

B2B Intent Data: A Practical Primer

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Introduction

In a world where every action seems to be digitally captured and analyzed, it feels reasonable for marketers to expect to purchase lists of people interested in buying their products. And, indeed, “intent data” is now an established category of information for both business and consumer purchases. But it’s a category that’s poorly understood. This paper will clarify the types of intent data available to B2B marketers, describe different ways to use it, and suggest how you can build it into your own company’s marketing programs.

What Is Intent Data?

Let’s start at the beginning. Companies have many types of data including data about their customers. This customer data falls into two broad categories:

- Attribute data describes characteristics of companies and individuals. Typical company attributes include industry, annual revenue, number of employees, location, and technologies used. Typical personal attributes include job title, role, age, education, skills, and purchase authority. Attributes stay largely the same over time, at least in the short term. They are generally used to determine how closely a company resembles your target customers. This is called “fit”.
- Behavior data describes actions taken by a company or individual. Typical behaviors include search requests, Web page visits, email clicks and opens, form fills, content downloads, event attendance, price requests, product purchases, and service requests. These are generally used to measure the current level of interest or “engagement” with your company and its products. This level fluctuates much more often than fit.

Intent is largely based on behavior, although some attributes may also be considered. For example, someone researching your product may show high engagement but if their attributes show they are a student or competitor they probably have no intention of making a purchase. As this example suggests, intent “data” is really a prediction derived from multiple inputs rather than a piece of information captured directly. An exception would be survey or form responses that answer a direct question about purchasing plans, but commercial B2B intent data is rarely based on such inputs.

Customer data can also be classified based on how it was collected.

- “First party data” is collected directly from the customer during interactions with the company’s Web site, emails, advertisements, ecommerce, CRM, and other systems. The company has access to all details and has implied or explicit consent to use it for all purposes that the law and ethics allow. First party data often

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provides very strong indications of intent, but these come relatively late in the buying cycle and only cover leads already engaged with the company.

- “Third party data” is collected outside the company from search requests, ad clicks, visits to publisher Web sites, social network and blog posts, forum messages, external emails, and purchases of other companies’ products. The origins and details of third party data are often obscured when the data is made commercially available. Third party data is also less likely to be linked to a specific individual than first party data, although in B2B marketing it will still usually be tied to a company.

Nearly all B2B intent data for sale today comes from publisher Web sites. It is collected by aggregators who tag site contents with topic and intent categories. They apply cookies or capture device IDs for visitors and tag these based on the contents each visitor selects. They may also use IP address or other data to identify the visitor’s employer. Many publishers use registration forms to capture actual name, email address, phone number, and other information. This enables the aggregator to build cookie, device, or email lists of people or companies who have demonstrated intent to buy a particular type of product. Aggregators combine information from multiple publishers to build stronger intent indicators for a larger number of potential buyers.

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Web publishers are not the only possible source of intent data. Intent can be inferred from questions people ask or contents they consume on search engines, ad networks, ad exchanges, and social media. Many search vendors, ad networks, and social media publishers use their data for their own intent-based targeting. Some of it is gathered by predictive modeling vendors for lead scoring. However, few firms are directly selling intent-scored lists derived from these sources.

Uses of Intent Data

It’s easy for marketers to imagine uses for intent data. Starting from the top of the funnel, major applications include:

- Lead acquisition. The most obvious use of intent data is simply to buy names of high-intent individuals or companies and treat them as sales leads. Some vendors will indeed offer such lists, which can be entered into marketing automation or CRM systems for nurturing and sales contact. But third-party intent data by itself rarely has enough accuracy and volume to identify significant numbers of quality B2B leads. Quantities are further limited by the fact that so much B2B data is not tied to specific individuals. Companies taking this approach will usually combine

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intent with fit and other behavior data, improving the chances that the net-new names will meet marketing or sales lead standards.

- **Prospecting.** Even when intent data cannot directly identify qualified leads, it can still help target campaigns to acquire new prospects. Filtering on intent should yield higher response rates to the initial promotions and produce leads with higher conversion rates later in the cycle. Intent-based prospecting campaigns may run on email, search engines, ad networks, social media, or mobile apps. In most cases, marketers select the keywords or segments to target and receive contact information of people who respond to the campaign offer. Because this approach adds new names to the marketer's database, it is especially useful at penetrating segments where the marketer doesn't already have a comprehensive list of potential buyers. These can include new customer groups and small-to-mid-size business segments with many members. This approach is also helpful where fit data isn't available on all potential prospects or the fit data isn't very effective at distinguishing likely from unlikely buyers. Even a modest lift from intent data can be enough to justify the cost of using it for prospecting campaigns.
- **Lead scoring.** Intent data can help marketers assess the potential of existing leads, improving the accuracy of lead scores used to decide which leads are sent to sales for immediate follow up. This is done by having the intent data vendor append an intent score, and possibly other data such topics of interest, to leads already in the company's marketing database. Such data is most valuable when leads are new and the company has little of its own data available about them. After that point, the company's own information quickly becomes more powerful than third party data. Even with new leads, the fact that a company has become a lead may itself be a stronger indicator of intent than third party data can provide. Companies that immediately call each new name may also find the results of this call are more important than third party intent data in deciding what to do next. However, firms with huge numbers of low value leads may find that intent data can help isolate the handful of leads that are worth immediate close attention. This is often applies to companies selling through a freemium approach. Such companies can combine the intent data with other third party information to identify new leads with a strong fit as well as intent.
- **Reactivation.** Marketers can apply intent data to find value in names that have already passed through the initial sales cycle. These include dormant leads, current customers, or former customers. Third party intent data may signal renewed interest in the company's product or interest in switching to a competitor's product. As with new leads, the predictive power of third party intent data must be compared with the power of the company's own data to see whether the external data adds enough insight to justify its cost. Marketers often find that external intent data uncovers opportunities that would otherwise be missed.

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- **Personalization.** Intent data can identify which topics current leads are exploring. This can guide selection of content presented on Web pages, in emails, and in display, social, and mobile ad campaigns. Third party data has the special advantage of reflecting selections the lead has made elsewhere. This lets the company present the most relevant content from the start of each interaction. Access to external behaviors also lets the marketer see interest in topics that are not covered in the company's own materials.
- **Content creation.** Content selections used to measure intent can be aggregated to show general trends in prospect interests. These can provide insights into market concerns and help marketers pick topics for their own content. Because intent data is gathered from many different sources, it gives a broader view of buyer interests than data collected from the company's own leads and prospects. In particular, intent data may uncover customer segments that the company has missed because its current content does not attract them. This has the potential to open up significant new markets or to address new personas within existing markets.

Limits of Intent Data

Third party intent data has some definite limits. Some of these will be reduced over time as vendors add data sources and improve their processing methods. Other weaknesses reflect the fundamental nature of intent data itself. Limits worth noting include:

- **Coverage.** Today's intent data reflects only a small fraction of digital interactions. Queries to major search engines and social networks like Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn, which are potentially the largest and clearest intent signals, are not available to intent data vendors. Many small sites are not included in the intent vendors' networks. This is especially problematic for B2B marketing, where small sites can be highly relevant to narrow B2B topics. It's harder for aggregators to gather data from mobile devices and apps than traditional Web browsers, and mobile accounts for a growing share of all digital interactions. Social media networks also account for a growing share of online activity and those too are less accessible than traditional Web sites. The net result is that many powerful intent signals are missing from individual or company profiles and many opportunities are missed altogether. This causes low match rates for applications that look for intent signals on existing leads, including lead scoring, reactivation, and personalization. The problem is most severe when trying to track small businesses, which generate

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fewer interactions to begin with and can be especially difficult to identify because they lack a dedicated IP address.

- **Identity matching.** B2B marketers are well familiar with the challenges of building a unified customer profile across their internal systems. Building unified profiles across multiple systems is harder still. Intent data vendors must merge data from different ad and publisher networks, from different devices used by the same person, from different business locations, from business users working at home, and from different people in the same company. They also work to match cookies, mobile devices, and email addresses gathered separately. When matches are missed, information for each customer is spread across several disconnected identities. This fragmentation creates multiple weak signals instead of one strong signal, substantially reducing the value of the intent estimates. Counteracting this fragmentation is one reason that most B2B marketers look at intent on the company level rather than for separate individuals.
- **Precision.** Intent data providers must map contents to standard classification schemes and discard detailed behavioral histories. This removes information which may be important for building accurate predictions. This is especially true with specialized B2B applications, where the Web site visited or specific terminology may reflect major differences in intent. The intent data providers also have strong competitive reasons to hide details about their sources and processing methods. This makes it even harder for marketers to know how to properly use their data. First party data is less subject to such constraints.
- **Buying process.** B2B purchases involve multiple individuals, often at multiple locations in multiple organizations. The most active researcher often isn't the actual decision maker. Purchases are spread over long time periods and the same organization often makes multiple purchases simultaneously. All these factors make it difficult to associate the intent signals with the right opportunity. The resulting confusion further reduces the precision of intent signals and makes it harder to follow trends as signals grow or weaken over time – even though such trends are critically important in determining which buying signals are worthy of attention. Again, working at the company level removes some of these difficulties.
- **Lack of contact information.** Much B2B intent data is gathered at the company level, for reasons just described. But most outbound communications require a specific target such as an email address or contact name. Absence of such data severely limits the value that buyers can gain from intent information.

Many of these limits apply to other data types in addition to intent data. The point isn't that third party intent data is uniquely unreliable, but that marketers must recognize it has strengths and weaknesses. They should assess each situation separately to determine whether the data currently available is adequate to the

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intended purpose. If not, they should look for additional sources to improve the data or find other applications that can better use what's on hand. Assuming that data is perfect is a mistake; so is rejecting data because it's not perfect. Smart marketers avoid them both.

How to Test

Which intent data applications you choose will depend on your business needs and the available data. The primary goal of most B2B marketers is to find high-quality leads, so acquisition and prospecting are likely to be your first priority. But firms with an abundance of leads might focus on lead scoring or reactivation. The value of intent data for personalization and content creation depends in part on what other data you have available to guide those efforts.

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- **Lead acquisition.** Since this is buying lists of leads from intent data vendors, testing is the same as any other new lead source: acquire a sample set of leads and see how they perform. The performance measure should be your standard metric for lead quality, typically an early-funnel event such as telephone qualification or sales acceptance. Waiting for a later event such as opportunity creation or a closed sale makes the outcome dependent on too many factors other than the lead itself. Before running your test, match the list against your current file to exclude names you have acquired elsewhere. This will give you some idea of how many net new names you can expect. You might want to look at how names that did match have already performed, but it's not safe to assume that unmatched names will perform similarly. Evaluating based on past results also raises knotty timing issues that are difficult unravel, since the intent data may include events that happened after your own results were recorded.
- **Prospecting.** This is similar to testing other types of marketing programs: you'll run a trial promotion and evaluate the results. Key metrics include cost per qualified lead and lead quality. As with lead acquisition, it's important to only look at leads you wouldn't have received otherwise. So you need to exclude leads that were already in your database or are later generated by other sources.

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- **Lead scoring.** The test must assess not just whether the intent data makes scores more accurate, but also the resulting business impact. Since scores typically determine which leads are discarded, nurtured within marketing, or sent to sales, a score change only matters if it assigns leads to a different treatment. The testing process is to build scoring models with and without the intent data, to classify leads based on the two sets of scores, to find leads whose classification changed when intent data was added, and to assess performance of those leads. A rigorous test would apply the old classifications to half the leads and the new classification to the other half and see which group yields higher profit. In practice, the number of leads that are reclassified may be so small that even a huge improvement in results would not justify the intent data investment. In such cases, further testing of actual results is not worthwhile. On the other hand, remember that this approach applies to all leads in your system, not only net-new leads provided by the intent data vendor, so volumes might be significant.
- **Reactivation.** Many firms do no marketing to dormant leads, current customers, or former customers. This means that every lead given an intent-inspired treatment is providing incremental value. However, this conflates the value of reconsidering those people in general with the value of using intent data as part of the reconsideration. As with lead scoring, a proper test would build scores with and third party intent data, find customers who would be treated differently based on the different scores, and see which score's treatment leads to more profitable results. Treatments based on intent data could include personalized contents selected with intent data. This gives a more complete measure of the value the company would receive from the intent data purchase.
- **Personalization.** This requires capturing the specific intent topics associated with each lead and using them to select the content that lead receives. A test would send standard content to half the leads and intent-based content to the other half. The choice of "standard" content is important: the proper comparison is personalization based on existing information vs. personalization based on existing information plus intent data. Performance measures should include both immediate response, such as click rates, and longer term performance such as engagement and conversion to sales accepted status. More elaborate testing might find that intent-based personalization is effective in for some groups, such as new leads with little first-party history. This could help save money by letting you purchase intent data on fewer records.
- **Content creation.** This test is easy: create content as suggested by intent data and compare its performance with existing content. You might deliver the new content using intent-based personalization. But the data purchases to support each application are probably separate, so the value of each should be measured independently.

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Summary

Third party intent data comes from different sources with different contents and can be used for different purposes. Using it effectively takes careful planning, testing, and execution. But the potential value is substantial so it's worth investing the effort to understand your options, define potential uses, and see what works for your business.

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About Raab Associates Inc.

Raab Associates Inc. is a consultancy specializing in marketing technology and analytics. Typical engagements include business needs assessment, technology audits, vendor selection, results analysis, and dashboard development. The company also consults with industry vendors on products and marketing strategy. It publishes the B2B Marketing Automation Vendor Selection Tool (VEST), the industry's most comprehensive independent guide to B2B marketing automation systems.

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