction: Introduce or increase support for digitally enabled conversational interactions (see the brief “Introducing the Conversational Interaction Framework”). Focus on offering these interactions in a non-intrusive, respectful way. When designing them, incorporate deep insights about the buying group, the goals of buying group members and sellers for the interaction, the delivery mechanism characteristics, and the optimal buyer experience for each conversation type. Plan to continuously iterate on the design approach to shape meaningful conversational interactions, incorporate new learnings, and quickly identify emerging use cases and personalities.*

## **Don't Fear Disruption — Embrace Adaptability**

Due to the pandemic, marketing leaders have canceled live events or adapted them to digital formats, shifted people to new roles, reallocated budgets, and refocused buyer messaging. The situation also has forced many sales and marketing leaders to rethink and even reinvent their

go-to-market strategy to adapt to buyers’ changing needs. Fortunately, many ABM and demand teams have used this shift as an opportunity to embrace experimentation and adaptability.

Although some normalcy may return in 2021, marketing teams that successfully convert current experimentation into a permanent change can establish a strong competitive edge. Freed from their previous processes, these teams will adopt experimentation-friendly practices and test new approaches, with impacts beyond marketing program design and execution. Embracing adaptability also can help marketers collaborate more effectively with peers, innovate more successfully with scarce resources, and learn new skills faster. They also are better positioned to deal with any future changes. To institutionalize this new way of working, however, marketing leaders must act quickly to capitalize on this year’s learnings and start building them into next year’s plans.

*SiriusAction: To embrace adaptability, start by evaluating current talent pools and emphasizing the development of a team that has broad, modular skill sets and capable of working in flexible groups (see the briefs “Incubating Demand With Agile Teams” and “Adopting an Agile Approach to Account-Based Marketing” and the Core Strategy Report “A Day in the Life of an Agile Marketing Team.”). Focus on building a marketing culture in which the left (technology) and right (creative) sides of the marketing brain are nurtured (see the event presentation “Rewiring the Demand and ABM Brain for an AI-Driven World”).*

## **The Sirius Decision**

While the unexpected and chaotic changes triggered by the 2020 pandemic may have been difficult for B2B companies, they served to reinforce the existing need for demand and ABM marketers to be more open to altering their traditional processes and mindsets to address the changing landscape. Leaders who are able to embrace the opportunities presented by the planning assumptions in this brief will have what they need to succeed in 2021: a clear path forward to build a resilient demand generation engine and an unswerving focus on identifying and meeting buyer expectations.