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Introduction

The death of the marketing funnel has been greatly overrated.

Contrarian bloggers and self-styled digital thought leaders have declared the marketing funnel—that beautifully simple archetype of the consumer journey—passé. They’ve argued that cross-channel marketing, a wide variety of platforms and persistent offline purchasing twisted the linear funnel into a pretzel, a gordian knot or ecosystem.

And yet, the one great truth of salesmanship persists: It’s not over until the cash register rings. To get the consumer to buy, you first have to make them aware, get them to consider and then, finally, ask them to act. This rather linear psychological progression is the thing we call the funnel, and now we have many more ways to push consumers through it.

This new digital marketing funnel is still a funnel. There are just plenty of ways to work it. So we’ve broken down six ways to move through the digital marketing funnel by tactic: television and video, display advertising, social, content, email and search.

Settle in and explore just WTF makes the digital marketing funnel, and click the orange links to learn even more.
The web didn’t kill television; it extended its reach (and the reach of all video content) by birthing the dynamic, shareable format of digital video.

But digital video is more than appropriating TV ads for web platforms. “For so many of our clients, their marketing programs start online,” said Barry Lowenthal, president of The Media Kitchen. “Sometimes TV is actually a video augmentation approach [for them].” One example: Twitter’s recent TV debut. While the critical reception was less than stellar, it undoubtedly reached new audiences by going traditional.

And while TV is known as a broadcast format, it’s not all about awareness. “Everybody understands that you can start a conversation on TV, but you have to finish somewhere else,” said Lowenthal. “There’s always some sort of call to action, whether it’s a social activation, a website visit, store visit. It’s not just about feeling good about the brand.”

Mid-funnel, it’s all about data. Addressable TV has created an environment in which marketers know whether they’re reaching a consumer for the first time, or whether it’s time to start driving them to a purchase. Digital video has been honing that advantage since its inception, and its ubiquity is changing budgets.

“Now that video is taking over people’s [social] feeds, you’re seeing increased creative efforts that might have gone to TV come to social,” said Tim Bosch, director of media planning and buying at Likeable Media.

The emergence of click-to-buy features makes video even more worthwhile for marketers homed in on conversions. Google just released its new “shoppable ads” for YouTube. Now consumers watching videos that feature key products are exposed to accompanying ads, making the transition from video to e-commerce platforms seamless.
Banner ads are hated and click-through rates are berated, but if there’s one place that marketers have a solid game throughout the funnel, it’s here. Content-rich banner ads are a go-to tactic in the upper funnel, where big, custom integrations and direct, contextual buys with publishers reign.

In the middle of the funnel, marketers look to programmatic advertising to target by behavior profiles and cookie information. Targeting also lives here, as marketers go deeper into the segmenting that points to likely customers.

Further down, in the lower funnel, retargeting and dynamic retargeting tactics call on consumers who have visited advertisers’ sites or have items in their shopping carts. Remember those high-waisted pants you looked at last month? They won’t follow you ‘til you die (there’s frequency capping for that) but it may feel like it. Finally, loyalty outreach and coupon codes live in the very lowest of the lowly funnel.

What about sequencing? Can a series of creatively sequenced banner ads be used to drive a customer through to purchase?

“There isn’t a perfect technology for sequencing,” said Crystal Stewart, vice president at Booyah Advertising in Denver. “The problem is viewability. You need to ensure your ads are 100 percent viewable or you might lose the middle message and then it doesn’t make sense to the consumer.” Ad servers are also a problem. If a server calls up the wrong size, you can also skip a step.
Think social’s “post-funnel?” Then you haven’t been paying attention. The familiar awareness-first approach of the past two years has been upended by various platforms’ commerce plays. Pinterest, Twitter and Instagram have all introduced click-to-buy buttons. Likewise, Facebook’s carousel ads aim to drive purchasing too.

“Social is great at the big boom of awareness and closing the loop,” said Hull. At the top of the funnel, brands need to concentrate on creating great, shareable content. Without that, all the media spend in the world won’t save your awareness campaign.

In the middle of the funnel, marketing plays start to feel more like display: “Facebook and Twitter are doing a lot with sequential contact and their ability to retarget people who saw your content,” said Bosch of Likeable Media. “This way, you know this isn’t the first touchpoint.”

New formats like carousel ads show potential. Brands can showcase up to five creative assets in one post, each with different calls to action. Partners like Facebook then optimize the order based on performance. When combined with smart targeting, the approach can be game-changing, “as long as the creative is on point,” added Bosch.

Even at the bottom of the funnel, social feels more personal, and it’s not easy to ask your friends for money. “Click to buy” functions are at least taking some awkwardness out of it. “These buttons give people [an idea of] what to expect,” said Bosch. “If you’re clicking, there’s a higher intention to buy.” While the clicks might be more costly, the conversion rates are worth it.

So who’s doing it well? Seamless, the online food delivery service, plays the whole field—err, funnel like a pro. “They put out a lot of highly engaging, lightweight content, but then they follow that up with ads designed to drive new users, app installs, conversions,” said Bosch. “And they do it in a smart way that’s super clickable.”
Brands that lament their inability to tie content marketing to ROI probably aren’t mapping the consumer journey the way they should. “You need to know what they need at each stage and time and that’s what you should be providing,” said Anna Hrach, director of content at digital marketing agency Ethology. “It’s really about giving them what they need to make the most informed decision possible.”

At the top of the funnel, where content drives awareness, brand videos and lush native interactives communicate sweeping values like “strength” or “innovation.” But to get consumers to consider and then commit, you’ll need to wade deeper into the weeds.

“As you move down the funnel, your content is going to get far more specific and far more detailed,” said Hrach. Mid-funnel content might include instructional and educational blog posts, newsletters that function as catalogs or consumer profiles that speak to specific segments and solutions. Your play is going to depend on your business, Hrach said.

Durable goods manufacturers, for example, play hard in the middle funnel since the consideration time is much longer. GE Appliances employs recipe content or DIY tutorials to keep its refrigerators top of mind. Further down the funnel, product specs are in order. (That counts as content too.)

One tactic that works well in the upper and lower funnel are user events. Video created at big integrations drive digital engagement and awareness, while simple in-store events, like newsletter-promoted classes from Athleta live in the lower funnel. Come for the yoga, stay for the yoga pants.
Customer Journey Mapping

Today’s buyers have more ways to interact with businesses, but this doesn’t always translate to a positive customer experience. Learn how customer journey maps and persona marketing can facilitate your contacts’ purchase decisions and improve their experience.

Download your copy today!
Like display, email is its own funnel-spanning, fully-automated platform that allows for personalization, targeting, and sequencing. Email’s trump card, however, is that subscribers opt-in. 60 percent say they’re in it for the discounts, but content also keeps consumers opening.

The subject line is a marketer’s opening upper funnel punch and it’s important to land it, said Dela Quist, CEO of Alchemy Worx. “A subject line today can impact an open or a click or a conversion three emails down the line.” Every subject line is a direct message to your audience, and they should be part of a series, not a standalone impression.

By the time a consumer opens even their first welcome email, they’re in the middle funnel, and (we hope) integrated into an existing CRM database. While a welcome email may seem like a top-funnel concept, Quist noted, “Even the content of a welcome message is in the bottom funnel, because to even get on your list they’ve already engaged with you.”

Even deeper in, a strategy called drip campaigning can help marketers nurture leads by automating who gets which email. Did someone sign up for your whitepaper? Great, try them on a webinar. No? Go with a video instead. Did someone leave an item in their cart? Strike now.

“Companies are beginning to understand and model individual customer journeys and target them based on things like abandoned shopping carts and browsing behavior,” noted Innovyx CEO Derek Harding. “That can be highly effective because sometimes people get close to the point of purchase and then get distracted and just need a reminder to come back.”

Some e-retailers go for a more straightforward strategy: Newsletters as catalogs from JackThreads, Bespoke Post and others play toward the bottom of the funnel. Coupon codes and discounts also motivate here. Once that sale is made, the Thank You email brings them back.
Marketing newbies may think that search is exclusively a lower funnel tactic. But, repeat after us, search… spans… the funnel. That said, the search funnel’s upper third is decidedly shallower than its middle and lower parts, according to Crystal Stewart, vice president at Booyah Advertising in Denver.

“Paid search does actually drive a lot of awareness,” she said. “Sixty percent of consumers that come off of search are new customers.” They may not be searching for your brand, but if it can bring them the information they need, you’ll move quickly from awareness to consideration. “They’ll go off to do their research, then come back via a brand search.”

Jeremy Hull, vice president at iProspect, believes Google’s remarketing lists give advertisers more middle-funnel reach, allowing them to target consumers just like they can with display. “You’re able to target an audience that hasn’t been to your website, but manage and measure it differently and possibly get lower CPA because new users are more valuable.”

Brand search performs 5x higher than keyword marketing, according to Stewart. And, as in content, intent has a lot to do with how fruitful search can be.

Consider this middle- to lower-funnel campaign from 360i for Red Roof Inn. The agency used a custom API to pull weather and flight information into a paid search campaign, which then served ads customized and targeted to travelers who had missed their flights. Sleep on the floor at O’Hare airport or comfortably at a Red Roof Inn? Fastest checkered cab ride through the funnel ever.