

# A Review of Research on Inbound Marketing

Hassan Aljohani

Email: hes20201@gmail.com

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review the available research studies on the subject of Inbound Marketing. Over the past decade, traditional marketing has been relegated to the background, as the new concept of Inbound Marketing has gradually taken its place. For this paper, specific search terms were used in the Google Scholar search engine and the results were shortlisted according to the year of publication. From the review of the available studies on the subject, it was highlighted that Inbound Marketing has slowly replaced traditional marketing strategies. In this paper, we have covered the evolution of the concept of Inbound Marketing as well as the different definitions which have been proposed by various authors. We will also cover the disadvantages of traditional marketing, a comparison of inbound and outbound marketing, and digital inbound marketing.

**Keywords:** Inbound marketing, traditional marketing, trend, review

## Introduction

Today's businesses are experiencing a revolutionary shift observing the dramatic changes in consumer behavior. This change mostly implies the transformation of how people shop and buy, and what they now expect from the products and services. (Ryan 2016 – as cited in Popova, 2019). These days, people make purchase decisions online. Hence, the marketing of products and services has also shifted online. In this paper, we will review studies which explore the concept of Inbound Marketing in detail.

## Methodology

In this paper, we will review some of the research studies which have been carried out on the subject of Inbound Marketing. Towards this end, specific search terms were used in Google Scholar search engine, such as “inbound marketing”, “inbound digital marketing”, and “online marketing”. The results of these searches were shortlisted as per the year of publication. For the purpose of this study, only studies published after 2014 were used, in order to examine the concept of Inbound Marketing.

## Results and Discussion

According to Nedaei, Khanzadi, Majidi, & Movaghar (2018), a substantial portion of the traditional business environment has been shifting online for the last decade, with the company website being the new business environment. In the online environment, marketing is undergoing a transformation, as businesses can no longer rely only on traditional marketing tactics and campaigns to attract customers (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

According to Bezhovski (2015), the Inbound Marketing, as an Internet marketing concept or a strategy, has its origin in permission marketing and content marketing. As a holistic approach it also comprises other accredited online marketing techniques like search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, e-mail marketing, CRM, web automation etc. The primary idea behind Inbound Marketing is to attract visitors to a website by “creating and distributing useful

content, convert those visitors into leads, earn their trust and then turn them into loyal customers” (Bezhovski, 2015). This approach is targeted on pull marketing techniques rather than push techniques that interrupt the internet users with an advertising message (Bezhovski, 2015).

### **Evolution of Inbound Marketing**

In 2005, Brian Halligan used the term “Inbound marketing” for the first time (Halligan and Shah, 2009; Pollit, 2011 – as cited in Bezhovski, 2015). The term inbound implies to attracting, drawing in customers. According to the pioneers of inbound marketing, Brian Halligan and Dharmesh Shah, “the need for such holistic approach aroused from the fact that the marketing tactics used successfully in the past didn’t produce the desired results any more” (Halligan and Shah 2014 – as cited in Bezhovski, 2015).

### ***Disadvantages of traditional marketing***

In his study, Todor (2016) has listed out the disadvantages of traditional marketing, which have led to the development of inbound marketing:

- Difficulties in measuring: the results are not easily measured, and in many cases cannot be measured at all.
- High costs: traditional marketing is in most of the cases much more expensive than digital marketing.
- Static: with traditional marketing there is no much interaction with the audience if any in many cases. It means throwing information in front of people and hoping that they decide to take action.
- Timing: in this case companies use static text or advertising commercial to promote the product/service. If changes occur the content cannot be changed fast enough.
- Customization: when using traditional marketing methods for advertising it is hard to target a specific customer. Segments of the market can be targeted, but not an individual. For example, an ad may target young women. In comparison, digital marketing techniques can track a viewer fields of interest and suggest similar products.
- Pricing options: in traditional marketing, it is difficult to offer complex pricing, meanwhile in online marketing the information can explain all the different pricing variations that may appeal to buyers (Todor, 2016).

According to Bezhovski (2015), the idea behind the Inbound marketing is to use marketing tactics that will “try to earn the interest of the prospects and pull (bring) them to the company (the company’s website) rather than trying to push the advertising message to them and wait for their reaction”. The attention of the potential customers is earned by developing high-quality content and sharing this content through multiple online channels including search engines and social media. In internet marketing, ‘content’ refers to a variety of formats, including news, web articles, videos, white papers, e-books, infographics, case studies, how-to guides, photos, etc. (Bezhovski, 2015). The founders of Hubspot, Halligan and Shah (2014) say that inbound marketing is equivalent for pulling the customers to the seller (as cited in Kalliosaari, 2018). The author also says that in order to get noticed by possible customers, a company must provide helpful information on its channels. Today, information is readily and widely available via the Internet, and usually, before purchase decisions, the Internet is the primary source of information seeking. Usually purchase decision starts by conducting a search via Google or other search

engines. That is the reason why it is often said that no company exists without a webpage or other kind of online presence (Kalliosaari, 2018).

According to Bezhovski (2015), one of the primary elements of the inbound concept is the company's website where "the visitors are converted into leads by optimizing landing pages and subscription forms, and offering content baits in return for the contact information". The leads are converted to first to customers and then to long-term loyal customers by using email marketing and sound customer relationship management systems (CRM) (Bezhovski, 2015).

### **Definition of Inbound Marketing**

According to Fishkin and Høgenhaven (2013) inbound marketing is "everything that can be created and done online that creates traffic to the selected channels" (as cited in Kalliosaari, 2018). Świczak (2014) defines inbound marketing in a similar way, as he refers to it as "acting in Internet in such way that the possible customers can find the chosen channels on their own" (as cited in Kalliosaari, 2018). Inbound marketing is a term for a marketing tactic, "where the possible future customers find the company naturally, without any direct push from the seller's side. It requires a lot of work and long-term commitment. It is important to make oneself heard through the right channels. The right channel can be determined by researching where the company's target audience exists" (Kalliosaari, 2018). Inbound marketing can also be referred as organic marketing or earned media (Fishkin & Høgenhaven 2013 – as cited in Kalliosaari, 2018).

According to Lin & Yazdanifard (2014), inbound marketing is about creating and sharing content. It is a marketing methodology focused "on getting found by prospects through blogs, podcasts, eBooks, eNewsletters, website pages, whitepapers, search engine optimization, social media marketing, and other forms of content marketing" (Lin & Yazdanifard, 2014). By creating content specifically designed to appeal to your ideal clients, inbound marketing attracts qualified prospects to your firm and keeps them coming back for more. According to Lieberman (2013), inbound marketing is a broad, high level, descriptive term for marketing strategies that, instead of pushing interruptive messages out to clients, engage prospects and pull them in to the business (as cited in Lin & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Inbound marketing can be defined as "the strategy of connecting with potential customers through materials and experiences they find useful. Using media like blogs and social networking, marketers hope to entertain and inform viewers with content they seek by themselves" (Marketing-Schools.org, 2016 – as cited in Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

According to Nedaei, Khanzadi, Majidi, & Movaghar (2018), inbound marketing is the process of attracting the probable customers to a business before they have any intention to become customers. An effective method for inbound marketing is creation of a positive psychological , business environment to attract the customers (Nedaei, Khanzadi, Majidi, & Movaghar, 2018).

According to Popova (2019), the term inbound marketing was firstly introduced by HubSpot in 2006. According to their definition, Inbound marketing is "the process of creating a valuable customer experience that will bring positive outcomes for the business. It is a method of attracting, engaging and delighting buyers in order to make the business grow and build up customer loyalty" (HubSpot 2019 – as cited in Popova, 2019). Inbound marketing can also be simply put as "pull marketing" which means that a business is pulling people in by sharing useful and relevant information and creating good and quality content. In order to fulfill these

requirements, the inbound marketing incorporates various techniques which today are commonly used online. (Halligan & Shah 2014, - as cited in Popova, 2019).

### **Advantages and disadvantages of inbound marketing**

According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016), inbound marketing allows several advantages such as:

- it allows a direct, permanent and long-term relationship with the customer;
- it defines fast and accurately the “buyer persona” profile;
- it allows to achieve better results in terms of the benefits / costs report compared to the traditional marketing;
- it permits to develop a content strategy based on specific topics (keywords) identified with SEO and Google Adwords, for which there is a real interest from the prospects;
- it represents an advanced form of marketing that relies on the creation and distribution of high quality content (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016), even if the advantages of inbound marketing are very important, this form of marketing presents also some disadvantages such as:

- it is more demanding and complex than the traditional marketing;
- it requires the use of Internet, so that the people who don't use it cannot become the target audience;
- it allows a segmented communication and not a universal one (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

### **Inbound Vs Outbound Marketing**

According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016), traditional marketing is connected with outbound marketing, which means that the marketing strategy pushes the products to the customers, while digital marketing is identical to inbound marketing, which mainly aims to win the target interest.

Outbound marketing aims to promote products and services to the audience directly, while inbound marketing helps to highlight goods and services indirectly, where the consumers identify themselves as the company's target (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016), Inbound Marketing is mainly a content marketing as it is the element that can capture the consumer's attention, pushing it towards the purchase. That's why, “the entire strategy of marketing is becoming a content marketing strategy and the lack of quality content inevitably leads to the failure of the company's digital marketing strategy” (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). Therefore, in inbound marketing, identifying the target and adapting the communication to its needs, expectations and interest play a vital role.

“Outbound marketing is an invasive form of marketing, while inbound marketing is a permissive one, since the consumer agrees to be identified and targeted, and he is not disturbed by the company's communication to him” (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

Newsletters, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), webinars, etc. involve voluntary subscription. According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016), inbound marketing efficiency is superior to the outbound marketing efficiency because it allows a better targeting of the audience and a better adaptation of the company's communication to it. For example, if persons have subscribed to the newsletter, the conversion rate is 750% higher than the newsletter addressed to people who haven't shown an interest in the company or its products / services (Gregg, 2015 – as cited in Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

According to Popova (2019), traditionally, most companies have assumed that the message had to be pushed in order for the customer to see it, in order for them to want buy certain products. This approach is called “outbound” marketing. Traditionally, companies have been using a number of different techniques such as e-mail blasts, telemarketing, direct mailing, printed advertisements, TV and other channels in order to push the message to reach their potential buyers. (Halligan & Shah 2014 – as cited in Popova, 2019). People have changed the way they shop today, and it has been evident that the outbound approach is no longer relevant and is not effective enough for the purposes of building brand awareness and, hence, increasing company sales (Popova, 2019). According to Popova (2019), traditional methods have lost their effectiveness due to a number of reasons. Firstly, consumers get overwhelmed with a constant flow of advertisement and interruptions they were not interested in so that they would just simply block or ignore it. (Halligan & Shah 2014 – Popova, 2019). Secondly, with a constant rise of competition and abundance of everything on the market, organizations have to increase their marketing creativity and adjust to the new trends. Alongside, it is also important to keep in mind that available sources and budget assigned for the marketing should be used efficiently. (Expert journal of Marketing 2015 – as cited in Popova, 2019).

For these reasons, a new ‘inbound’ approach has taken the place of outbound marketing. It has revolutionized the holistic thinking about how marketing strategies should be created. As per this strategy, the customer is ‘pulled’ and not pushed, through sharing useful content and by providing relevant information which in turn will help to build long-term consumer relationships. (Halligan & Shah 2014 – as cited in Popova, 2019)

According to Patel & Chugan (2018), inbound marketing is different from outbound marketing in terms of gaining customers because outbound marketers try to find customers with traditional marketing techniques whereas in inbound marketing, marketers earn the attention of potential customers and through unique content, makes the brand easy to be found (Patel & Chugan, 2018).

### **Digital Inbound Marketing**

Digital Inbound Marketing is a new academic concept in online marketing literature. According to Opreana & Vinerean (2015), “Digital Inbound Marketing represents the process of reaching and converting qualified consumers by creating and pursuing organic tactics in online settings”. The most important elements of digital inbound marketing are interactivity and engagement, two constructs which offer marketers an opportunity to foster valuable relationships that transcend the limitations of traditional media. These two constructs allow marketers to have continuous conversations with customers or people who are interested in their products or services (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

***Table 1: Differences between traditional and digital inbound marketing***

	Traditional Marketing	Digital Inbound Marketing
Basis	Interruption	Organic
Focus	Finding customers	Getting found by potential, existing and aspirational consumers
Aim	Increased sales	Creating long lasting relationships by reaching and converting qualified consumers

	Traditional Marketing	Digital Inbound Marketing
Target	Large audiences	Interested prospects
Tactics	Print advertisements TV advertisements Outdoors advertising Cold calling Trade shows Email lists	Blogs, Ebooks, White papers Videos on Youtube, vimeo, etc. Search engine optimization tactics Infographics Webinars Feeds, RSS Social media marketing tactics

Source: Opreana & Vinerean, 2015

### ***Components of Digital Inbound Marketing***

#### **a. Content Marketing**

Content is the foundation of digital inbound marketing. According to Opreana & Vinerean (2015), “organizations can attract potential customers, retain existing once, and transform aspirational consumers by developing various forms of content that prospects consider valuable and will use the created content in order to access a website to learn more or come into contact with a marketing offer”. Basically, the aim of content marketing is to attract and retain customers by constantly creating pertinent, valuable content with the intention to change or reinforce consumer behavior. This is an ongoing process that is best integrated into the overall marketing strategy and focuses on media ownership, not media lending (Flanagan, 2015 – Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). There are various forms of content such as video, image, text, blogs, ebooks, infographics, slideshow presentations, interactive content, etc.

#### **b. Search Engine Optimization**

According to Opreana & Vinerean (2015), Search Engine Optimization or SEO is a online marketing tool that refers to building a website and inbound links to a particular website to optimize the position in search engine results’ pages. This tool simplifies it for prospective customers to find an organization’s content. After content marketing, SEO helps increase the visibility and discoverability of content on search engines.

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is a tactic and a marketing approach for improving the online findability of a website and the content on it (Ledford, 2015 – as cited in Saarinen, 2019). This is a relevant part of inbound marketing because to make sure a company reaches the right people with their content, the targeted audience needs to be able to find the content (Saarinen, 2019).

#### **c. Social Media Marketing**

According to Opreana & Vinerean (2015), online social networks have greatly altered the spread of information by making it incredibly simple to share information on the internet. Social media amplifies the impact of an organization’s content. A business can both distribute content across various social networks and consolidate its brand by creating its business page on such networks. Sharing content across social networks makes it appear reliable, while creating business pages offers a business more opportunities to make its content known. “Social interaction in the digital world in which consumers communicate

and interact in real time, can be used to create connections with clients in order to provide and receive information from prospects” (Tikkanen et al., 2009 – as cited in Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Peer communication through social media, which is a new form of consumer socialization, has deep influences on consumer decision making and thus, even marketing strategies. “Social media, especially social networking sites, provide a virtual space for people to communicate through the Internet, which also might be an important agent of consumer socialization” (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

In their study, Opreana & Vinerean (2015) say that social media marketing represents such a huge cost effective opportunity for marketers who wish to start a dialogue with their customers in order to get an insight into their preferences. Social network sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and Twitter, just aggregate an abundance of information. Another significant aspect of social media and its impact on marketing is the opportunity it provides for collaboration on products and campaigns with consumers (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). This way, online marketers can improve the company’s profitability, revenue streams, and even increase the loyalty of customers who may become brand advocates in online settings (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

#### **d. Brand-Focused Marketing Communication**

According to Opreana & Vinerean (2015), brand-focused marketing communications in the online environment have a special impact on the capitalization of the company. “Marketing communications are the means by which companies try to inform consumers, to convince them and remind them - directly or indirectly - about the products and brands they sell. In a sense, marketing communications represent the "voice" of the brand and represent tools that can start a dialogue and can build relationships with consumers” (Kotler et al, 2012 – Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have reviewed papers which have explored the concept of Inbound Marketing. Over the past decade, traditional marketing has been relegated to the background, as the new concept of Inbound Marketing has gradually taken its place. From the review of the available studies on the subject, it was highlighted that Inbound Marketing has slowly replaced traditional marketing strategies. Authors have talked about the evolution of Inbound Marketing, and have proposed definitions for the same. Authors have also talked about the disadvantages of traditional marketing, a comparison of inbound and outbound marketing, and digital inbound marketing.

## **References**

- Bezhovski, Z. (2015). Inbound Marketing – A New Concept in Digital Business. In *SELTH 2015 - International Scientific Conference of the Romanian-German University of Sibiu* (pp. 27 – 34).
- Kalliosaari, P. (2018). *Inbound marketing for a small B2B company* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, Seinäjoki, Finland.
- Lin, C.O.Y., & Yazdanifard, R. (2014). How Google’s New Algorithm, Hummingbird, Promotes Content and Inbound Marketing. *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management*, 4, 51-57.

- Nedaei, D., Khanzadi, P., Majidi, B., & Movaghar, A. (2018). Inbound E-Marketing Using Neural Network Based Visual and Phonetic User Experience Analytics. In *4th International Conference on Web Research (ICWR2018)* (pp. 12-18). Tehran, Iran.
- Opreana, A., & Vinerean, S. (2015). A New Development in Online Marketing: Introducing Digital Inbound Marketing. *Expert Journal of Marketing*, 3(1), 29-34.
- Patel, C.P., & Chugan, P.K. (2018). Digital Inbound Marketing to Drive the Success of Startups. *International Journal of Family Business and Management*, 2(1), 1-6.
- Patruti-Baltes, L. (2016). Inbound Marketing - the most important digital marketing strategy. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series V: Economic Sciences*, 9 (58), 61-68.
- Popova, E. (2019). *Raising Brand Awareness Through Inbound Marketing in B2b Sales on the Russian Market* (Unpublished Bachelor's thesis). Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Lahti, Finland.
- Saarinen, V. (2019). *Increasing sales with inbound marketing* (Unpublished Master's thesis). Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland.
- Todor, R.D. (2016). Blending traditional and digital marketing. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series V: Economic Sciences*, 9 (58), 51-56.