

EBOOK

No One Buys Alone

The case for shifting to a role-based content strategy in the age of buyer self-service and complex B2B purchasing

thr@content



The end of the funnel fantasy

Marketers have always lived by the mantra “the right message, to the right person, at the right time.” Unfortunately, they’ve never really been able to achieve it.

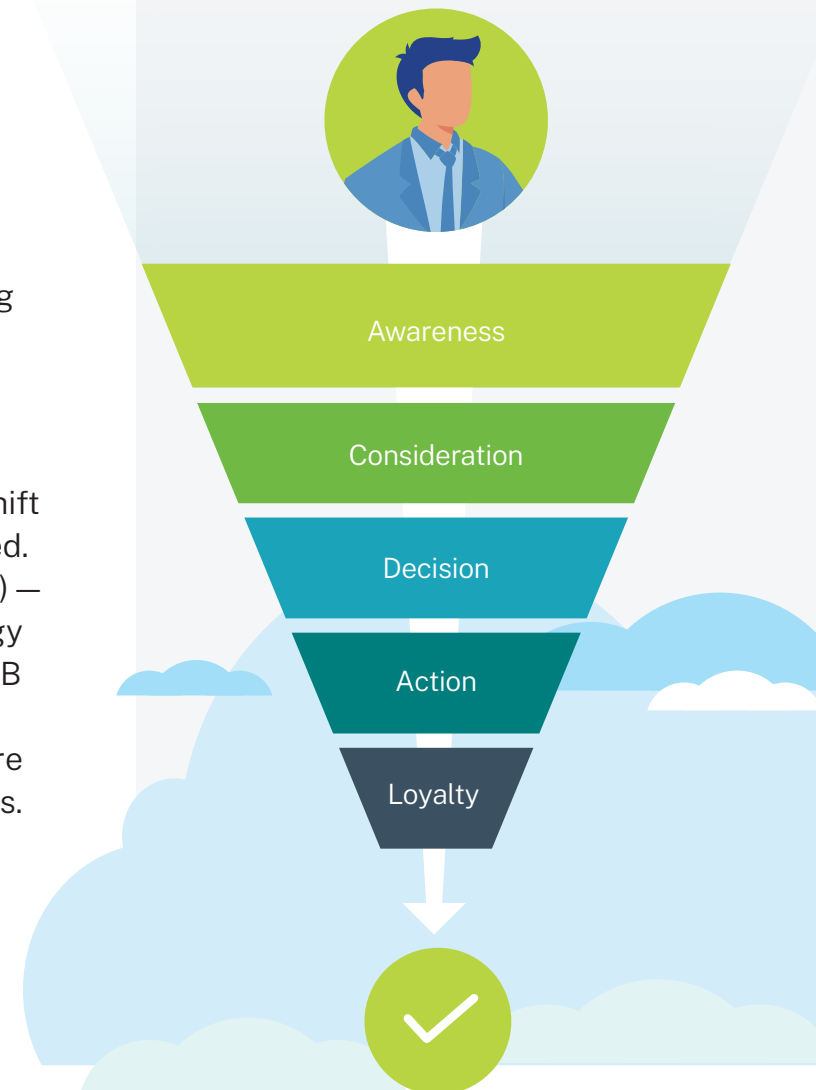
Most B2B content strategies still orbit around an outdated buying model based on a fictional funnel with one buyer, one linear journey, and a predictable path from awareness to action. Concepts like TOFU, MOFU, and BOFU still shape how most teams plan their campaigns, allocate budgets, and evaluate performance.

Yet, only 58% of marketers consider their content programs to be moderately effective¹ while 13% find them little or completely ineffective. The situation may be even more dire

since only one-quarter report having a clear view of how their content is performing² to begin with.

One of the most commonly overlooked reasons for this is the shift in how enterprise buying has evolved. While decision-making units (DMUs) — buying groups in today’s terminology — have existed for decades and B2B buying has always been a long and laborious process, today’s buyers are information seekers, not handraisers.

Marketing Funnel:
How most marketing teams plan their content



¹ “15th Annual Content Marketing Survey,” Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs, December, 2024.

² “Level of clarity when tracking content performance among marketing and media leaders worldwide as of February 2024.” Statista.com. Accessed July 2, 2025.

Stats to know

The average B2B buying cycle now spans

11.5 months,⁴

stretching to

16 months

on multi-national deals.⁵



Each stakeholder has their own questions to answer and moves at their own pace, on their own timeline. When you consider that a typical B2B DMU can consist of as many as fifteen people,³ and each consults an additional four to five sources before reaching a decision, the buying process becomes exponentially more complex.

Yet, marketers are still using the old playbook of strategies and tactics. They assume all stakeholders have the same needs and move in lock-step as a two-dimensional persona rather than a dynamic, multifaceted, and often fickle group of people that's actually calling the shots.

A content strategy based on different roles in different states of readiness for change, rather than a rigid funnel vision, helps marketers take a more dynamic, personalized, and informed approach to marketing that speaks both to decision-makers and influencers alike.

It'll require some upfront work, but it's a seismic shift with the capacity to transform how organizations pursue and achieve their customer expansion and retention goals.

“B2B DMU can consist of as many as fifteen people,³ and each consults an additional four to five sources before reaching a decision”

³ “The Science of B2B: Buyer Identification Benchmark.” 6Sense.com. January, 2024.

⁴ “The Impact of Industry on the B2B Buying Journey.” 6Sense.com. November, 2024.

⁵ “2024 European B2B Buyer Experience Report.” 6Sense.com. October, 2024.

Dynamic groups vs. the monolith myth

It isn't uncommon for marketers to create content aimed at multiple audiences and personas at once. This isn't due to laziness. More than half of marketing leaders say they don't have the resources or talent to build a scalable content model,⁶ so it's easy to see why targeting three, four, or six different personas in the same asset has become a common practice.

While it's certainly a more efficient approach to distributing marketing messaging, it's also significantly less effective because it's predicated on the mistaken notion that everyone in the buying group cares about the same things at the same time or in the same order.

Whether by necessity or conviction, conventional content planning tends to ignore the fact that one stakeholder might be highly motivated to change, while another doesn't even believe there's a problem to solve. Some will fixate on price, while others zero in on particular features, assumed challenges with internal adoption, or

grapple with going to bat for a small vendor over a household name.

Designing content for a mythical monolithic buying group that makes decisions in an organized and systematic way ignores this messy — and very human — reality. As a result, the content often lands flat.

Well-informed marketers will address all of these points head-on because they KNOW their target audience inside and out. Recognizing that modern buying groups are dynamic, multi-threaded, and consensus-driven requires a content philosophy that's equally as nuanced.

Stats to know

On average,

13 people

within an organization are involved in the buying decision, with

89%

of purchases involving two or more departments.⁷

“conventional content planning tends to ignore the fact that one stakeholder might be highly motivated to change”

⁶ “15th Annual Content Marketing Survey.” Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs. December, 2024.

⁷ “The State Of Business Buying, 2024.” Forrester.com. December, 2024.

Buying isn't actually a journey

Traditional inbound models treat buying like a campaign: first educate, then nurture, then convert. Marketers love to call it the “buyer’s journey” when, in reality, it’s the seller’s journey. It’s the process sellers think buyers take or want them to.

But purchasing behavior isn’t some scientific endeavor in which all components logically lead to a specific and unassailable conclusion. It’s more like a Choose Your Own Adventure book or a role-playing video game.

In complex deals, each member of the buying group goes through a mental checklist that varies by role, experience, and personal biases. They ask themselves:

- **Is this problem real and urgent enough to warrant my attention right now?**

They need validation that their need or pain is legitimate, urgent, and addressable.

- **How are others like me successfully solving this challenge?**

They need proof others are succeeding and signals of how they’re doing it.

- **What happens if we do nothing or go in a different direction?**

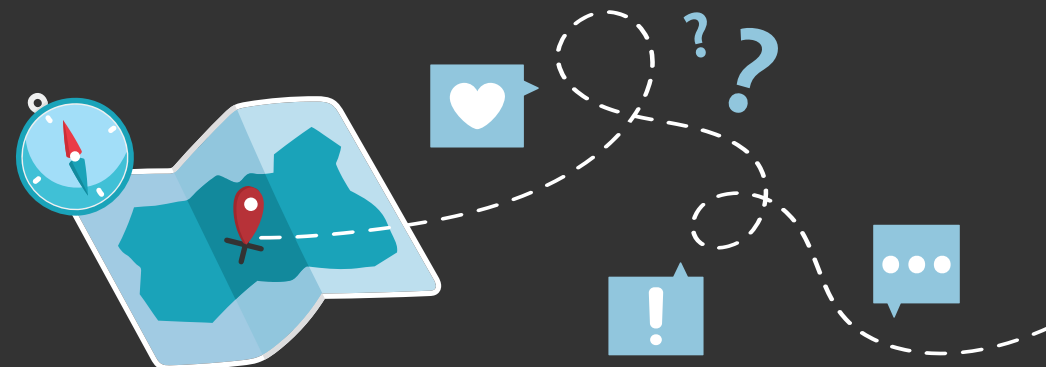
They need to understand the true cost of inaction, the risks of the wrong choice, but also the ease of transition (not just the pain of delay).

- **Can I trust this vendor and solution long-term?**

They need reassurance they won’t look stupid for this decision.

- **Can I defend this decision to others within my organization?**

They need ammunition for internal selling.



The risks of ignoring “hidden” decision makers⁸

51%

of hidden decision-influencers
(finance, operations, procurement)
need high-quality content to help
convince C-level executives

53%

say strong content can outweigh
brand recognition alone

71%

of hidden buyers say thought
leadership is more effective than
traditional marketing or sales
materials at demonstrating a
vendor’s potential value

Each of these decisions requires different forms of reassurance, justification, and emotional buy-in, and each person in the buying group needs to satisfy those buy-in demands before reasonably moving on to the next.

Serving content or messaging prematurely is very likely to be ignored or, worse, push them further away from buying from you. All it takes is one key group member — especially unseen stakeholders in finance, legal, compliance, procurement, or operations — deciding against you to kill your shot at a deal.

As the seller, you have to go beyond just helping them answer these questions. You have to anticipate their concerns, build urgency, and inspire a shift in mindset and behavior.



⁸ “Invisible Influence: Unlocking the Power of Hidden Buyers.” Edelman.com. 2025.

Applying behavioral science to marketing content

Inspiring change does not happen by brute force. Repeatedly highlighting features and benefits doesn't actually work when the audience in question isn't even thinking about those things yet.

Because buying is a series of small but important shifts in behavior, to inspire change (and accelerate purchase commitments), you need to understand how people actually make these decisions.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM, also known as Stages of Change) is an established psychological framework for understanding the human-centered concept of individual decision-making and its role in enterprise buying.

TTM is a five-step process that can help marketers understand each stakeholder's likely mental stage of readiness for change. This can then influence the type, volume, and cadence of content you produce for them.

“B2B buyers make decisions emotionally first, then justify rationally — even in enterprise deals. Neuroscience shows that trust, safety, and relevance activate faster than logic.”⁹

⁹ Öberg, Christina. “Neuroscience in business-to-business marketing research: A literature review, co-citation analysis and research agenda.” Elsevier.com. 2023.



The 5 stages in the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change

- 1 **Pre-contemplation:** (NOT “problem unaware.”). Buyers are not actively thinking about solving a problem. In this stage, they’re often reluctant to change; rebelling against trendy motions; resigned to the status quo; or are rationalizing their current status as being okay.
- 2 **Contemplation:** Buyers acknowledge the challenge or issue at hand but aren’t convinced change is necessary or think it’s too risky. They haven’t yet considered the cost of inaction or why addressing this now matters.
- 3 **Preparation:** Buyer has committed to taking action and begins evaluating options. They build their vendor consideration sets, establish their criteria, and generally try to figure out how to tell one vendor from another.

- 4 **Action:** The visible start of a change. They’re talking to sales teams, choosing a vendor, signing the deal, and creating an implementation timeline and go-live plan.
- 5 **Reinforcement/Maintenance:** They’ve implemented a solution and are now focused on adoption, optimization, full integration, and generally kicking ass in the market.



Mistimed messaging kills momentum

Studies show that mistimed content, such as fear-of-missing-out messaging aimed at individuals in pre-contemplation, triggered defensive and dismissive reactions, reducing receptiveness and intention to act.¹⁰

Adopting a role-based personalization content strategy helps contextualize the different versions of information each stakeholder needs in each stage of their transformation, not just in content type, but in emotional tone, argument structure, and timing.

Marketing's essential role is to identify the stages of change of its target buying group members and create content spanning the entire customer lifecycle that helps move each person one step forward, from their current stage of readiness to the next. It isn't about clicks or downloads; it's about mental preparation and eliminating risk that prevents individuals and the buying group as a whole from reaching the point where they can say "yes."

¹⁰ "Fear Appeals for Individuals in Different Stages of Change: Intended and Unintended Effects and Implications on Public Health Campaigns." *Health Communication* 20 (1): 91–99. doi:10.1207/s15327027hc2001_9.



Role-based needs in action

What does stage-of-readiness actually look like in practice? Imagine you're a fly on the wall in a tech enterprise looking to upgrade their cybersecurity.

A CIO might care about business-level strategies and a solution's fit within a company's existing tech environment, while the IT Manager wants to compare security features and workflows.

On the other hand, operations wants to know the impact of this solution on their field teams, while a finance exec looks at the total cost of ownership (even though they may not be all that involved until the proposal hits her desk).

Stage of Change	CIO/COO (Strategic Lens)	IT Manager (Operational Lens)
1. Precontemplation(No intent to change)	<i>"The current approach is fine. We have bigger strategic initiatives."</i> Likely focused on broader transformation, risk posture, or board-level priorities.	<i>"The system is clunky, but we've found workarounds."</i> May feel pain operationally but doesn't believe change is possible or allowed.
2. Contemplation(Aware but ambivalent)	<i>"We might need to rethink this... if there's a clear ROI or risk mitigation case."</i> Wants to understand business impact, resource demand, and long-term viability.	<i>"This new tool could help, but leadership won't go for it."</i> Starts looking at peer tools, reads comparison blogs, asks questions in forums.
3. Preparation (Planning to act)	<i>"Let's evaluate options — but this must align with our strategic goals."</i> Needs confidence in vendor viability, integration pathways, executive alignment.	<i>"I'll demo a few tools and build a case."</i> Starts building internal decks, gathering microstories or data to pitch upward.

Stage of Change	CIO/COO (Strategic Lens)	IT Manager (Operational Lens)
4. Action (Taking steps to implement)	<i>“This initiative is now active. Make sure it doesn’t blow back on us.”</i> Demands clear rollout plans, stakeholder coverage, and exec-level reassurance.	<i>“We’re running the pilot. Let’s prove this works fast.”</i> Focused on success metrics, support responsiveness, and day-to-day usability.
5. Maintenance (Sustaining change)	<i>“Is this driving the outcomes we promised?”</i> Watches adoption, TCO, and perception with internal stakeholders.	<i>“We need this to stay stable and scalable.”</i> Looks for best practices, workflow extensions, and smooth renewals.

Even if they all eventually agree on a solution, the content that helped each of them say “yes” will have looked different, felt different, and arrived in different formats and have been delivered over different channels.

This is the heart of role-based personalization.

It’s not just tagging personas or giving lip service to multiple stakeholders in a core campaign asset. It’s creating content — bite-sized and in-depth — that reflects the actual moment, motivation, and mental model of each person involved in the decision at every stage of their decision-making process.



More isn't better. Better is better.

All of this might sound overwhelming. So many personas and roles with multiple stages of change — how could you possibly achieve this personalization at scale, especially with limited budgets and resources? The good news is that most marketers already have the raw material they need, and ultimately, you may end up actually creating less content rather than more to accomplish your objectives.

For example:

- That lengthy quote you glossed over in a customer interview could be the foundation of a contemplation-stage microstory for a skeptical stakeholder.
- Last year's high-performing pillar blog could be reshaped into three shorter pieces for different stages of readiness.
- A product walk-through could be trimmed down to a 90-second explainer video with SME commentary to aid a technical buyer in Contemplation.

You don't need to start from scratch; you just need to recalibrate and repurpose a lot of what you already have and fill the gaps with new insights and related assets.

3-step framework for role-based personalization

STEP 1

Know what success looks like and how you got there

The road to better, more impactful content begins with insights sourced from key stakeholders in your best-fit current customer accounts. Start by mapping your key stakeholders, identifying what stage they're likely in, and pinpointing the top 2-3 questions they'll ask in each stage of their decision-making process.

It's a good idea to schedule a call with the champion in some of your best-fit or most profitable client accounts and have them take you step-by-step through their organization's purchase process as well as their own personal journey.

Supplement this information (or replace it if you're short on budget and resources) with social listening on popular social sites like Reddit and LinkedIn, in industry forums, and in analyst and industry reports.





STEP 2

Audit your existing content library

Dig into your existing content library, even if assets are stored across different folders and systems. Begin mapping your existing content to the most relevant buyer role and the best-matching stage of readiness. Make note of how that asset could be tailored and reworked to meet the same stage of readiness for a different buyer role in the group until you've satisfied each buyer role in each stage of readiness for change.

STEP 3

Use AI to uncover real feelings and demands

AI tools like Gong, Salesloft, and Google NotebookLM make it easy to mine sales calls, quarterly business reviews, and customer success interactions for kernels of role-based motivations. Use these tools to surface patterns in objections, priorities, and buying triggers by role and identify what matters most to decision-makers, influencers, and users at different stages — turning real conversations into content ideas tailored by role and stage of change.

Meet your buyers where they are

The old inbound playbook was built for simpler times. Fewer decision-makers, faster sales cycles, and buyers who relied on vendors for information are relics of a bygone era.

Today's enterprise buyer is self-educating, risk-averse, and part of a complex internal web.

Role-based personalization can help marketers unravel the web and meet each member of their target buying group with the information they need, in the order they want, and in the format and channel they prefer.

Marketers who adapt will build stronger consensus, shorten decision timelines, and deliver real strategic value. Those who cling to the funnel will be left wondering why their content isn't converting and their pipeline is drying up.

No one buys alone. It's time your content stopped acting like they do.

Thrū Content

Thrū Content's live and asynchronous customer engagement programs help you tell role-based, personalized microstories at scale.

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