Marketing insight paper

in association with

Content priorities in the IT decision cycle

Optimising your digital asset portfolio for maximum impact

Freeform Dynamics, 2018

About this report

This report provides an analysis and discussion of the IT decision cycle and the role of digital content in that context. Along the way, it presents results from a recent survey of 1,144 participants involved in technology-related buying activity.

If you are relatively new to technology marketing, or are more experienced but interested in a different and very pragmatic (rather than theoretical) perspective, you should find this report a comfortable read from beginning to end.

If you are confident in your knowledge of the way decisions are made, then you can skip or skim-read the parts of the document that are less relevant to you. We have organised the report into the following three parts to assist with this.

PART 1

Background and recap of fundamentals

Introduces the research presented in this report and recaps some important fundamentals such as the role of the CIO, how IT and business teams work together, and the activities that take place in the decision cycle.

If you are an experienced marketer, you may wish to skip or skim-read this section.

Page 3

PART 2

Mapping your digital content portfolio onto decision cycle activities

Reviews the types of content prioritised by those involved in the technology buying process, and then maps specific content types onto key activities within the decision cycle.

This section is highly recommended if you are looking to review and optimise your content portfolio. It will be particularly useful if you are trying to address sales and marketing cycle friction and/or sales funnel leakage.

Page 8

PART 3

Leveraging diverse sources and channels to achieve reach coverage and impact

Discusses buyer views of different content sources and inputs, e.g. the press, industry analysts, bloggers, consultants and so on. Also looks at specific subject-matter interests, covering topics ranging from emerging technologies and workplace transformation, through the datacentre and infrastructure services, to software delivery.

Recommended reading if you are interested in working more effectively with the influencer ecosystem in a coordinated manner.

Page 11

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PART 1

Background and recap of fundamentals

Introduction

The technology used by any business has a big impact on how well it operates and competes. Against this background, those involved in IT strategy, planning and procurement take significant technology investment decisions very seriously. They go through various steps and activities as they define needs, explore options and ultimately select suppliers and solutions. This buying process typically involves a range of different disciplines and stakeholders from both IT and the business.

If you work in a technology sales, marketing or PR role, whether in-house or agency-based, it can be hard to prioritise your content investments to support such complex buying and selling activity. Focusing purely on generic messages and material rarely works effectively, yet the other extreme of producing hundreds of assets to deal with every angle in every scenario is both unmanageable and cost-prohibitive.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The technology buying process typically involves a range of different disciplines and stakeholders from both IT and the business, with each player having their own perspective on what's important and why.

The research laid out and discussed in this paper is designed to help. Based on input from 1,144 people involved either directly or indirectly in the investment cycle, we start out by reviewing some IT decision-making fundamentals. From there we go on to look at inputs into the process, and more specifically the kind of content seen as most valuable at each stage in the buying cycle from the buyer's perspective. As the technology selling process is essentially the mirror image of this, the insights will help you make prioritisation calls when planning your next launch or campaign.

Inputs to this paper

The primary source of data for this paper is a recent survey conducted by Freeform Dynamics in collaboration with *The Register*. In line with the focus of our discussion, all figures relate to a subset of the overall study sample comprised of those who declared they were involved in technology decision-making activity (Figure 1).

Overview of study

- Research designed and analysed by Freeform Dynamics
- Executed via The Register (online survey of readership during Summer 2018)
- 1,144 respondents involved in the decision cycle (subset of larger group)
- Mix of enterprise, mid-market and SMB
- Emphasis on native English-speaking geographies (e.g. UK and USA)

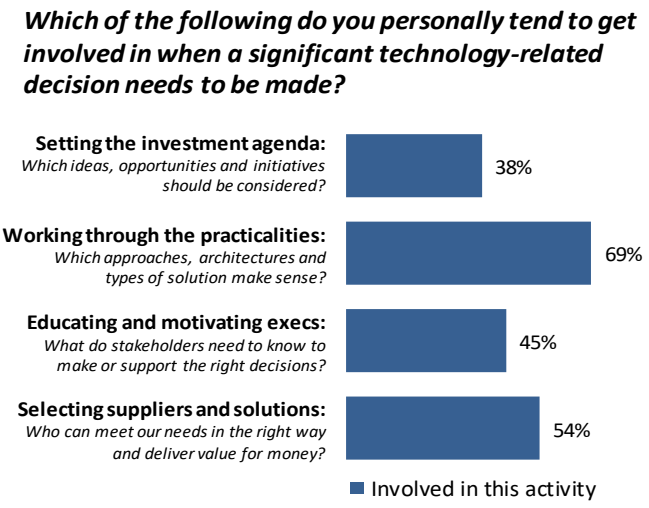

Figure 1 Overview of study and involvement of sample in decision-making activity

The other big input to this paper, apart from the accumulated knowledge from literally hundreds of surveys conducted by Freeform Dynamics over the past decade, is a smaller but highly informative study performed towards the end of 2017. This has already been written up in a report entitled 'The Politics and Practicalities of IT Procurement'. This is available for free download from www.freeformdynamics.com.

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Procurement fundamentals

If you are an experienced marketing professional, some of what we are about to cover may be very familiar to you. We make no apologies for this because we have found from experience that some of the fundamentals we will be reviewing are often forgotten or overlooked in the cut and thrust of day-to-day marketing activities. Plus, quite frankly, there are some myths that circulate within technology marketing circles that we need to dispel, as they can easily trip you up if you are newer to the game.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Targeting the CIO is necessary but insufficient.

The role of the CIO

Whether they are called the CIO, or more likely go under some other title, the head of IT is often the focus for messaging and marketing activity. This makes absolute sense, so long as it's not at the expense of communicating with other IT roles, especially in larger organisations (Figure 2).

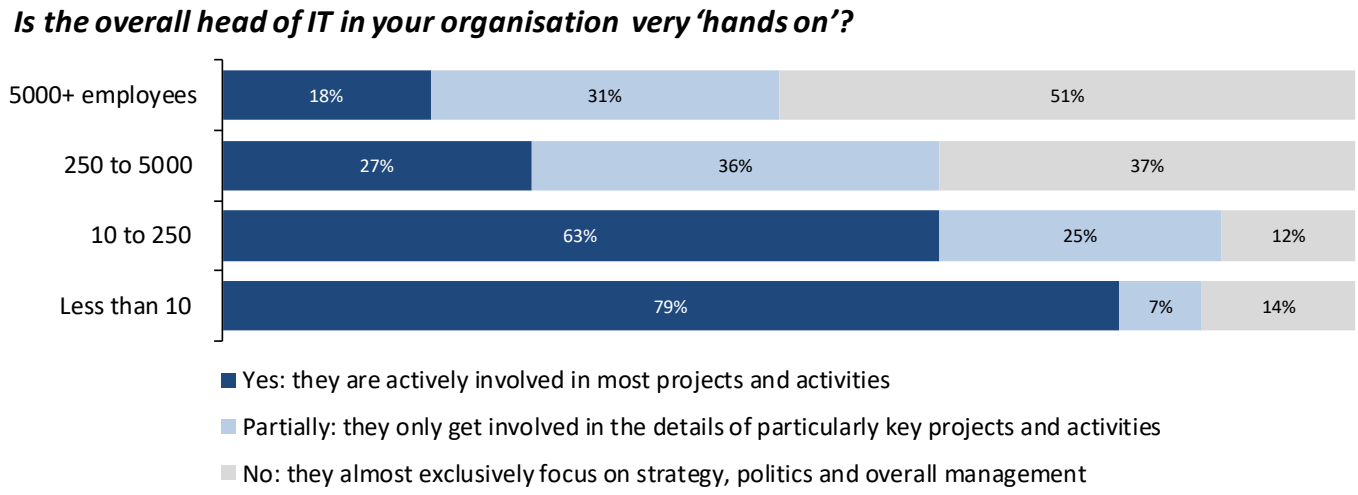

Figure 2 The CIO is not the only important target, especially in larger organisations

The important principle at work here is that of delegation. If you are running a large IT organisation, you rely on your people - function heads, team leaders, programme managers, project managers, architects, ops specialists, security experts, and so on - to get on and do what they're good at. This includes assessing needs, evaluating options and making purchase recommendations. Even if an initiative is being driven top-down, responsibility for working through the detail is still typically delegated.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Practitioners working at the sharp-end often shape ideas, set buying criteria, evaluate solutions and make recommendations.

If your direct marketing or sales approach to a CIO in an enterprise environment is rejected or referred to someone lower down the hierarchy, this is not necessarily because what you are promoting or selling isn't relevant. The more likely explanation is simply that they don't have the bandwidth, or often even the necessary skills, to get involved in every buying discussion. In many cases, it is often much more productive from a sales and marketing perspective to start conversations lower down the hierarchy in the first place. There is no shame in this!

Of course if you are marketing into the SMB space where IT teams are much smaller, then whoever is running the IT organisation will, by definition, be very hands-on. Even then, the opinion of others in the team will often be sought, so the same principle applies of looking for different entry points into the buying cycle.

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The IT-business dynamic

As industry analysts, we at Freeform Dynamics take a lot of briefings from IT vendors and the views we hear are often contradictory. Some spokespeople, for example, tell us with absolute certainty that the democratisation of technology means IT teams have lost power and influence, with business people now driving their own technology agendas and controlling their own IT budgets. Others, meanwhile, warn that IT teams have too much control of the technology agenda and are holding back the business. At the time of writing it is fashionable to claim that this is because IT professionals are in defensive mode as they run scared of cloud computing, the march of automation, artificial intelligence, and so on.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Beware the myths about either IT or the business having total control.

In reality, it's impossible to generalise, other than to say that neither of the above extremes is generally true. This research, for example, tells us that sometimes IT is driving, sometimes it's the business, and on other occasions the two are working collaboratively. On the whole, though, it's relatively unusual for either party to be acting unilaterally (Figure 3).

How often does technology-related investment and decision-making follow these patterns?

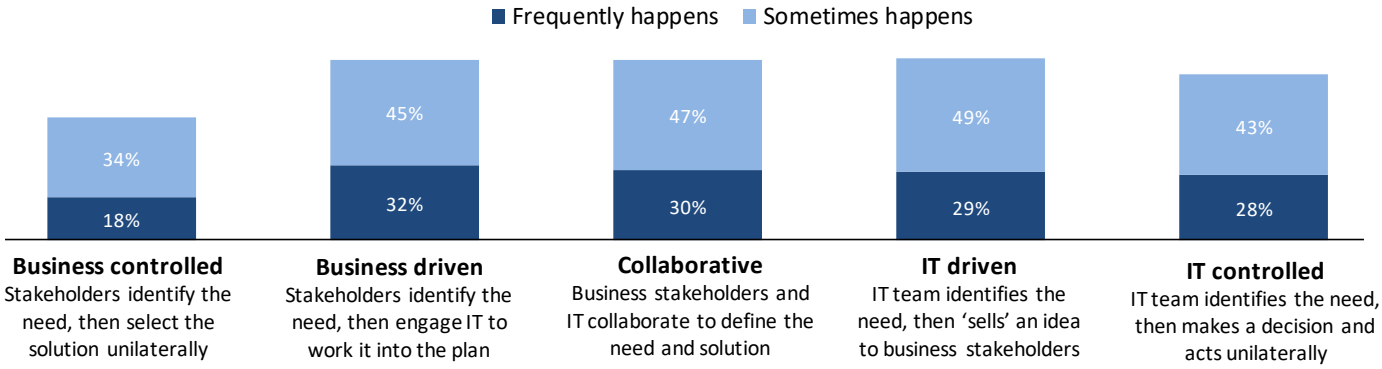

Figure 3 Most decisions ultimately involve input from both business and IT people, regardless of who drives

Other studies show that more mature organisations, who are also the ones generally achieving the best business outcomes, have a prevailing culture in which collaborative decision-making is the norm. Conversely, when activity is repeatedly taking place at one or both of the two extremes, this is likely to be an indicator of something being wrong. There are legitimate situations in which unilateral decision-making makes sense, but if either IT or the business is habitually acting alone on significant technology initiatives, this often means the organisation is dysfunctional from a cultural or management perspective. Such entities tend not to make the best customers over the longer term, so in most cases it doesn't make sense to target your marketing at this group.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Regardless of who is driving, it is safe to assume that any large or strategic deal will ultimately involve input from both IT and non-IT stakeholders.

If you are looking for business that's both profitable and sustainable, almost by definition you will be marketing and selling to accounts in which it is safe to assume that any large or strategically important deal will ultimately involve both IT and non-IT stakeholders, influencers and decision makers.

This is clearly important when considering your digital content and engagement strategy, particularly when set against the backdrop of the buyer's decision-making process. In the next section, we take a step back and look at the process side of things a little more closely.

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The buying/selling process

There are many ways to define what goes on in the decision cycle; indeed thousands of books have been written on the topic. The framework used to shape our research draws upon this body of knowledge but is deliberately not based on any particular methodology. We wanted a simple, generic structure within which to consider the different activities and perspectives in a very pragmatic manner (Figure 4).

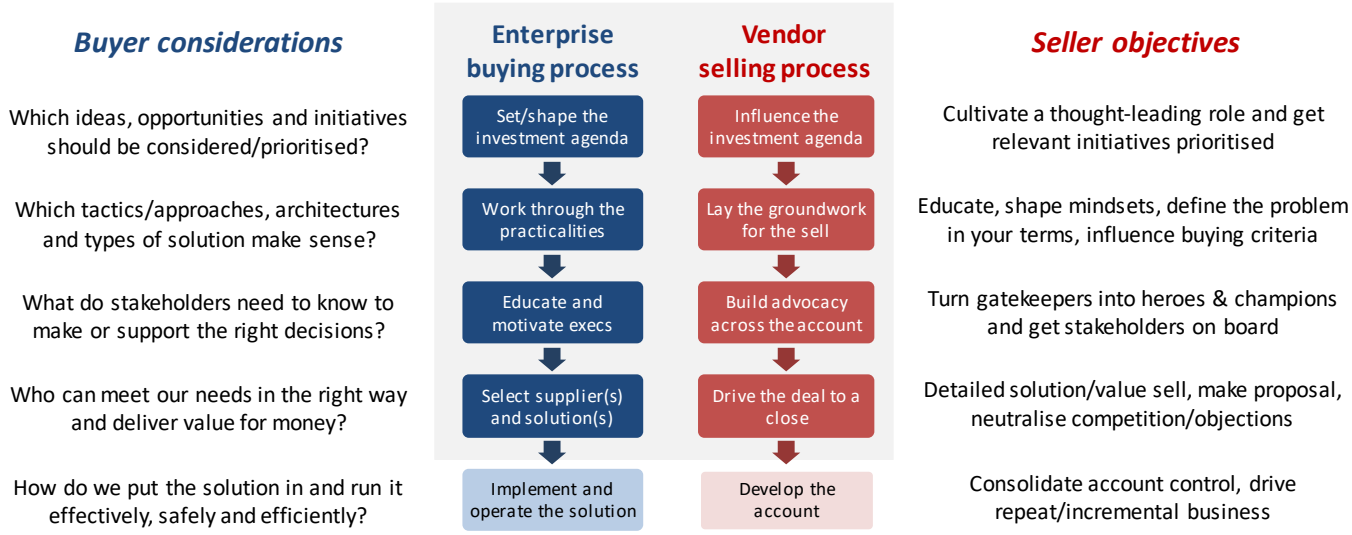

Figure 4 It often helps to look at the world from the buyer's perspective

It's worth highlighting a few key points when looking at the above framework:

- The buying process starts way before anyone begins to think about selecting suppliers and solutions. This means a lot of decision-making activity has already taken place before various quadrants, waves, product reviews and other analyst selection aids become relevant.
- Problems and opportunities are framed, and mindsets are shaped, early on in the process. As a marketer or seller, the more you can influence this upstream shaping of thoughts, the better. Engage early, and downstream selling becomes much easier – i.e. more deals convert, deals close more quickly, and the cost of sale is lower. Enter late in the process and you are likely to encounter thinking and selection criteria that may not sit well with your proposition, especially when a competitor has been engaged for a while.
- A frequent problem expressed by IT professionals is that once they have done their homework, and figured out what's best for the business, they often have to 'sell' their recommendation internally to senior management and/or business stakeholders.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The buying process starts way before anyone begins to think about selecting suppliers and solutions.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Acknowledging and enabling the internal sell is critical to drive larger or more strategic deals effectively.

A challenge in relation to that last point is articulating the rationale for spending additional money on a more modern, future proof, flexible and/or functional solution rather than just buying the cheapest. Differences between IT and business people in terms of their perspective, frame of reference, knowledge, experience and even the language they use often gets in the way here.

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Here is a chart from the Freeform Dynamics report mentioned earlier (entitled "The Politics and Practicalities of IT Procurement"), which illustrates why internal communication and the 'internal sell' are so important (Figure 5).

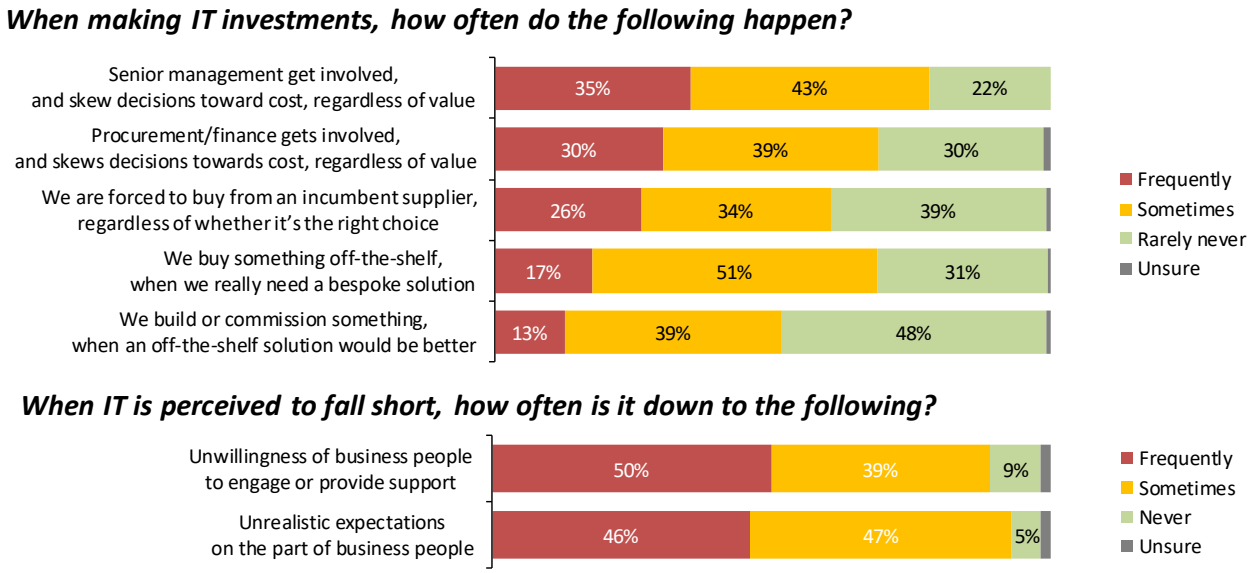

Figure 5 The importance of the internal sell

As per previous comments, some of the communication gaps that lead to these kinds of outcomes are easier to bridge if a progressive management style and collaborative culture are in place. That said, even where there's a will to work together effectively, IT professionals still often need help in articulating technology-related principles and benefits in a way business people can understand and appreciate.

Empathising with your primary audience

We are frequently told by IT vendors that they're looking to engage more directly with business audiences. While we would never discourage this objective, the natural entry point for most technology vendors and service providers is the IT team. This is where you're most likely to find those who will listen, engage, then champion your cause.

KEY TAKEAWAY

IT teams are looking to influence the internal investment agenda as much as you are. Enabling them to elevate their position will increase your chances of driving sustainable, high-quality business.

And you have something very important in common with this audience. Just like you, those working in an enterprise IT environment are also looking to influence the investment agenda. A frequent complaint is that IT teams too often get to hear about important business initiatives very late in the internal process. They are then presented with a *fait accompli*, and have to deal with requirements and expectations that haven't taken full account of technology-related considerations. When this happens, it frequently translates to false economies, increased costs, unnecessary risks and/or missed opportunities to exploit technology in new and different ways.

So, as you look to drive engagements and create champions in accounts, it makes sense to help IT teams elevate their position internally, and for you to facilitate that all-important internal sell where necessary. Providing them with content that can coach them on how to drive the technology discussion in more meaningful ways with business people is a good way of doing this, as is making business-friendly content available that they can forward to their internal non-technical stakeholders in order to educate and motivate them to support the 'right' investments.

This tip provides us with a good lead-in to the content discussion more broadly.

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PART 2

Mapping your digital content portfolio onto decision cycle activities

The role of content

One dimension of the content discussion is concerned with formats and media. Should information be provided in long-form or short-form, as graphics or text, online or downloadable, via interactive or on-demand streaming media?

We have made a deliberate choice not to tackle this 'form-factor' and 'delivery' aspect of the content discussion in this paper because there are too many dependencies on demographics, context, devices, geography, culture, fashion and a range of other factors.

Given that content can be repurposed relatively easily nowadays, the more critical discussion is around actual substance. On this, our study respondents see a role for a whole range of content types in the decision-making process (Figure 6).

Are the following content types particularly relevant to the technology investment and decision-making process?

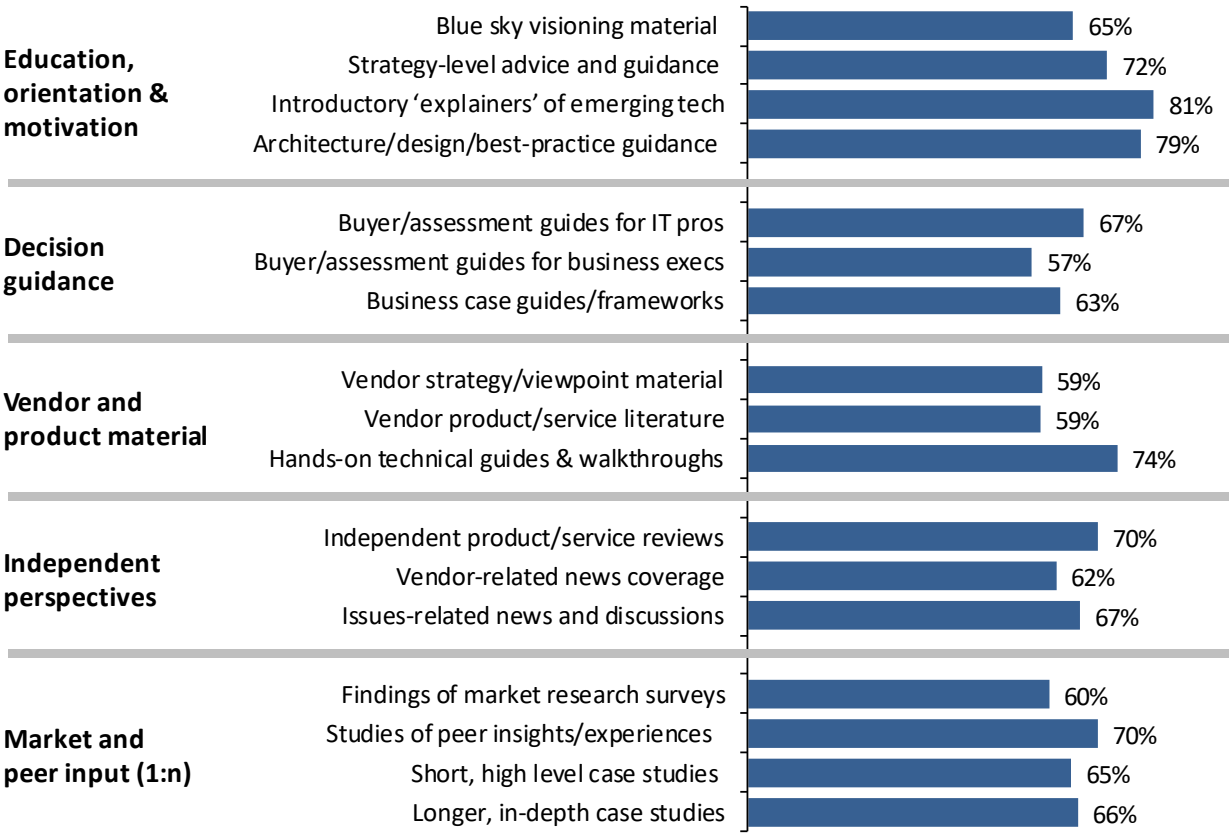

Figure 6 Many different content types are sought after in the decision-cycle

While the above might be useful to act as a convenient checklist when performing a content audit, a much more interesting perspective is looking at content relevance in relation to specific decision-cycle activities.

When we do this, we can see some very striking differences between content priorities at each stage in the process, from setting/shaping the investment agenda, ultimately through to selecting suppliers and solutions (Figure 7).

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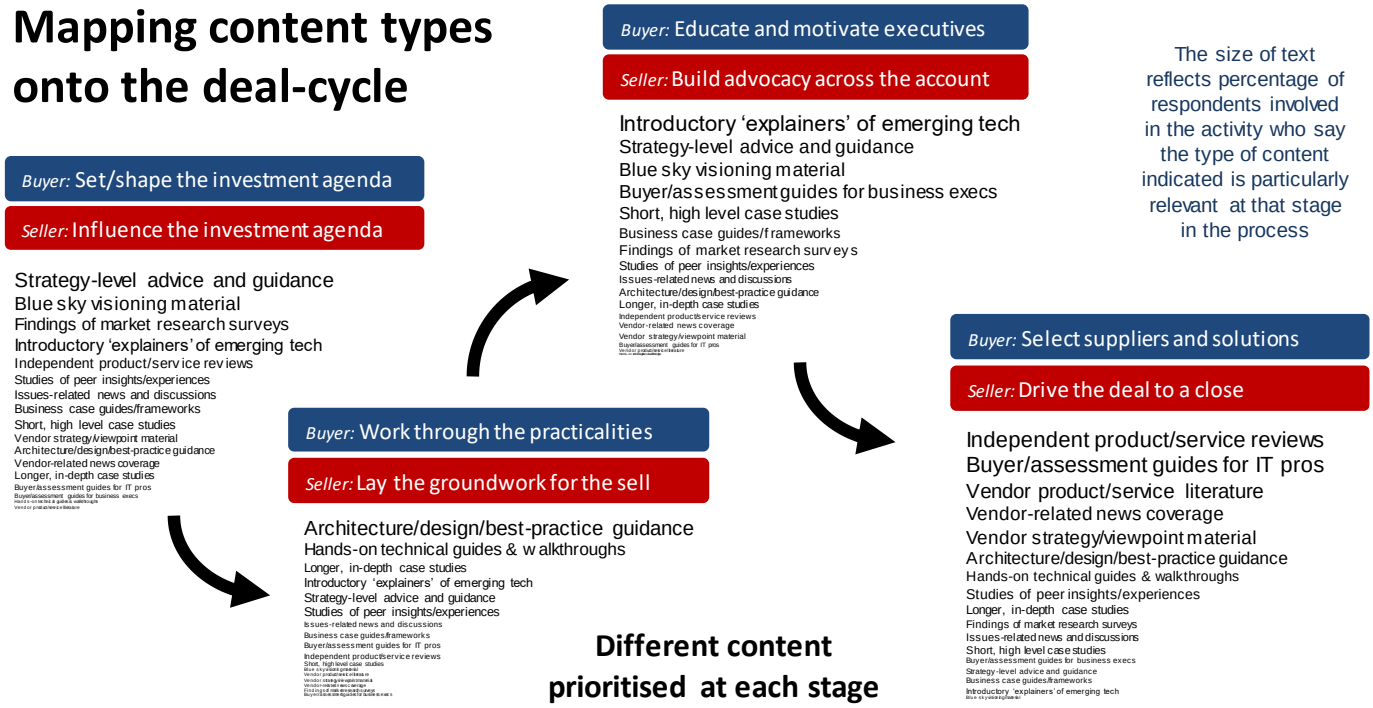

Figure 7 Mapping of content types onto decision-cycle activities

As indicated on the chart itself, the font size used to present a content type under a particular decision-cycle activity reflects its importance and relevance in that context. So, the rule of thumb is, if you can read it easily it's probably important at that stage in the process. If you can't, it's probably not relevant at this stage.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Use the *buyer's* process as the primary point of reference when considering content requirements.

So why does this kind of mapping matter? Well it can be invaluable when you are looking to optimise the performance of your marketing and sales activities – particularly if you are currently experiencing issues. A useful analysis, for example, is to consider the point at which most friction and/or leakage from the sales funnel occurs. Here are some questions you might ask when looking at this:

- Are customers and prospects not prioritising the kind of needs and opportunities you can address with your solution?
- Are they prioritising relevant needs, but then buying more of the same from an incumbent, or going in a different technical direction that favours a competitor?
- Are IT buyers frequently telling you they would love to go with what you are offering, but wouldn't be able to get it approved?
- Are your sales teams or channel partners spending lots of time in deals, only to get beaten by the competition at the closing stages?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Analyse your marketing and sales process to identify the points of friction and funnel leakage, and where additional leverage could be obtained. Then prioritise accordingly.

The answers to these and similar questions will help you identify at which point in the cycle you are having trouble or can gain more leverage, and therefore which content to prioritise to help at that stage. Also remember the internal sell, and that IT professionals typically embrace with open arms anything suppliers can give them to help with this. Indeed, some of the best performing content in lead generation campaigns is often material that IT pros can download and pass on internally.

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It's probably worth highlighting at this stage that the decision-making framework we have been discussing doesn't necessarily map totally onto the traditional marketing funnel view of the world. This is because the funnel reflects where the buyer is in *your* process rather than in theirs. In a B2C environment, particularly for one-off purchases, this will often not make a difference. In a more complex B2B decision cycle, however, a prospect can enter your funnel at any stage in *their* process (Figure 8).

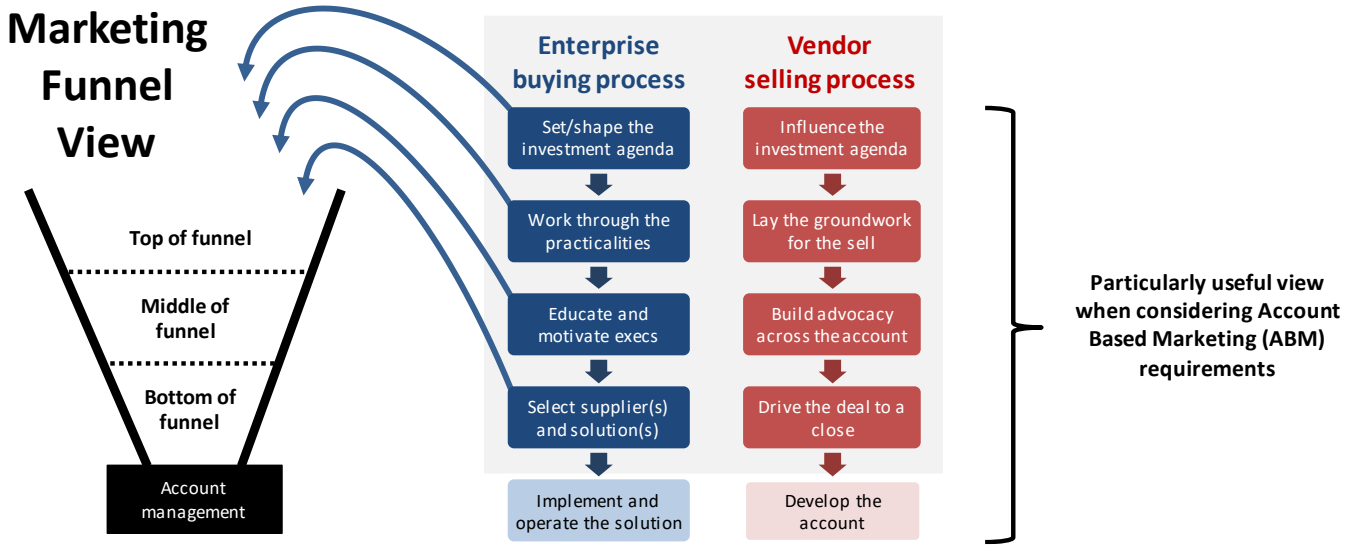

Figure 8 The decision-cycle vs the traditional marketing funnel

Of course it's perfectly legitimate to target campaigns at buyers at different points in their buying cycle, so you can then make assumptions about the stage they are at as they come into the top of the funnel.

However, from an overall engagement strategy perspective, it's important to make sure that content is both available and discoverable at relevant contact points to meet prospect needs, whatever their current situation or focus.

The trick here is don't try to be exhaustive, but make sure that you have at least one or two strong assets relevant to each point in the customer buying cycle for each of your product or service lines.

KEY TAKEAWAY

If you are adopting ABM, look to expand your visibility and presence in accounts through content that will be passed around internally. The kind of content that is aligned with the internal sell is particularly relevant in this context.

A note on Account-Based Marketing (ABM)

At the time of writing, many technology vendors and service providers targeting the midmarket and upwards are considering or adopting an account-based marketing (ABM) approach.

Executed well, ABM can lead to superior and more sustainable performance as a result of building, strengthening and leveraging relationships to enhance cross-selling and up-selling potential, and generally to develop and retain accounts more effectively.

The challenge of building contacts and relationships directly from the 'outside in' for target accounts is clear, however, so the more you can do to expand your visibility and presence internally through content, the better. The kind of content that is aligned with the internal sell is particularly relevant in this context.

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PART 3

Leveraging diverse sources and channels to achieve reach coverage and impact

The origin of content

Some of the content types listed earlier will be naturally aligned with specific sources. Vendor viewpoints, product literature, and hands-on technical guides for example, will likely be produced and published directly by the supplier. Industry analysts are then a common source of independent viewpoints and assessments, and perhaps strategy documents and market research. And when it comes to vendor-related news, the press community is the obvious primary source.

But the alignment between content types and sources is not fixed, e.g. a case study could be produced by a marketing agency, an analyst firm or independent journalist.

Overlaying everything is the interplay between different inputs and channels. With this in mind, we asked study respondents their views on the origin of content. Here are the results with an overlay illustrating how industry analysts like Freeform Dynamics and publishers like *The Register* work together with sponsors to feed relevant and compelling input into the decision cycle (Figure 9).

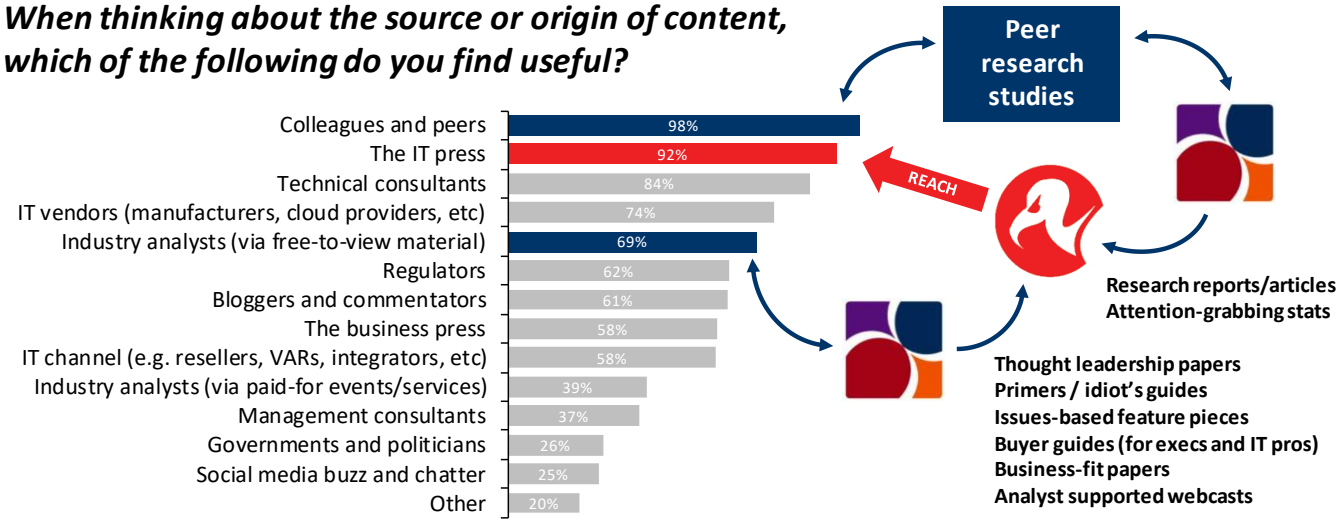

Figure 9 Sources matter, and the trick is to get the various inputs working together

The important principle here is not to consider each input in isolation, but to think more in terms of an influencing ecosystem. Our analysts at Freeform Dynamics, for example, have strong relationships with IT buyers, journalists, consultants, vendors, resellers, integrators, and so on, not to mention other analysts and the community of bloggers and other commentators. Each of these other parties then has a diverse set of relationships of their own, e.g. reporters at *The Register* maintain trusted relationships with individuals working in pretty much every part of the industry, on both the buyer and seller side of the equation.

KEY TAKEAWAY

An important principle is not to consider each source or input in isolation, but to think more in terms of an influencing ecosystem.

On a specific point, some may find the relatively low prominence of social media buzz and chatter surprising given that social outreach is receiving so much attention in marketing circles. In order to understand this, you need to bear in mind that there's a big difference between B2C and B2B influence and engagement. Social media is absolutely critical in any B2C strategy, but when it comes to professional groups in a business context, e.g. those working in enterprise IT, then other inputs are regarded as far more important.

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Subject matter priorities

So far, we have been talking about content types generically, i.e. independent of specific themes. Let's round things out now by taking a look at the topics that readers have asked the *The Register* to prioritise (Figure 10).

When it comes to the subject matter itself, would you like us to particularly prioritise content in any of the following areas over the coming year?

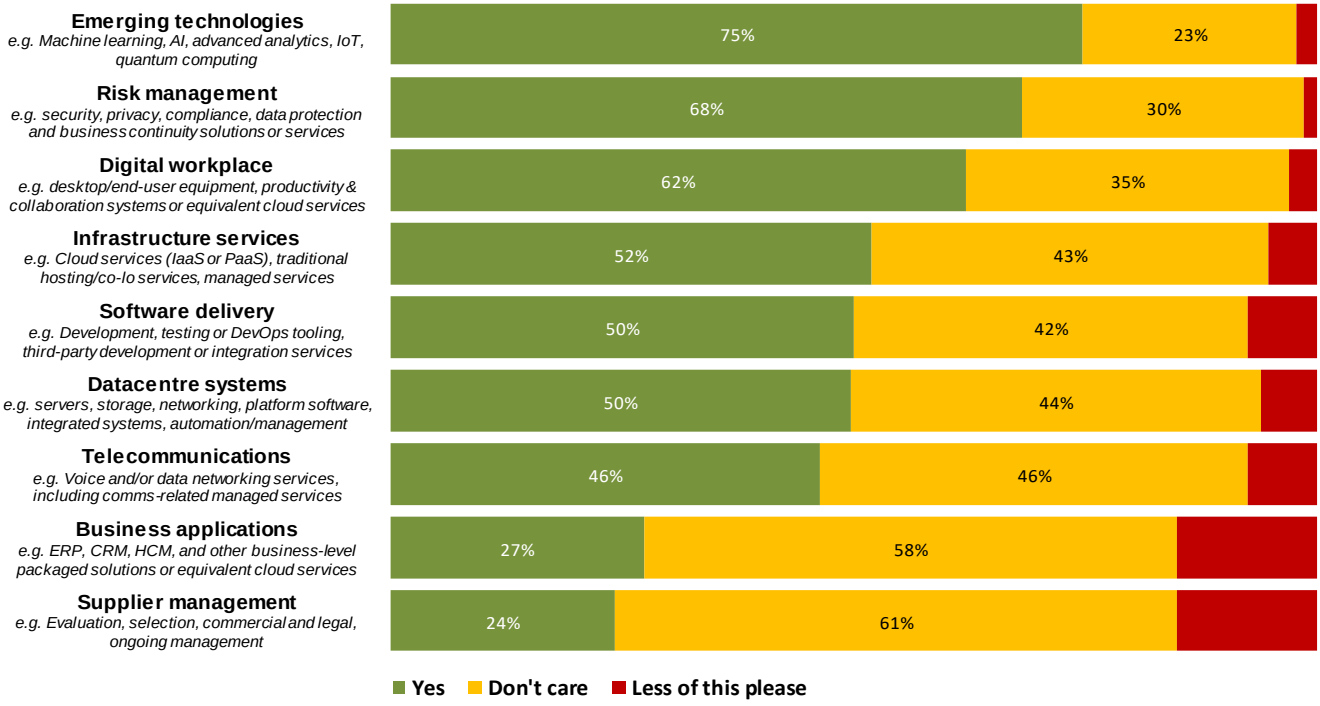

Figure 10 Topic area priorities of readers of *The Register*

The topics you see listed above are self-explanatory and you can judge for yourself where some of your propositions would fit. And don't be put off by the rankings if the topic relevant to you is relatively low down the list. Given that *The Register* has upwards of 10 million unique monthly readers, even the lowest ranking topic maps onto a cohort of at least 2.4 million pairs of interested eyes.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Putting the buyer's agenda front and centre might sound a bit counterintuitive, but it's actually the best way to get results for sellers.

Final thoughts

In today's digital marketing context, relevant content from trusted sources is critical. The big challenge, however, is not getting content and messages out there, it's making sure that your material stands out and reaches the right people at the right time. To be fully effective, it must be designed to support buying cycle activities. Obvious, perhaps, but clearly a principle not broadly applied given the amount of content we see that lacks substance and purpose and simply adds to the digital noise.

The reason why organisations like Freeform Dynamics and *The Register* are successful in helping sponsors stand out, is because everything we do in terms of content and delivery is conceived from the buyer or user perspective, and produced with their objectives in mind. Putting the buyer's agenda front and centre in this way might sound counterintuitive, but it's actually the best way to get results for sellers.

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About *The Register*

The Register (www.theregister.co.uk) started life as a daily news operation on the web in May 1998. On the first day, 300 readers visited; today over 10 million unique readers visited the site every month. *The Register's* blend of breaking news, strong personalities, and its accessible online execution, has made it one of the most popular authorities on the IT industry.

With an international team of journalists and columnists, *The Register* reports on the IT industry from the inside out – covering everything from enterprise software to chip developments.

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