

Three Differences that Matter in Demand Generation Systems

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There is no hotter category in marketing software today than demand generation systems. These products, from vendors such as Eloqua, Vtrenz, Market2Lead and Marketo, generate and nurture leads through a combination of email, Web pages, lead scoring, and integration with sales automation systems. As with any software, success depends less on which product you choose than whether you use it effectively. Still, the products do differ in significant ways. Picking a system that fits your needs is an important step on the road to success.

So, how do you make a sound choice? One thing *not* to do is to look at a generic list of the “top three” products or “industry leaders” and refuse to consider any others. Rankings are important to industry insiders, but they say little about any product’s relationship to your particular business situation. If you were buying a car, would you only look at the three best-selling autos?

On the other hand, few marketers have the time or inclination to perform an in-depth technical analysis of several dozen demand generation systems, or even to document their own needs in detail. What they need is a shortcut that lets them quickly find which vendors are fundamentally suited to their needs. Once this group is identified, each marketer can then choose how much further effort to spend trying to find the best vendor within this group. This is based on balancing the cost of gathering more information—including the cost of delayed deployment—against the benefits of selecting a system with an incrementally better fit.

Fortunately, such a shortcut is available. It relies on identifying the few key differences among systems that relate to your critical business requirements. These fall into three categories.

1. Marketing Scale. Enterprises where dozens of marketers run hundreds of programs have unique needs. These large marketing operations are often managed separately for different regions, products and customer segments, but must still be coordinated to maintain consistent messages and performance metrics. If you work in a such an organization, critical features in a demand generation system include:

- modular marketing materials, including templates with standard headers and footers, reusable Web forms, and automated selection of message text within a promotion. These features allow a single change to be deployed instantly across multiple campaigns, saving

time and ensuring consistency. Without them, a large marketing organization must choose between stifling central control or unsupervised chaos.

- fine-grained security that allows different users to control their own marketing campaigns and components. This is not a concern in small departments where one or two users do everything. But it is critical in large organizations where responsibilities for execution are sharply divided.
- ability to run on company systems. Some large companies still insist that the software run on their own servers, even though the usual approach for demand generation software) is to let the vendor run it for them as a service. Or, a company may want to embed demand generation landing pages and Web forms within company-hosted Web pages, rather than letting the vendor host them separately. This item is only important for some large companies—but if you work for one of them, it can be an absolute requirement.

2. Channel Scope. All demand generation systems support emails, Web forms, and integration with CRM systems such as Salesforce.com. If those are the only channels you use, any system will do. But if you work in other channels, especially within the same campaign, you'll want to find a system that can handle those too.

- direct mail, telephone, mobile (SMS) and fax are easy if all you want to do is send batches of messages at hourly or daily intervals. Any system can generate the necessary lists. But if you want an immediate response or highly personalized contents you'll need to look more closely at what each vendor can do and what delivery partnerships it has in place.
- events such as Webinars and seminars require specialized features such as waiting lists, reminders, and attendance reports. Only a few demand generation vendors do this well. But there are plenty of specialist vendors for event management, so you may decide this is not a make-or-break requirement.
- RSS feeds are an increasingly popular way to update content automatically. Displaying the feeds is no problem, but some demand generation products go further to manage feed creation and track readership in great detail. Few marketers are so dependent on RSS that they would consider this essential, but it's something to consider if you're looking for a tie-breaker.

3. Functional Scope. A complete set of marketing automation functions includes planning, project management, content management, campaign management and analysis. Of these, only content management and campaign management are essential for demand generation. If you have good solutions in place for the rest, stop reading right here. Otherwise, you may want a demand generation system with:

- planning, which includes budgets and campaign schedules. Integration with corporate accounting systems is desirable but hard to find.
- project management, which includes tracking the tasks and managing approval workflows for marketing materials and campaigns. These features are barely present in today's demand generation systems, although they are becoming more common.
- analysis, which includes reporting on Web activity, email delivery, campaign response, return on investment, and much else. Demand generation systems vary greatly in this area, so look closely if you have significant unmet needs. Bear in mind that comprehensive reporting may require the demand generation system to import and merge data from other sources. Some products simply cannot do this.

This brief list is not a comprehensive catalog of possible demand generation system features. Nor does it touch on important considerations such as ease of use and vendor stability. It simply offers is a quick checklist of items that are easy to judge against two criteria: do I need it? and does this system have it? The answers will tell you which products are worth exploring in depth.

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