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CASE STUDY

THE MARKETING THAT COULDN'T SELL

Real Operating Decisions. Real Capability Failures. Real Business Outcomes.
An Executive Case Study in The O'Brien Method Series

COMPANY PROFILE

Industry: Media: B2B media and advertising services company selling packages to mid-market brands

Approximate revenue: $12–16 million

Business model: Media sales, ad packages, and sponsorships sold through an inside sales team fed by marketing-generated leads

Growth stage: Recently invested heavily in demand generation and content marketing to drive growth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marketing had tripled inbound lead volume over a year through aggressive content and paid programs, and the CMO reported growth in marketing-qualified leads as a clear win. Sales saw it differently. The new volume was, in their words, mostly junk: inquiries from businesses too small to afford the company's ad packages, or downloads from people with no buying intent. Reps had quietly begun ignoring marketing-sourced leads altogether. A diagnostic compared actual closed-won customers with the profile of leads marketing was generating and found almost no overlap. Marketing had been optimizing for cost-per-lead and volume. The number that actually mattered, revenue from ICP-fit accounts, had never been the objective either function was working toward.

THE SITUATION

The demand-generation investment had been approved based on marketing-qualified-lead growth as the headline metric, and by that measure the program was succeeding every month. For several quarters, sales leadership's complaints were treated as a cultural friction point between departments rather than as a data problem, because no one had built a shared definition linking the leads marketing generated to the customers the company actually closed.

THE INVESTIGATION

The diagnostic pulled twelve months of closed-won deals, built a firmographic and behavioral profile of the company's best customers, and compared that profile against the leads generated by marketing's campaigns. The overlap was minimal. Campaigns had been tuned to cost-per-lead and raw volume, metrics that rewarded broad, low-friction content offers that attracted a wide audience, most of whom did not resemble the company's actual buyers. No documented, operational ICP existed that both departments referenced. Sales worked from an informal, undocumented sense of a good customer, and marketing had never been given anything more specific to build against.

ROOT CAUSE

The root cause was the absence of a shared, operational ICP definition that connected marketing's optimization target to the revenue outcome that mattered. Marketing was succeeding against the objective it had actually been given, volume and cost-per-lead, which was simply the wrong objective because it had never been tied back to the profile of accounts that convert and retain.

THE INTERVENTION

A single ICP definition was built directly from closed-won data, drawing on firmographic profiles, budget ranges, and intent signals that correlated with actual conversions, and was adopted jointly by marketing and sales as the shared standard against which both functions would be measured. Campaigns were retargeted around that definition, and the highest-volume, lowest-fit channel was cut despite its favorable cost-per-lead optics because it generated volume the sales team could not convert. An ICP-fit score was added to every inbound lead before it reached a rep, so sales could see at a glance which inquiries matched the customers the company actually wanted.

BUSINESS RESULTS

Total lead volume dropped, an outcome the company had previously deemed unacceptable but now recognized as the correct trade-off. Sales-accepted-lead rate and win rate both rose sharply despite the smaller volume, and reps stopped ignoring marketing-sourced leads because, for the first time, those leads were worth working. Marketing's internal success metric shifted from raw MQL count to ICP-fit pipeline contribution, aligning the department's incentives with the revenue outcome the business actually needed.

THE O'BRIEN METHOD INSIGHT

A marketing engine optimized for lead volume and a sales team that needs lead fit are not automatically aligned functions working toward the same goal. They are two functions each hitting their own number, which can diverge from the company's actual revenue outcome even when neither department does anything visibly wrong. Without a shared, operational ICP definition built from real closed-won data, more leads can make the underlying problem worse, not better, by giving sales more low-fit inquiries to sort through and ignore.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR CEOS

- Marketing-qualified-lead volume is not a proxy for revenue quality unless it is explicitly tied to a documented ICP derived from actual closed-won data.
- When sales and marketing disagree about lead quality, resolve it with a data comparison of the closed-won profile against the generated-lead profile, not a cultural conversation.
- Be willing to cut a channel with excellent cost-per-lead metrics if it is not generating leads that convert. The optics of an efficient channel can mask its actual contribution to revenue.
- Score every inbound lead for ICP fit before it reaches a rep. A visible fit score changes how leads are handled and prevents good-fit leads from being lost in a larger volume of low-fit leads.
- Marketing and sales should be measured against the same downstream outcome. Separate metrics for each function will optimize the two departments in different, sometimes opposing, directions.