

A Metia best practice guide

Account-Based Marketing (ABM)

5 questions CMOs should ask about their ABM programs



metia

Account-Based Marketing (ABM) is a mainstream play in B2B enterprise marketing, allowing businesses to focus resources on the customers and prospects that present the greatest opportunity.

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Introduction

Account-Based Marketing (ABM) allows businesses to focus resources on the customers and prospects that present the greatest opportunity.

Enabled by advances in technology and encouraged by demonstrable return on investment (ROI), ABM is a mainstream play in B2B enterprise marketing.

A recent survey of B2B marketers by trade body ITSMA found 77% of respondents reporting a 10% or greater uplift in ROI from ABM programs versus traditional marketing activities – with 45% reporting ABM as more than twice as effective.¹

However, while B2B firms are making significant investments in ABM, most programs are still in their infancy. Of the marketers surveyed by ITSMA, 52% reported ABM programs in their first year; with only 17% of programs into their third year or more.

Generating returns from ABM is demanding. It requires content and communications that inform, educate, and stimulate action – and these must be delivered in the right formats, at the right times, through the right channels.

ITSMA 2018 ABM benchmark study



45% of B2B marketers report ABM to be twice as effective as traditional marketing activities¹

¹ Source: ITSMA <https://www.itsma.com/research/raising-the-game-with-abm-2018-abm-benchmark-study/>

This requires a detailed understanding of your customers and prospects, along with operational and creative excellence to ensure consistent execution.

While technology plays a key role in ABM execution, it does not guarantee success. For the time being at least, success depends on human intelligence and good judgement – and this is a concern for many marketers. A recent survey by marketing automation provider Pardot found the “lack of ability to execute” listed as the biggest fear of failure for ABM.²

CMOs must address these concerns head-on, playing an active role in understanding and interrogating strategy, and ensure they have the tools and personnel in place for success.

This guide provides CMOs with 5 questions to ask their teams. These simple questions cut through the ABM hype to help you understand the maturity of your program and maximize your ROI.

We hope you find it useful.

Peter Morgan

Vice President, Demand
Metia Group

“For companies investing in ABM, programs are taking a substantial share of marketing budgets and ABM principles are beginning to influence the way B2B firms go to market overall.”

ITSMA

²Source: Pardot <https://www.pardot.com/blog/2018-findings-the-state-of-account-based-marketing/>

1 Which accounts should I target?

ABM succeeds when marketing and sales resources are focused on the accounts most likely to buy. Identifying these accounts is critical to success.

Defining your target accounts requires buy-in from marketing and sales. This means working together to identify and prioritize accounts that will move the business forward – then agreeing the investment to be made in each target.

The sales organization is a good place to start. Focusing on existing prospects can help to quickly demonstrate impact, ensuring sales buy-in to the process. ABM can increase the velocity of opportunities through the pipeline, leading to rapid impact on revenue.

Similarly, aftersales or support teams will have a view on which customers represent the biggest opportunities for cross- and up-selling or, conversely, customers that are at risk of lapsing.

CRM data should also be analyzed. If your customers have fixed milestones such as contract renewals, these should be surfaced within your strategy. If you lack contacts at a key account, or need to expand relationships across the org chart, ABM can serve to expand your reach.

Work with sales to identify and prioritize accounts that will move the business forward – then agree the investment you wish to make in each target.

Clean and current data within your CRM is critical for insight. If an account's records haven't been updated for 12 months, this data is unlikely to offer useful insight.

Advances in technology, including predictive analytics, can also be used to guide strategy. A growing selection of vendors allow organizations to match in-house customer data with a wealth of third-party data sources to identify high-priority, high-value, in-market prospects – and the topics they are interested in.

As you build a target list, focus on prioritizing accounts based on their potential value to the business. A simple stack ranking will help you tier accounts and assign appropriate levels of investment. It is critical that both your marketing and sales leadership are agreed on the final targets to ensure buy-in across the organization.

Things change. Both in your own business and in your clients' businesses. To ensure your program evolves to support business objectives, agree a regular cadence to review and update your target list.

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2 How do I engage difficult-to-reach clients?

A tiered approach works well in ABM, with plans to engage targets on a one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many basis.

The approach to engagement includes any, and all, marketing channels – with account-targeting applied as a filter, either manually or through technology. Integrating online and offline tactics invariably improves your chances of success.

In our approach to ABM, Metia has championed the notion of a Fair Exchange of Value. Modern audiences cannot be duped into dialogue. They are aware of each micro-transaction that takes place during interaction, whether it is giving up a few seconds to investigate the contents of an email, or committing much more time to a face-to-face meeting.

Acknowledging that a Fair Exchange of Value needs to be provided at every tier raises the bar for your marketing team, but it will prevent an ABM program from starting with an unrealistically optimistic engagement strategy.

Engagement at every tier should be based on a fair exchange. Establishing a reward or return for each engagement is critical. Targets will not respond unless they see a personal or organizational benefit.

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A tiered approach to ABM

One-to-one



Generate personal, face-to-face contact with your most important customers and prospects. This requires highly personalized outreach and a strong value exchange, with regular involvement from senior executives. Build strong incentives through access to relevant influencers and unique experiences.

One-to-few



Target a longer list of new and existing customers, delivering content tailored to each organization or industry. While technology and automation play more of a role in this tier – for example, through personalized content – activity should be led by experts within sales and product functions.

One-to-many



Scale and automate your program to reach hundreds, or even thousands, of target accounts. Led by marketing, this outreach is facilitated through technology – for example, targeting audiences through account-targeted display advertising.

While ABM platforms can play a key role in your strategy, human intelligence is required to maximize their impact.

A range of technology is now available to run ABM programs. Metia tracks and uses more than a dozen of these vendors, each with different strengths in their capabilities for different purposes. While these platforms can

be applied to play a key role in your strategy, human intelligence is required to maximize their impact. Ensure expectations are set accordingly within both marketing and sales organizations.

3 How do I start a conversation with new prospects?

Good ABM programs will turn one-way outreach into a two-way conversation with your sales teams.

Genuine conversations will develop only when prospects can see value. This requires a deep understanding of their pain points and ambitions – and evidence that you have successfully addressed similar issues for others.

Customer decision making is not purely logical. This is especially true in B2B, where the personal risks of purchases are far greater than in B2C. This means listening to and understanding the signals you are prompting in customers throughout each buyer journey, and then feeding this insight into every touch point of your program – from banner ad creative through to face-to-face meetings with senior executives.

Developing this knowledge requires deep research on every target. CRM data and anecdotal feedback from sales teams can contribute critical information on known customers. Desk research is often valuable to ensure communications to new targets hit the mark.

Simplicity and personalization are essential. When sharing content with a target, engage them on their terms. Use the channels where they are most active. Remember, people like to talk with people, not companies – and definitely not to automated systems. Tailor your message to every target, adding context specific to their role or company.

Engage individuals on their terms. Remember, people like to talk with people, not companies—and definitely not to automated systems.

An overreliance on automated tactics, or on a single channel, risks undermining your efforts. Ensure a balance of online and offline tactics in your program. A handwritten note accompanying a piece of direct mail is a powerful statement that a customer or prospect matters to your business.

Be prepared when things don't go your way. We are all bombarded by marketing, so make sure you are ready to overcome initial skepticism or be ignored, and are able to offer something of value at every touch point.

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4 How do we turn conversations into revenue?

Once a conversation is underway, the role of sales is to develop the relationship and sell – and this too requires support from marketing.

Ensure sales teams understand the audience's pain points to capitalize on conversations as they unfold. They must be empowered to discuss and explore the customer's priorities, and not to immediately talk product, unless and until the customer is ready to have that conversation. Providing materials to help sustain and evolve that first exploratory conversation is critical.

The orchestration of a campaign requires competency in running integrated programs across multiple channels, and an appetite to operate close-up to customers when one-to-one contact is important.

ABM campaigns require discipline. Success relies on interactions between marketing and sales, even with a modest target list. Take a simple campaign targeting 20 organizations with a direct mail desk drop – with follow up by email and phone. If you are seeking to engage with numerous individuals across multiple touch points, the number of deliverables and individual engagements to be sequenced quickly escalates depending on the sophistication of the campaign.

Governance is an important part of a campaign. Sales teams have a lot on their plate. It's important to balance outreach so they aren't overwhelmed and see the benefit from participating. Even with the best intentions, some policing is required – ensuring commitments are met, so the investment made to start a conversation isn't wasted.

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5 Can we use ABM to scale our customer relationships?

Through intelligent ABM strategies, marketers can identify and nurture client-side advocates to expand customer relationships.

In ITSMA's 2018 ABM benchmark study, 66% of respondents reported that, "ABM accounts are more likely to provide positive references and advocates than other accounts."³

Customers advocate for you when their actions bring mutual benefits. ABM programs help brands to identify happy customers and to encourage and reward their advocacy.

Start by looking for customers who've had great experiences with your business – particularly those who have shared positive feedback. Prioritize people who have a high degree of influence on future purchasing decisions – bear in mind these may not always be the most senior client-side contacts.

For many marketers this process can be informal, asking sales teams to gather and share anecdotal feedback. In larger enterprises, the process may require support from technology – for example, through social media monitoring.

ITSMA 2018 ABM benchmark study



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³Source: ITSMA <https://www.itsma.com/research/raising-the-game-with-abm-2018-abm-benchmark-study/>

In some accounts, you'll find scores of potential advocates – in others, less than a handful. Either way, you need to make them know they are valued. For some, this may take the form of a shared experience. Simple hospitality still has a role to play in building trust in human relationships. Others may be excited by intellectual stimulation – for example, an invitation to join an industry roundtable to learn best practice. Understanding the motivations of each target is important in getting the balance right.

In addition to making your customers feel valued and recognized, provide them with the tools to evangelize inside their own business. Share upcoming reports and thought leadership pieces ahead of publication, under embargo if necessary. Provide regular access to your senior executives and share product roadmaps – focusing on strategic viewpoints rather than sales messages. If they have a question or issue, ensure it is prioritized.

Provide customers with the tools to evangelize inside their own business – with a focus on strategic viewpoints rather than sales messages.

Once you've developed your relationship, ask them if they can help you. This could be anything from introducing you to others within the organization to providing a reference in an external pitch. Whatever it is, make sure your request is appropriate given their level of engagement.

Always remember that advocacy is a two-way street. Success depends on mutual benefits. Frequent communication and a helpful spirit of collaboration between sales and marketing will help you get the balance right.

About Metia

Metia Group is a global marketing agency with offices in London, Seattle, Austin, and Singapore. We employ some 120 marketing professionals; each is expert in a particular area of specialization. Our clients include big corporations and ambitious businesses. We provide them with structured marketing programs that reach across geographies, scale massively, can be deployed systematically, and are measured relentlessly.

Metia has specialist services designed to support our clients in the areas of Insight, Demand, Content, and Advocacy. These services are based upon deep expertise, proven methodologies, and are enabled by unique tools and systems. Our Content Resonance System (CRS), Global Content Network (GCN), and Performance Benchmark System (PBX) are used by many of the world's largest corporations to better connect with their customers.

To learn more about our capabilities and discuss how we could help you reach and engage your target audiences with focused, measurable campaigns, please get in touch at www.metia.com/contact.

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