

Developing Content That Drives Conversion Throughout the Buying Journey

Published: 18 October 2019 **ID:** G00450894

Analyst(s): Christy Ferguson

A successful demand generation program requires robust content that aligns to buyer profiles and the entire buying journey. Product marketers must utilize the content types most likely to drive top-of-funnel conversion, while also improving conversion rates in the later stages of the buying cycle.

Key Findings

- Technology and service providers (TSPs) invest resources in content creation that lacks alignment to buyer profiles or buying cycle activity streams, which can lead to buyers going elsewhere for answers or the sales cycle length being extended.
- Twenty-nine percent of Gartner-surveyed technology buyers indicate that they prefer provider-delivered content to learn about new technology solutions.
- Twenty-two percent of Gartner-surveyed TSPs with more than \$250 million in revenue are not utilizing any of the top three content types that are most likely to drive higher conversion rates across all stages of the sales and marketing funnel.

Recommendations

To improve product promotion and awareness throughout the buying cycle, product marketers should take these actions:

- Align content to each activity stream in the buying cycle to engage buyers with relevant, impactful information throughout the buyer's journey.
- Address buyers' needs and questions based on their buying committee role and journey by investing in content that conveys compelling stories to build credibility and establish buyer trust effectively.
- Expand content types included in your content strategies by leveraging lesser utilized content to creatively capture buyer attention, engage buyers, and drive higher conversion rates across the sales and marketing funnel.

Table of Contents

Analysis.....	2
Content Planning: Align Content to Buying Cycle.....	4
Content Development: Ensure Content Addresses the Buyer's Needs.....	5
Content Amplification: Expand Content to Optimize Demand Generation Conversion Rates.....	8
Summary.....	12
Gartner Recommended Reading.....	12

List of Tables

Table 1. Content Tagging Requires Consistent Nomenclature.....	6
Table 2. Example of Aligning Content Based on Stories Relevant to the Buyer.....	8

List of Figures

Figure 1. Buyer Preferences and TSP Content Utilization.....	3
Figure 2. Building Content to Support Demand Generation in TSPs.....	4
Figure 3. B2B Technology Customer Life Cycle Model.....	9
Figure 4. Essential Top-of-Funnel Content.....	10
Figure 5. Essential Middle- and Bottom-of-Funnel Content.....	11

Analysis

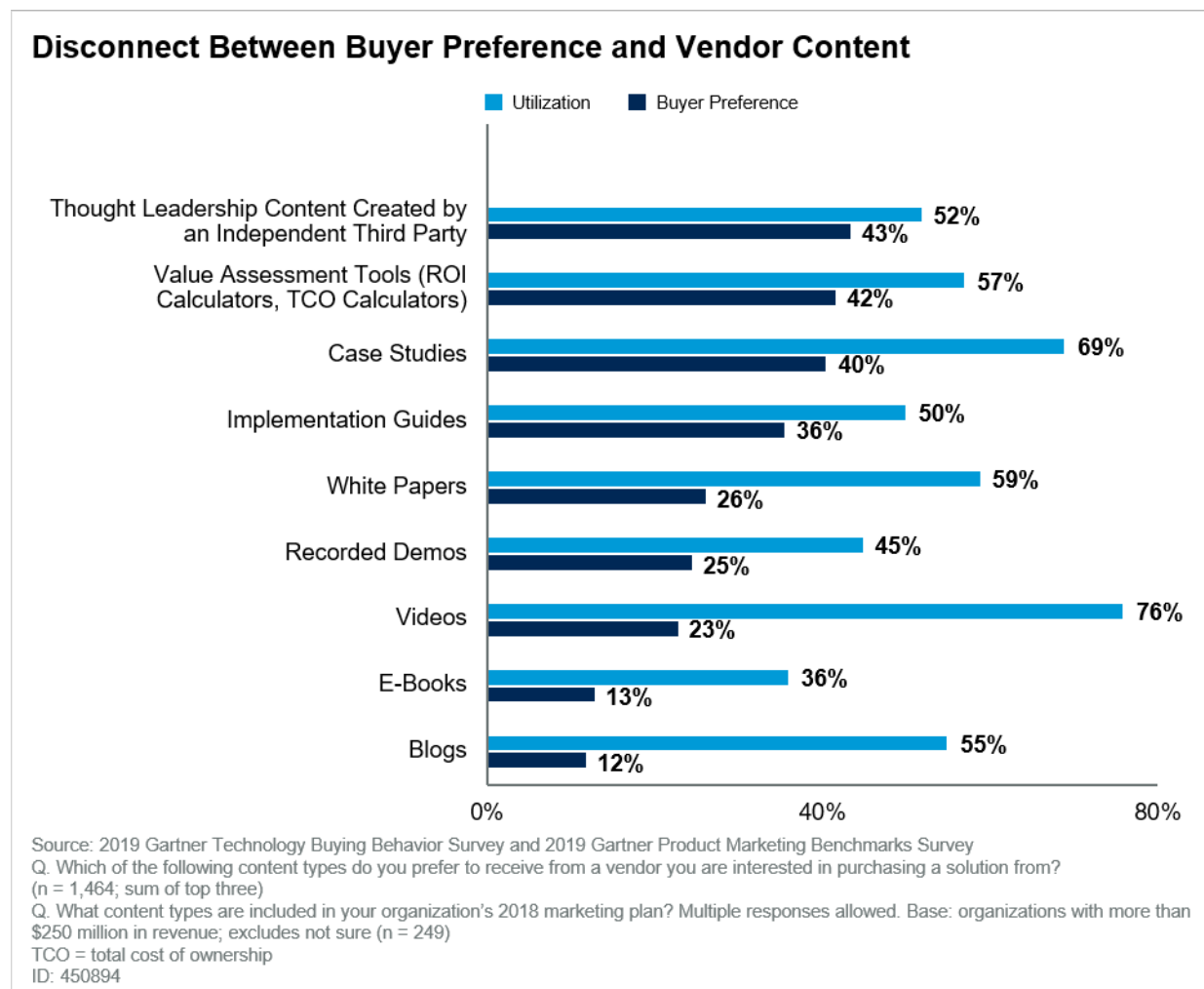
Investments in content to support marketing efforts continue to grow. Yet, interactions with Gartner clients indicate that the sheer volume of content created leads to underutilization of assets.

Underutilization often stems from content creation to support single use cases and ad hoc requests versus a proactive content strategy, especially in the context of sales enablement content. In addition, content that underperforms is quickly replaced with new content, with little understanding as to why the asset did not meet expectations.

While 29%¹ of Gartner-surveyed technology buyers indicate that they prefer provider-delivered content (see Note 1) to learn about new technology solutions, the content is not meeting buyers' needs. Gartner surveyed technology buyers and found a disconnect between the types of content they seek and the types of content vendors are including in marketing programs. For example, blogs and videos are two of the top content types TSPs with over \$250 million in revenue² are producing (see Figure 1), yet when buyers are actively in a buying cycle, they rely less on these content types. Part of this stems from a shortsighted concentration on driving top-of-funnel engagement. Product marketers must develop content that performs throughout the marketing

funnel. To do so requires an understanding of buyers' needs and questions, along with the buying cycle and use case for each asset.

Figure 1. Buyer Preferences and TSP Content Utilization

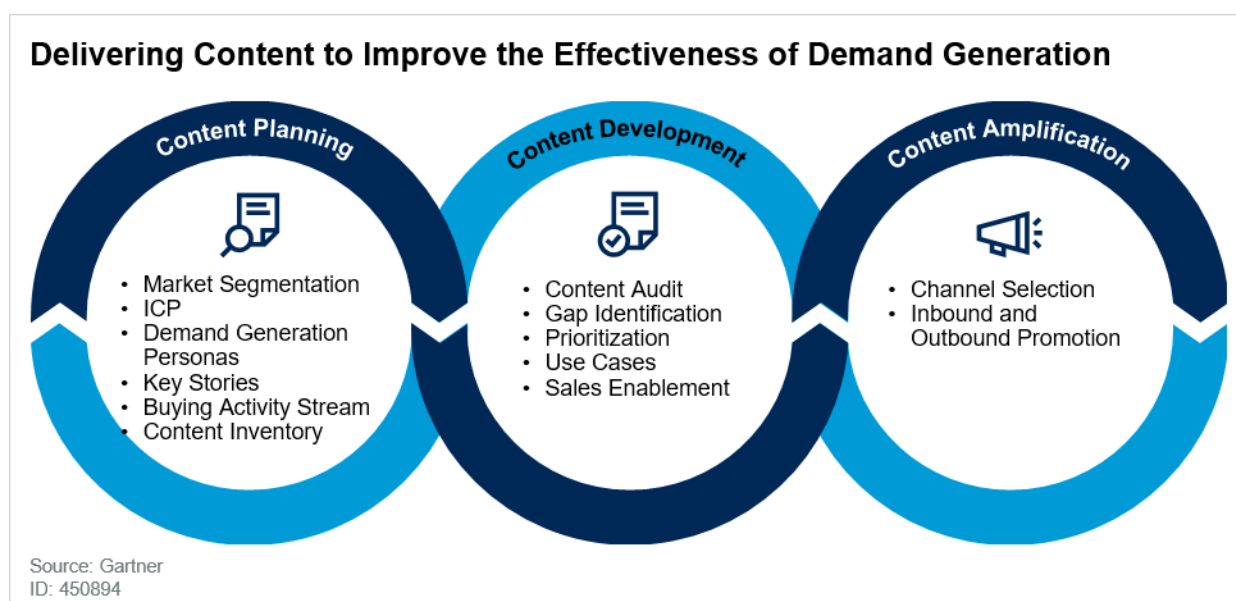


Therefore, as shown in Figure 2, to deliver effective content, product marketers must include three key building blocks:

- **Content planning:**
 - **Storytelling considerations:** Clarity on market segmentation, ideal customer profiles (ICPs), buyer personas and stories most likely to compel buyers to take action.
 - **Alignment to buying activity streams:** Explore, evaluate and engage streams, as effective content types vary based on the buyer's journey (see "The B2B Customer Life Cycle for Technology Products and Services").

- **Content inventory:** Product marketers must have visibility into all assets available for use in demand generation programs by building a content inventory before finalizing a content plan.
- **Content development:** Conduct regular audit cadences to identify gaps and content needs, including content types for prioritization as well as for use cases, identify resources and a plan to close the gaps, and ensure sales is effectively enabled to leverage content.
- **Content amplification:** Select channels, including sales engagement, to amplify the content with your target buyer personas (see “Leverage B2B Buyer Personas to Personalize Demand Generation Programs and Engage Buying Teams”).

Figure 2. Building Content to Support Demand Generation in TSPs



This research will address the planning and development stages.

Content Planning: Align Content to Buying Cycle

Gartner has identified three key buying activity streams as part of the buying cycle. These are not linear, as the buyer journey is no longer linear. While success will be measured within the marketing funnel, it's critical to recognize that there isn't a one-to-one alignment with the funnel.

Demand generation programs need to be built with the buying cycle in mind.

These three buying activity streams are *explore*, *evaluate* and *engage*.

In the *exploration stream*, reach and awareness are critical. Buyers may not be aware of you, and they are just starting to explore solutions to their pain points and determining how they approach the problem. Educational content performs well in this activity stream.

In the *evaluation stream*, buyers are looking for a solution to address the need, and they are starting to shortlist and determining how to compare providers. Buyers in this activity stream are seeking value-centric and product-centric content.

In the *engagement stream*, buyers are ready to engage directly with your sales teams. Assets with greater depth and detail are required, including sales enablement content, in order to help the buyers understand how to be successful once they decide to move forward.

To begin content planning, define your segmentation strategy. This starts with the market segment and ICPs (see “The Enterprise Persona — Defining Your Ideal Customer Profile”), and then continues with buyer personas.

A deep understanding of these segments is necessary (see “Leveraging Target Audience Data to Improve Segmentation and Demand Generation Efforts”) to implement an effective content approach. As such, product marketers must define the key stories relevant to each buyer persona within the ICP. Then, product marketers must align the story to the buyer’s journey.

Therefore, high-performing content plans include assets that address buyers’ questions based on who they are and where they are in the buying cycle (see “Tech Go-to-Market: Use ‘Questions to Answer’ to Drive a Customer-Centric Content Strategy That Accelerates Buying Decisions”).

Content Development: Ensure Content Addresses the Buyer’s Needs

Content audits are critical to ensuring content is current and that efforts aren’t being duplicated (see “How to Scope, Plan and Execute a Content Audit”). Content audits are easier to conduct when you, as the product marketer, establish a methodology for tagging and tracking your assets, which is a best practice critical to identifying gaps in your content inventory. It includes identifying tagging categories, such as target segments, buying cycle activity stream and clarity around the type of content (see Table 1). To be effective, consistent nomenclature when tagging or indexing assets is critical. Teams should align on a set of tags and clearly define each tag for any team member with access to the content inventory.

Table 1. Content Tagging Requires Consistent Nomenclature

Tagging Category	Description
Asset Product Offering	Which product(s) in the portfolio does the asset support? Be specific, and include the software version, if applicable.
Target Segment	What is the ICP best aligned to this asset? Is this asset industry-specific or horizontal? Does the revenue or number of employees of the target segment impact the relevance of the asset?
Buyer Persona	Based on the story the content conveys, what personas are most appropriate targets for this asset?
Buying Cycle Activity Stream	Which buying cycle stream(s) does this asset address? Is the asset best suited for buyers educating themselves in the exploratory stream, shortlisting providers in the evaluation stream or those that have engaged with channel partners, sales or third parties in the engagement stream?
Content Topic or Theme	Include the topic or theme of the content. For example, one case study may have a financial benefit outcome versus another that highlights staff efficiencies.
Content Type	Clearly define content types, and use consistent naming. For example, case study versus success story, or trend report versus technical white paper, and overview video versus customer testimonial video.
Localization	Is this asset available for multiple geographic regions? If so, tag each region.
Content Expiration	Use an expiration date in instances in which content references time and dates or specific limitations on usage (for example, when including licensed content).
Marketing Use Case	Is this an asset that is ideal for social media, or in a tradeshow booth or website? For example, a 30-second video versus a four-minute video.

Source: Gartner (October 2019)

Sophisticated content marketing teams should be measuring effectiveness of assets across multiple channels and stages in the buyer's journey (see "Getting Started With Content Marketing Measurement — Quantify Eyeballs, Engagement and Impact"). TSPs must audit content on a regular cadence (at a minimum, on a quarterly basis) to identify high-performing assets and content gaps, including identifying:

- What to retire
- Which assets to update with new messaging
- What assets may be needed for specific personas in the various activity streams of the buyer's journey

Technologies such as NewsCred and Percolate enable content marketing teams to have visibility into content inventories and performance (see "Magic Quadrant for Content Marketing Platforms"). TSPs without content platforms should use page views and/or content downloads to leverage web analytics tools. Lastly, update your plan, gather feedback across internal stakeholders and

communicate plans. Whether stored in a content marketing platform or in a manually updated spreadsheet, the content inventory must be visible to key stakeholders throughout the business (see “Market Guide for Digital Asset Management”). The key stakeholders include product marketing, content developers (internal and external), and demand generation and account-based marketing teams, as well as sales.

Due to the complexities of the buying cycle, ensuring that buyers have access to compelling content throughout the buying journey is critical. A lack of relevant content simply elongates an already complex and lengthy buying cycle, and may eliminate your organization from consideration altogether. In addition, TSPs that are able to deliver relevant content throughout the buyer’s journey may be able to influence the buying committee requirements.

To drive performance of content marketing efforts, product marketers must engage with those team members responsible for content creation to ensure clarity around key stories pertinent to buyers. Content developers require depth and understanding of the buyer segments and personas to ensure all content developed will resonate with a buyer and compel them to act.

Varying storylines are necessary to resonate with buyers, and while the differences between business buyers and IT buyers may be obvious, there may be more subtle differences between multiple business buyer profiles. Consider the marketing business buyer and the finance business buyer looking to solve a marketing problem. They have varying needs, unique biases and perspectives, given their roles and priorities, and both require content that will resonate with them. However, a single content asset may be repositioned for each buyer type. However, unifying elements should be included to bring the two buyer roles together and to consensus. Consider a single customer success story that can be developed into multiple case studies told from differing points of view, with clarity on the results achieved by the company as a whole. This approach not only services the needs of the various buyer personas, but also allows TSPs to create derivative assets from a single content asset. Table 2 shows an example of content plans that support multiple storylines based on the buyer.

In this example, the content carries a unifying theme, such as “marketing optimization that reduces compliance risks,” while still conveying the most relevant messages to each buyer role.

Table 2. Example of Aligning Content Based on Stories Relevant to the Buyer

Demand Generation Buyer Persona	Explore		Evaluate		Engage	
	Storyline	Content Type	Storyline	Content Type	Storyline	Content Type
CFO	Focus on costs and business impact of database compliance requirements	Thought leadership paper	Tell the story of the CFO in Customer X, as well as the cost savings and risk avoidance achieved	Case study	Focus on training available to support reporting implementation to adhere to compliance audits	Implementation documentation, with focus on finance function
CMO	Focus on impact of lack of compliance with privacy regulations	Thought leadership paper	Tell the story of the CMO in Customer X, as well as the integrations with the martech stack and the business impact	Case study	Focus on implications and requirements of staff onboarding and timeline, along with improvements in global data usage	Implementation documentation, with focus on marketing function
CMO = chief marketing officer martech = marketing technology						

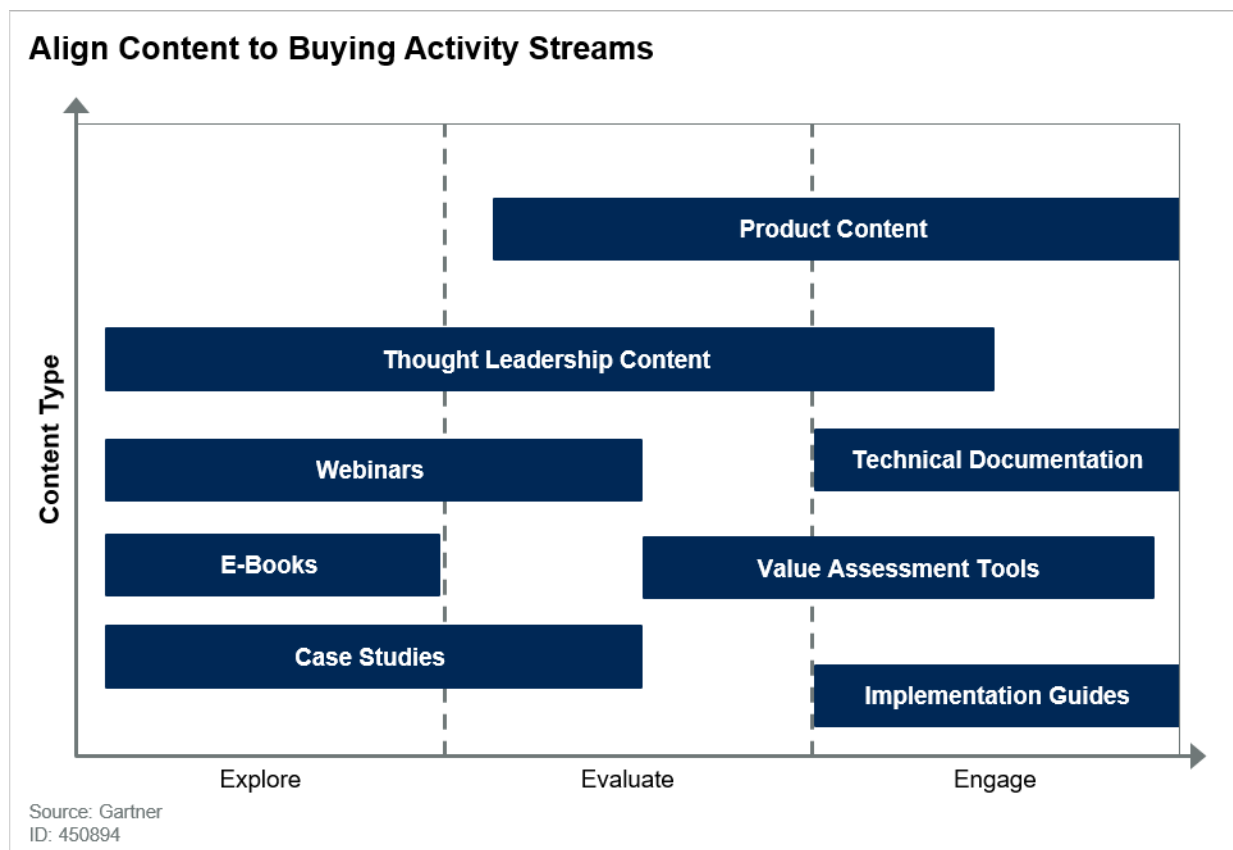
Source: Gartner (October 2019)

Product marketers must prioritize content development based on gaps identified through the tracking and audit process. While messaging and buyer journey gaps are critical, understanding what types of content may be missing or are underrepresented is also important. To measure these potential gaps, product marketers must understand content types that buyers value and content types that TSPs see as successful throughout the buying journey, including when it makes sense to have content specific to individual personas.

Content Amplification: Expand Content to Optimize Demand Generation Conversion Rates

To accelerate leads throughout the marketing funnel, content must take a holistic approach and be designed to address each stage of the journey. As shown in Figure 3, specific content types are more relevant at varying streams of the buyer's journey. For example, in the exploratory stream of the buying cycle, thought leadership content, case studies and webinar content types lend themselves to educational messages.

Figure 3. B2B Technology Customer Life Cycle Model



For TSPs with over \$250 million in revenue, thought leadership content (including provider-developed and third-party-developed), case studies and videos are the top four performing content types when measured by volume of marketing qualified leads (MQLs), as shown in Figure 4. However, these content types lose value as buyers advance through the buying journey.

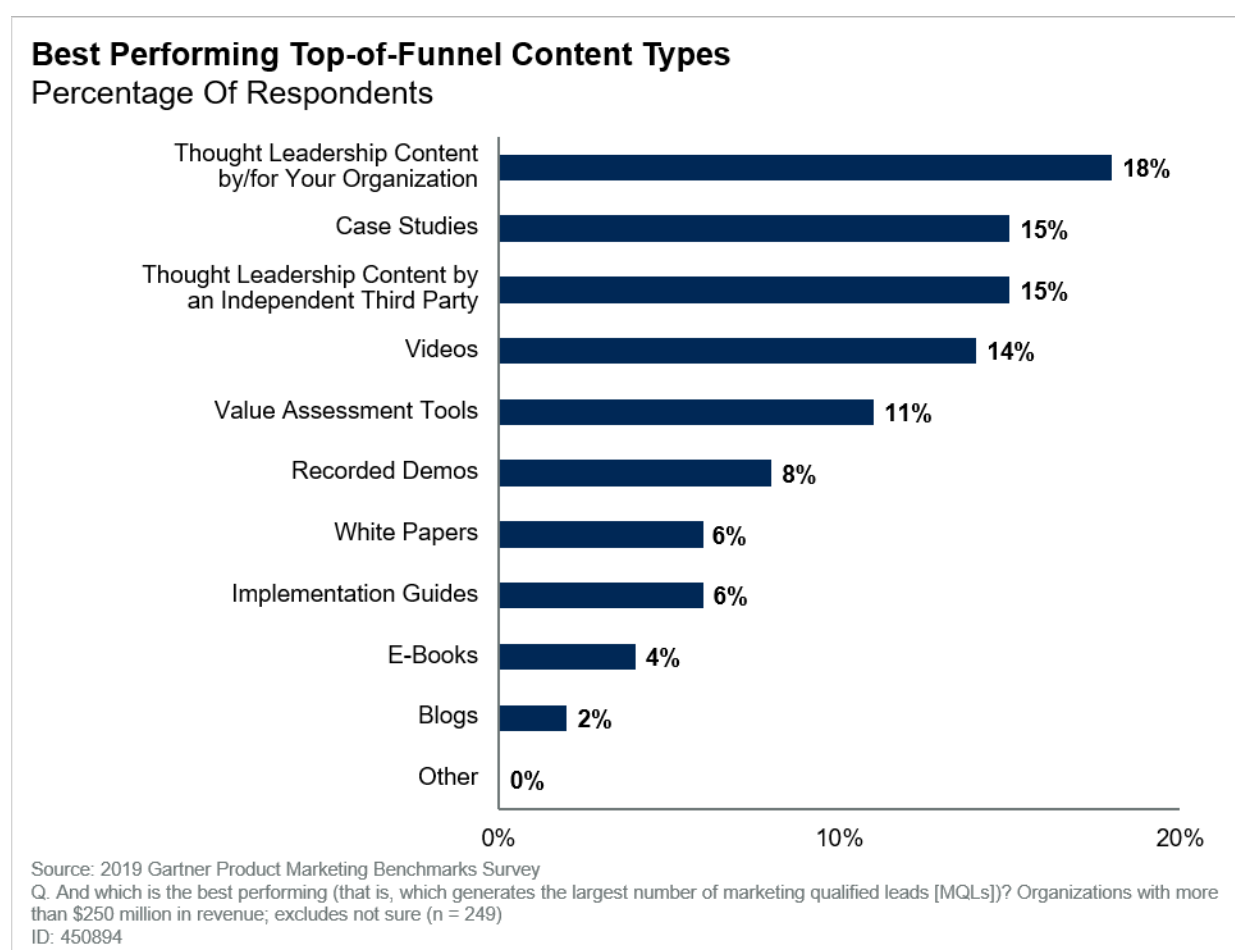
For example, as shown in Figure 1, Gartner surveyed TSPs with revenue over \$250 million, and content types to support the engagement activity stream of the buyer's journey, such as implementation guides, are missing from many content marketing plans.

In addition, Gartner client interactions indicate that content marketing teams often focus on one of two content areas — top-of-funnel thought leadership content or midfunnel product-centric content. Often, this focus stems from how success is measured. For example, if success is measured by top-of-

funnel leads, there is a tendency to focus on thought leadership content, which, while necessary to support the buyer's journey, creates a gap in product-centric content.

The pendulum has shifted too far, and buyers' needs are not being met later in the sales cycle. Ultimately, this situation can result in content priorities that are not aligned with the actual business goals, such as accelerating the sales cycle.

Figure 4. Essential Top-of-Funnel Content



When dissecting this survey data further, Gartner found that among the total sample, TSPs utilizing value assessment tools, implementation guides and e-books are seeing higher-than-average conversion rates across all stages of the marketing funnel, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Essential Middle- and Bottom-of-Funnel Content



This finding echoes Gartner's buyer research that shows buyers are seeking thought leadership, case studies, value assessment tools and implementation guides. Yet, close to half of TSPs surveyed with over \$250 million in revenue are not utilizing many of these content types at all, as shown in Figure 1. To achieve high-performing demand generation programs, product marketers should ensure that content plans include these essential content types.

In addition, for their largest buying efforts, close to 90% of Gartner-surveyed technology buyers indicate that after they make contact with sales or channel partners, they still seek information about providers of interest from sources other than the sales representative. Therefore, enabling sales with content to support the engage stream of the buying cycle is critical. To support sales enablement, create prescriptive marketing "plays" for high-value assets that sales will be utilizing in the engagement stream. These plays should include:

- **For licensed or third-party content (including links to curated content), include:**
 - The company perspective (what you agree with and what you don't agree with)
 - Insights from the content (could be on competitors or other scenarios)
- **Single access point for the content:** Developing best practices for keeping content up to date in a central repository (see "Market Guide for Sales Engagement Platforms") that sales can access will reduce the use of outdated assets.
- **Sales case requirements:**
 - Outline the market segment and persona for which the asset is appropriate.
 - Define the situation for which the asset is relevant.

- Provide language in how to message the asset.

Each piece of content that is in the existing plan or is to be developed must serve a purpose, and ideally there are multiple use cases for each asset. The exception to multiple use cases may be very specific account-based marketing content elements that are highly personalized.

Summary

While technology buyers value and seek content from providers, this content must be relevant and engaging to accelerate the buying journey. This requires TSPs to align content to the buying activity streams and buyer personas with stories that are likely to resonate. To improve effectiveness of demand generation programs, TSPs must then deliver these stories through content types that buyers value and are most likely to drive higher marketing funnel conversion rates.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

“Use ‘Questions to Answer’ to Drive a Customer-Centric Content Strategy That Accelerates Buying Decisions”

“Leveraging Target Audience Data to Improve Segmentation and Demand Generation Efforts”

“The B2B Customer Life Cycle for Technology Products and Services”

“Implement a Balanced Marketing Mix to Improve Demand Generation Conversion Rates”

Evidence

¹ Results presented are based on a Gartner study conducted to further understand the buying process for enterprise technology. The research was conducted online from February through April 2019 among respondents located in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Germany.

Respondents in organizations with more than 100 employees and \$50 million in revenue were surveyed. The 1,464 respondents were involved in large-scale technology purchases in one of the following seven categories:

- Application software (on-premises or cloud)
- Infrastructure software (on-premises or cloud)
- Data center hardware
- Security (hardware, software or services)
- IT outsourcing/managed services
- Professional services (related to technology strategy or implementation)

- Communications services

Respondents were asked about the purchase process, including general awareness generation and what factors impact purchase decisions.

Note: The results of this study are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily the market as a whole.

For the purposes of this survey, “large-scale” IT purchase decisions were defined as follows:

- For organizations with less than \$1 billion in revenue, the minimum contract value of the purchase needed to be \$25,000 (or local currency equivalent).
- For organizations with \$1 billion or more in revenue, the minimum contract value of the purchase needed to be \$50,000 (or local currency equivalent).

The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts, and it was reviewed, tested and administered by Gartner’s Research Data and Analytics team.

² From September through November 2018, 500 respondents (375 in the U.S. and Canada, and 125 in Western Europe) were interviewed online and through computer-assisted telephone interviewing. Participating organizations were TSPs with annual revenue of \$10 million or more and primary product offerings for software, services and hardware (for the U.S. only).

The results shown in this report refer specifically to companies with revenue exceeding \$250 million in U.S. dollars.

Respondents were required to have knowledge of the marketing budget and spend for the company or business unit, and knowledge of the marketing campaign/program tactics. They were also required to have one of the following primary job functions/roles: CEO/president/founder, demand/lead generation, marketing leadership, sales leadership, web/digital social marketing or marketing operations/analytics. They were also required to have knowledge of the marketing budget and spend for the company or business unit, and knowledge of the marketing campaign/program tactics.

Note: The results of this study are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily of the market as a whole.

Note 1 Provider-Delivered Content

Provider-delivered content is defined as thought leadership content from a solution provider or detailed product content (for example, data sheets and white papers).

GARTNER HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
USA
+1 203 964 0096

Regional Headquarters

AUSTRALIA
BRAZIL
JAPAN
UNITED KINGDOM

For a complete list of worldwide locations,
visit <http://www.gartner.com/technology/about.jsp>

© 2019 Gartner, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved. Gartner is a registered trademark of Gartner, Inc. and its affiliates. This publication may not be reproduced or distributed in any form without Gartner's prior written permission. It consists of the opinions of Gartner's research organization, which should not be construed as statements of fact. While the information contained in this publication has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable, Gartner disclaims all warranties as to the accuracy, completeness or adequacy of such information. Although Gartner research may address legal and financial issues, Gartner does not provide legal or investment advice and its research should not be construed or used as such. Your access and use of this publication are governed by [Gartner Usage Policy](#). Gartner prides itself on its reputation for independence and objectivity. Its research is produced independently by its research organization without input or influence from any third party. For further information, see "[Guiding Principles on Independence and Objectivity](#)."