The Alphabet Soup of B2B Lead Qualification: Understanding MQLs, SALs and SQLs

Friday, July 26, 2019 - Written by: Sabrina Ferraioli

Lead qualification also helps ensure that prospects still on the fence receive the follow-up nurturing they need. And those who are the B2B equivalent of tire kickers are moved out of the funnel.

Think of your sales funnel as a flowchart and your qualification process as a way to direct traffic through the funnel.

Let’s now dig into the process so we can understand the difference between an MQL, SAL and SQL.

What Is a Marketing Qualified Lead?

With today’s digital marketing, lead generation, marketing automation and analytics, leads can come into your sales funnel from practically anywhere. Many are the result of inbound marketing tactics used to drive traffic from social media, SEO search, landing pages, pay-per-click ads, content and email campaigns.

When they opt in to a web form, they're interested. But in what? Receiving a free download, researching products or services as part of their buyer's journey discovery or just collecting information on a topic?

And if they're interested in buying, then when?

The first step is to determine if a lead is a PROSPECT interested in buying now or in the near future or a SUSPECT with no immediate plans.

An MQL is any prospect that has entered your lead-tracking system or funnel by showing interest and meeting your minimum threshold for qualification as someone likely to become a customer.

This determination can be based on:

- **Predetermined criteria**—based on ideal buyer personas.
- **Lead intelligence**—this is the data-mining component that reports on a lead's online activity, social profile and buyer stage.
- **Engagement**—buyer behavior relevant to the pages on your website visited, number of repeat visits, social media activity, content downloaded and forms filled out.

Lead scoring through marketing automation is often used to qualify inbound leads. However, you likely use a more hands-on approach to lead generation as well, such as buying lists of leads that conform to your buyer personas, meeting people at tradeshows or receiving referrals.

At this stage, you have identified leads that meet your criteria but have yet to vet them and determine if it's time for salespeople to act on them.

Changing Role Dynamics for a Better Outcome

Ask most people the difference between sales and marketing, and you'll get something like this: Marketing generates the leads, and sales closes the deal.

All too often, this perceived separation of work tasks prevents a sense of collaboration or alignment of purpose between sales and marketing. While MQL qualification improves the lead qualification process, marketing's criteria and sales' criteria often remain disparate, and prospects aren't evaluated for sales readiness.

That changes with the inclusion of the **Sales Accepted Lead** (SAL) stage. Essential to the SAL is a shared sales and marketing definition of a qualified lead. When marketing sends a lead to sales, they agree to review it in a timely way, reducing the issue of lost leads.

In this process, sales determines whether to shunt a lead back to marketing as an MQL or put it in the SQL bucket. They send it back to marketing based on pre-defined reasons for not accepting a lead. These include inaccurate or incomplete data, not fitting the agreed profile, or not being ready yet and thus requiring more nurturing from marketing.

Telemarketers or inside salespeople may make discovery calls—not to sell but to start a conversation and further qualify prospects based on:

- Need
- Current solution or application
- Willingness to put sales in touch with key decision makers
- Readiness to move forward

No more than 10% of SALs should be returned to marketing. Anything more than that suggests a misalignment between the two departments' lead definitions. Marketing nurtures the leads returned to them, moving them to the digital equivalent of raising their hand to indicate they are ready for contact with a sale rep.

Not only does the SAL process prevent lead loss but it also provides for a feedback loop between sales and marketing, so they can work better together.

The SQL that Boosts Revenue

Once the SAL meets a jointly agreed upon threshold, it becomes an SQL. That means it's been sufficiently vetted to determine:

- **Fit** between buyer's need and seller's product/service
- **Opportunity** based on signals (such as activity in the industry or within the company) that suggests the time is right to buy
- **Purchase Intent** and readiness to talk with a sales person based on online behavior and questions asked during the discovery call

The SQL is deemed ready by both marketing and sales to enter the sales pipeline as a viable opportunity and assigned to a rep for a follow-up sales call.

A well-designed B2B lead qualification process and greater collaboration between sales and marketing increases the alignment of activities. You’ll be working together toward the same goal. The result? Companies that align sales and marketing increase the revenue generated by their marketing efforts by 208%.

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Published in
Lead Qualification