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The Intent-Driven ABM Playbook

(And Why Your Firmographics-First Strategy Is Stalling)

Firmographics are out. Intent data is in. Targeting high-value accounts means targeting the individuals who lead those accounts – and not just by name. B2B buyers increasingly expect to be addressed as people (and not only as spokespeople).

Account-based marketing (ABM) campaigns used to rely entirely on firmographics to function.

That was especially true in the mid-2010s when the strategy was first reaching the mainstream, and targeting large buying committees (aka the account level) within an organization made more sense than targeting individuals, especially given the capabilities at the time.

And if you're targeting accounts, don't you want to rely on data about those accounts? On characteristics like a company's size, revenue, industry sector, and its existing techstack, characteristics that fit a company squarely within your ICP?

But because B2B is naturally privy to longer sales cycles, marketing teams need to be far more attuned to when prospects are looking to buy, especially when it comes to laser-focused ABM campaigns. That is – intent should be central to ABM, not stale firmographic data.

And many B2B marketers are now discovering that to truly break through the barrage of messages competing for their buyers' attention, they need to go beyond account-level data.

That involves targeting the humans – the faces beyond the job titles in your CRM – that make up the teams inside those accounts.

The future of B2B is consumer-style, and that means bringing identity and behavioral intent to the forefront. Long a staple in B2C marketing, behavioral intent data is now a tool marketing teams can wield for highly personalized B2B ABM campaigns, too.

But teams can't make intent-driven ABM happen if their strategy is built on a faulty foundation of firmographics.

Keeping Up With ABM

B2B marketing, as a whole, has moved from static targeting to dynamic, intent-based signals. **Developments like dynamic personalization are why the global ABM market is also predicted to more than double from $1.4 billion in 2024 to $3.8 billion by 2030.**

81% of marketers who use an account-based strategy say that it delivers better ROI than any other marketing program, according to a survey conducted by Momentum ITSMA (fun fact: Momentum ITSMA, formerly just ITSMA, also first developed the strategy of account-based marketing back in 2003).

Firmographics – company size, industry, revenue, you know the usual suspects – may have been the old way to start singling out companies for an ABM campaign, but it's not the way to continue them. Especially not in the next half-decade, as more and more companies jump on the ABM bandwagon and competition reaches a fever pitch.

It's time we went beyond the account level. **These days, ABM programs use real-time intent data, behavioral signals, and predictive analytics to identify which accounts are actively in a buying cycle.**

> **The global ABM market is predicted to more than double from $1.4 billion in 2024 to $3.8 billion by 2030**

A popular heuristic in B2B marketing says only about 5% of potential B2B buyers are actively in-market at any given time. That means making use of behavioral signals to identify high-value accounts actively exploring relevant solutions – and using those signals to send timely and precise engagement – should be top priority for any team running ABM campaigns.

And by targeting accounts, we mean the individuals inside your CRM databases – who underlie those accounts.

Their titles, their buying power, their relationships with people on their team – and just as important, their own behavioral data, preferred channels, and intent signals.

The Basics of ABM

Here's a refresher. **Account-based marketing is a B2B marketing strategy that focuses on high-quality leads that are top examples of a company's ICP, and additionally, most likely to convert.**

The keyword here is account – this strategy focuses on singling out companies based on firmographics (Firmographics: characteristics of organizations, a portmanteau of "firm" and "demographics.")

On average, 21% of the total marketing programs budget is allocated to ABM programs for technology marketers with $100 million or more in annual revenue. That's a hefty chunk.

Often, ABM campaigns deliver higher ROI and allow companies to develop stronger relationships with their clients, especially given the close collaboration with sales teams that often occurs during these campaigns.

Generally, teams must lead with a deep understanding of a company's pain points, needs, and goals, and then craft personalized content, offers, or experiences that will resonate with the people in those accounts.

That also means leading with personalized outreach and communication – personalized to both the company and the individuals leading the buying decision.

Firmographics may be the starting point for determining which accounts to target – size, techstack, audience – but they are not the end-all be-all of ABM. It's just the smallest tip of the iceberg.

If your ABM still starts and ends with company-level filters, you're missing the only thing that predicts pipeline right now: who's actually in-market — and which people inside the account are doing the research.

When Firmographics Fall Flat

Firmographic attributes – like company size, industry and vertical, location, growth stage, and revenue – have long been the starting point for ABM campaigns. They're often used to determine a total addressable market for a campaign and determine an ICP for a company.

But that's all they are. The starting point. **Firmographics can't predict intent or buyer behavior**. **They can't tell you the pain points a company – or its individuals – is experiencing. It can't tell you their priorities**, or how the individuals who make up that company act, need, and want. They don't tell you about underlying consumer needs.

All that said, firmographics are also typically self-reported. When companies self-classify, they may choose to inflate numbers or simply accidentally misreport some facts, or details could go stale over time.

Firmographics alone are not a good basis for segmentation, especially when it comes to ABM – where qualitative, personalized outreach matters more than reaching the largest portion of the market.

When you treat all contact inside of a firmographically "target" account as a homogenous unit, you're missing out on the needle-moving details.

To get to the finish line, marketers have to fold in intent data, info they have on leads in the CRM (at the level of the individual, not the account), and other behavioral signals (web engagement, ebook downloads, the like).

Intent data can help marketing teams prioritize and sequence outreach efforts.

Where Intent Data Rises Up

Accounts are made up of different individuals, with different job titles, functions, seniority levels, and goals – who all need to agree on where money is spent. **One study from the late '10s found that an average of 6.8 stakeholders weigh in on a B2B purchasing decision – these days, it could be ten or more**.

ABM intent data is data that indicates an "account's" interest or readiness to buy a specific product or service. Typically, this is deduced through tracking online signals and engagement – of individuals. If they attend webinars, download ebooks, email opens and clicks. That means relying on signals from the leads that make up that account.

Intent data is the new frontier for ABM. **As both AI tools and data collection improve, intent is the best way to reach the right ABM teams.**

How B2B Buyers Act Like Consumers

B2B buyers want to be treated like humans, not data points. B2B buyers – yes, even the ones inside accounts – have long behaved like B2C buyers. After all, they're two sides of the same coin.

B2B buyers spend more time researching than speaking to sales teams. G2 reviews, etc., before actually pressing that "get a demo" or "contact us" button.

Buyers are typically 70% through their research process before they engage a sales team. And they expect companies to reach them across channels – blogs, video, email, and more.

It's also important to consider their titles, and consequently, their buying and influencing power. Additionally, consider their demographics and interests. **Millennial and Gen Z B2B buyers make up over 70% of all B2B buyers now – and they expect self-serve options, B2C-style touchpoints, and want businesses to reach them – seamlessly – through multiple channels.**

Digging Into Sales Calls

Why rely on account-level, self-reported static data – like firmographics and technographics – when you can drill into your own first party intent data?

Digging into sales calls transcripts can provide you access into your customers' real pain points (instead of having to guess!). ABM personalization and account intelligence can also be streamlined through machine learning tools that can extract insights from recorded calls.

When data quality is one of the biggest concerns for marketing teams, the cleanest, more qualitative data is your own. Integrate that and connect it with identity, and you're on your way to better insights.

Individuals, or Teams?

While shifting from account-level data to buyer-level intent and behavior, in many cases, B2B companies are selling to teams, not individuals.

Yet most CRMs operate on a lead model that considers the names of individuals who represent accounts, rather than mapping the relationships between teams and titles.

The idea that a single lead drives a sale doesn't track – like we've mentioned, double-digit teams usually drive buying decisions, not just an individual.

But then again, these individuals – and their research process – is the basis for these team-spaning conversations.

When marketing to leads or entire accounts as single units, you ignore the multiplicity of the account – and the true individuals underlying it. **Mapping the buying committee – the team – and targeting each individual is far more effective than targeting the single title that serves as the lead.**

Integrating Identity and Behavioral Data for Hyper-Personalized Campaigns

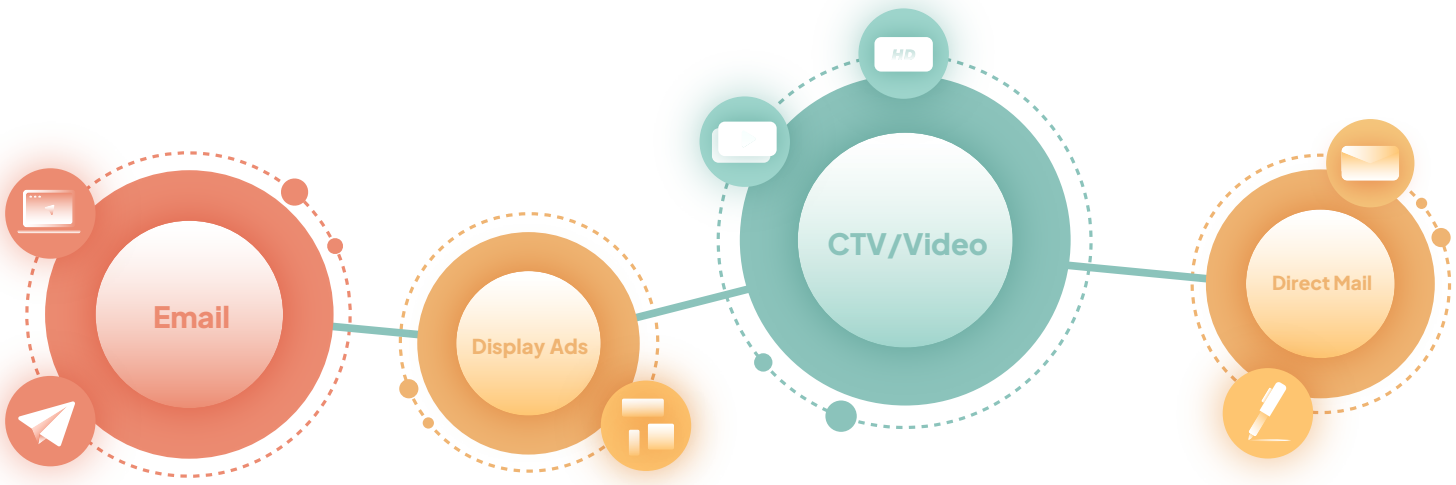
Personalization has long ago moved beyond first-name tokens and generalized pain points. Marketers are increasingly tailoring content, messaging, offers, and experience based on account context, stakeholder personas, and their stage in the journey.

This is supported by AI tools that can dynamically assemble or recommend content per account.

Influencing an account now requires activating multiple channels (digital ads, content, direct mail, events, personalized web experiences) in a coordinated way so that the buyer sees a consistent narrative.

Tools and platforms are also getting better at triggering, sequencing, and measuring these touchpoints in an orchestrated view.

With more reliance on granular signals, predictive models, and behavioral data, the demand for high-quality, clean, integrated data is greater.



Machine Learning Changes the Game

AI/ML models are being layered in to continuously reprioritize accounts, detect patterns, and help automate some of the decision making when it comes to ABM.

Take a page from Snowflake's ABM playbook. Their enterprise ABM team needed to target the right accounts, but be mindful of resources and budget. Before integrating ML tools, budget allocation was broad, and static. The team couldn't dynamically adjust spend based on account characteristics and real-time behavioral signals.

They needed better precision, but also needed to help meet the team's quarterly business goals for meetings.

So they built an internal AI model that not only identified accounts suitable for ABM campaigns, but also helped predict which ones were most likely to respond to outreach efforts and lead to booked meetings.

The Snowflake team increased meetings booked and drove higher ROI, all while staying within budget.

Shifting ABM from a Company-Centric to a People-Centric Approach

The literal name of the game in account-based marketing is about choosing high-quality accounts and focusing on them.

But "account" doesn't drill down to who you're really targeting. Psst…it's people. It's always been people.

That means going past "account level" data to the people underlying it – **and using real-time signals, including ones built on behavior and intent, to target those individuals based on their interests and needs** – not simply using firm-level data to build static company-level lists.

In the process, you get higher conversion rates, better relationships with your ideal customers, and solid ABM outcomes.

Need a little guidance to get away from firmographics and start prioritizing intent in your ABM campaigns? **As always, Stirista is here to help.**

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> **Use real-time data to target individuals based on their interests and needs**

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