

## Case Study Series: What's Working in Marketing & Selling Professional Services

### Marketing Firm Uses LinkedIn and Content to Attract Clients and Shorten the Sales Cycle

By M. Sharon Baker

#### OVERVIEW

Carole Mahoney, an inbound marketing strategist, helps small- to medium-sized companies align their sales and marketing teams with those in customer service. She teaches companies how to identify their ideal customers, how to reach them with inbound marketing, and how to “ingage” so they can increase sales. Most important, Mahoney teaches companies how to think of customers as individuals, not numbers.

#### SITUATION

Within six months of starting Mahoney Internet Marketing in 2008, Mahoney was making more than her previous yearly salary. But she wasn't happy with the clientele she had.

“I was frustrated,” she says. “Clients were bickering with me on price, [others] weren't listening to me but arguing, and getting some to pay their invoices was a pain.”

She also spent a lot of time creating proposals but not closing sales.

“I was wondering whether I was doing it right,” says Mahoney, a voracious lifelong learner.

#### APPROACH

Realizing she needed to better understand sales and the entire sales process, the Portland, Maine, solopreneur hired a sales coach.

“Understanding the sales process allowed me to get better at marketing and understanding buyers and buyer decisions,” she says. “How someone is approached has a huge impact on what happens in the sales process.”

She learned how to say no to some clients, and she learned how to identify the best clients for her rather than agreeing to work with whoever was sitting in front of her.

Mahoney cultivated referrals and practiced what she preached to grow sales. First, she armed herself with research regarding who her ideal clients are and what they need, called a buyer persona.

## **Visualize Your Ideal Buyer**

“Over the years, I looked at the characteristics of my clients, their roles within a company, and what kinds of companies I was working with, which all contributed to my understanding of who my customer was,” she says.

As it turned out, Mahoney's ideal prospects worked at B2B companies that have fewer than 50 employees, at firms where the founder was still involved in the day-to-day operations, and in technology, healthcare, education, or government.

“I work well with companies in Southern states,” she says. “They seem to like me a lot.”

Armed with ideal buyer profiles, Mahoney created content tailored and mapped to the buyer personas and their needs. She then posted this content on her website or used it in lead nurturing campaigns. When her content resonated with prospects, sales conversations began.

“Sales conversations help me decide what keywords to use, what tests to run, even how to use social media to reach the right people,” Mahoney says. They also “inspire much of the blog post content, landing pages, calls to action, even the ebooks and other downloadable offers.”

With the tailored content available on the website and knowledge of her ideal buyers, Mahoney then looked for prospects. She used social media channels such as Twitter, Quora, Facebook, and LinkedIn and engaged them in what she calls “ingagement,” a made-up word fusing “inbound” with “engagement.”

LinkedIn, she learned, was the best platform to find prospects because of its business focus and tools that allowed her to search for specific demographics and keywords.

## **How to Find Ideal Customers: LinkedIn**

Like many others first joining LinkedIn, Mahoney didn't do much more than fill out her basic profile when she joined in 2006, hoping people would find her. She stepped up her efforts as she went through her sales training, realizing she could use the platform to engage in ways that would be different—specifically, targeting individuals rather than faceless companies.

The trick, she knew, was not to overtly sell, but learn about a prospect and engage with them as part of a process of getting to know them and earning their trust. Once she's earned their trust, many prospects end up hiring her.

## **How to "Ingage"**

Mahoney used LinkedIn to search for specific job titles, look at profiles, and see whom people recommend. She reviewed what groups prospects belong to and how much they interact in those groups. She also looked for things she might have in common with them.

“One of my favorite things to do is find groups that customers would be in and comment on discussions they may be participating in or have started,” Mahoney says. “I don't share my own blog posts or try to

connect, but try to make comments about the topic” to demonstrate her level of knowledge and expertise.

That often resulted in prospects looking at her LinkedIn profile.

When she learned a prospect looked at her profile—a feature of LinkedIn’s premium service—Mahoney sent them a quick note asking them why they stopped by, a technique she uses to start a conversation. This initial friendly email exchange typically was the nudge that grew into a conversation, and then later into a sales conversation, she says.

Mahoney didn’t immediately connect with a prospect or possible partner; she did so only after an initial conversation in which she determined a connection would be beneficial for both.

“Your profile and connections are your online reputation,” she says. “It’s not about quantity, but quality connections.”

## **RESULTS**

As a result of referrals, a website full of content tailored to her ideal buyers, and “ingagement,” Mahoney Internet Marketing doubled revenues every year since its 2008 inception, Mahoney says. Using LinkedIn for prospecting brought her three of the six clients she worked with in 2012.

In addition, she says, “Twice I’ve landed five-figure retainers using LinkedIn, and both are still clients today.”

Using targeted buyer personas and “ingagement,” Mahoney has shortened her sales cycle from 60 days to 30 to 45 days.

“It definitely accelerates the sales process, and at least cuts it in half,” she says.

She closed one deal in just a few short weeks after she reached out to a CEO who had viewed her profile. Although she had worked for the company years ago, she had never met the CEO. After learning the company was looking to revamp its website, she suggested an informational call. After a second call, she sent a proposal, which was accepted.

Mahoney was able to identify her possible competitors for another prospect after looking at the prospect’s connections on LinkedIn. Using her sales insight, she realized the prospect needed reassurance by soliciting bids from three vendors. After confirming who else the prospect was talking to, she figured out what her unique offering was—that she could teach the company how to incorporate buyer personas, use social media, and use inbound marketing to engage prospects rather than “do it all for them” as her competitors would.

Articulating this differentiator to the prospect helped her win the contract, she says.

After partnering with analytical software company HubSpot, which helps her measure her client’s success using inbound marketing, and seeing the measurable success her clients are enjoying, Mahoney is now writing a book teaching others how to “ingage” with customers on an individual level using LinkedIn. The book is due out at the end of 2013.

### **Additional Engagement Tips from Carole Mahoney**

- **Create your LinkedIn profile in Word or using pencil and paper first.** This allows you to focus on what you are saying rather than be distracted by LinkedIn's other profile features. (See the resources below for a link to a worksheet that can help.)
- **Create a permanent URL for your profile** using your full name and a description of what your company does in the link to your website.
- **Whenever you comment on the Internet, use your permanent LinkedIn URL** rather than your website when this option is available. Doing so allows you to see who viewed your profile, which you can then use to "ingage" with what could be a prospect.
- **Remember to connect to friends and family**, not just colleagues and companies, so you can leverage them to find more connections.
- **Don't connect with everyone.** Have a sense of people before you connect. Have a conversation with potential connections before you connect to foster a richer connection.

### **Resources**

Mahoney Internet Marketing website: <http://www.minternetmarketing.com/>

Worksheet to help create your LinkedIn profile: <http://www.minternetmarketing.com/optimize-your-linkedin-profile/>