

# Market Insights -- Discussion Paper

*Sponsored by*



## *UNDERSTANDING THE CLIENT ECOSYSTEM TO DRIVE BETTER SALES*

### **Introduction**

Customers these days are typically much further along the decision-making cycle before they engage with providers than they were in the past. This is especially true in the B2B segment.

And while the research companies might argue at the margins about precisely how far they are along the cycle, all of them agree that a buyer will often be more than halfway towards a decision before the seller is even aware that they are in the market.

For B2B companies looking to build out and qualify their leads, the pressure is on to understand current customers better. That will help them qualify their prospects and, just as importantly, better appreciate a client's ecosystem — to ensure that not only are they providing the right information at the right time, but they are in front of the real decision-makers and influencers.

This year, account-based marketing (ABM) has emerged as one of the hottest topics in the digital marketing world. That's not because it is a new concept — it's not. Rather, the conflation of analytics, social media, attribution solutions and the increasing sophistication of marketing technology platforms has pushed ABM to the top of mind for many B2B companies.

In simple terms, ABM involves processes and software to help businesses focus on the right accounts, solidify a robust account map and, importantly, drive sales and marketing alignment.

To coincide with its recent Global Forum in Sydney, ADMA partnered with Avention OneSource Solutions to host a round table discussion on the topic with more than a dozen senior marketing executives. Participants included marketers and analytics professionals from retail, financial services, telecommunications and professional services. Merkle CMO **George Gallate** was also engaged as a guest speaker to help set the tone for the discussion.

Avention OneSource Solutions' **Joe Lim**, Director Australia & New Zealand, started the discussion by noting “I think all companies are struggling to develop a 360-degree view of who their client is. That involves really understanding what is going on inside the whole business and, from that, identifying who they should be going after — and, more importantly, how best to do that.”

He then introduced Gallate, who began by tackling a common marketing myth: that B2B marketers always take the lead from their B2C colleagues.

## **B2B experts**

According to Gallate, “Everyone in this room has heard the statement that B2B follows B2C in marketing. It’s a general concept, especially in the digital space. Taking the gloves off, I just think that’s rubbish.

“The fact of the matter is, we as B2B marketers have so much opportunity to do things much better with a little bit of focus, a little bit more effort, and a little bit of smarts. And the subject that’s getting a huge amount of traction in the B2B sector currently is account-based marketing.”

## **Benefits**

Done well, account-based marketing blends solid processes and analytics to provide a data driven framework to empower salespeople to identify who their customers are, how far they are along a decision trail, and how the company can best meet their needs.

According to Gallate, “When you have data driving communication, and when you use multiple data sources to get real business intelligence and link it to your front line staff and your thought leaders, very powerful things happen.”

Participants agreed on the need for a focused approach. “When you are focused and you apply account-based marketing principles, you are going to be more successful than your competitors.”

Account-based marketing was also described as a great equaliser. Speakers referenced research suggesting that account-based marketing allows smaller businesses take on their bigger peers.

*“When you have data driving communication, and when you use multiple data sources to get real business intelligence and link it to your front line staff and your thought leaders, very powerful things happen.”*

Participants were told that marketers need to think about account-based marketing from the perspective of their own internal customers: sales managers and their teams.

“They are thinking, ‘What can you tell me that I don't already know?’”

It is also critical to think about aligning the information sets used by sales and marketing, which are often run as different silos, and staffed by people with very different personalities.

Participants in the discussion — drawn from a mixture of sales and marketing backgrounds — asked, “How do we give that information to marketing and sales, so they've both got the same information and neither feels threatened by the other.”

One of the core difficulties they identified with the concept of account-based marketing was the struggle to understand the entire ecosystem that exists within a given customer's operation. “The perceived decision maker is not always the actual decision maker and that's a challenge,” said one.

Another flagged difficulties with engaging sufficiently senior executives at the client. “The biggest issue we probably have is being able to market to the right people. Let's say I get a deal with a company of 50, you are working with the IT manager who's responsible for the system. It's incredibly hard to get the CEO or the CFO onto your database to market to them.”

## Account Ecosystem

Gallate told the participants, “In the US there was a hypothesis: if you had a direct sales or a key account, you didn't need account-based marketing because you were constantly dealing with the account on a day to day basis.”

The problem with that view, he said, was that it failed to recognise that account-based marketing is not just about the one person the sales team deals with — it's the ecosystem within that account that matters. “So there needs to be a paradigm shift. The account is more than one person. There are a number of touch points within that organisation that need to be nurtured.

Done well, participants said, account-based marketing reduces the sales cycle and reduces the cost of sale.

## Managing Change

As with all transformation and change management, recognising and adjusting the culture of an organisation is crucial to success when it comes to implementing account-based management programs and systems.

Given that ABM conflates two very different cultures — sales and marketing — this is especially so.

One of the executives in the room with a strong history in sales management said,

“The thing I often say to marketers or CFOs is that salespeople are paid to do something that no one else really can do. And that is to pick up the phone to an abject stranger and try to get a meeting with them. Now, you can furnish them with great information to help that process, but it still takes a certain personality type to pick up the phone and have that conversation.”

Account-based management, on the other hand, involves a commitment to process and to engage with the task of populating the system with information. “That sales personality type is diametrically opposed to entering information into forms of any description, whether it’s online or a piece of paper.”

The solution is a combination of carrot and stick. And it is incumbent upon the people driving the project — typically in marketing — to explain that the win for the salesperson is better qualified leads. “We need to show sales that they can be more successful. You can qualify your plan better and not waste your time on people who are unlikely to buy.”

There was also an acknowledgement that the role of the sales person has changed. They need to be a subject matter expert, rather than just a person managing a pipeline. That raised a number of questions:

- How do we see that change manifest?
- Are the sales teams and sales departments part of this change process?
- Are they on board with this?
- Are they embracing account-based marketing, or is there still that resistance?

These questions led to a wider conversation about the nature of the relationship between sales and marketing.

Several of the participants managed joint sales and marketing teams, with the suggestion that this enabled better collaboration. However, it was not a firm rule and often depended upon the type of company and the kind of culture that exists.

It was clear that the divide between sales and marketing in many organisations, while not impossible to bridge, is significant — and that each group still struggles to understand the challenges of the other.

For instance, one participant said “We might run a marketing event that generates a lead or some data which needs to be passed along the chain. How do you make sure when that crosses that divide into sales that you can keep on following that? In an ideal world, everyone has an amazing CRM system that everybody uses, but obviously my experience suggests otherwise.”

Marketers should also see it as their role to help sales people know their customers better. “We just have to convince everybody to come along the journey. We can get good quality leads for them. We can introduce them to people in that large account that they didn’t know. We can help put commission in their pocket,” said one marketer.

Another noted, “In my experience, the thing that has worked well is when we’ve made the usage [of the system] incredibly easy. I think the marketing person has to be tenacious. Change management involves helping the sales leaders to see the benefit. If the sales leader doesn’t want to do it, you’re screwed. It’s not going to happen.”

## Murky Attribution

Improved analytics, smart use of social channels, and marketing automation systems that are able to identify prospects with accuracy from their digital fingerprints have all contributed to the efficacy of account-based marketing as a discipline.

Despite this, the vexed question of attribution still raised its head in the conversation.

“The thing I’m finding hardest as a marketer,” said one participant, “is that if you actually get a lead from one of those companies — from, for instance, an event — it’s never easy to track the one cause. Did they come to the event from an email campaign, or perhaps they heard about it on social media. So it’s a little bit murky on how that happens and it is often hard to pin it on to a single thing.”

## Conclusion

Understanding the differences — particularly in motivation — between sales and marketing is an essential part of delivering successful account-based marketing. Marketers need to understand how they can better qualify a lead or provide greater understanding of a client or prospect.

For sales teams, a richer understanding of the whole ecosystem within a client opens up more opportunities. Account-based marketing also helps to build insight into a client’s business, which in turn builds subject matter expertise, and makes the sales person more valuable to the customer in the long term.

**AVENTION**  
ONESOURCE SOLUTIONS

TURNING DATA INTO OPPORTUNITY