

# The Psychology Behind Inbound Marketing

**SmartBug.**

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## Introduction

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In the book “Buyology,” Martin Lindstrom compares marketing and advertising with science by saying, “Science is hard fact, the final word. Marketers and advertisers, on the other hand, have spent over a century throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it will stick.”

Interestingly, marketing has taken a similar path in history as psychology. Once a highly subjective and immeasurable field, psychology is now an expansive field backed by science that is applied in many ways through the use of measurable and data-driven methods. Marketing, too, is similar in that it hasn't always been the most evidence-based or scientific field.

When psychology first gained popularity in the early 1900s, the most trusted method in the field came from Austrian physician Sigmund Freud. Even those who know little about psychology can likely recall the work of Freud. His theories, though a major foundation in the field, were quite far-fetched and based solely on his own personal experiences rather than scientific research. Freud believed that all of the unconscious desires and motivations of a person are revealed through dreams. The introduction of more scientific and research-based methods in psychology has proved his theories to be ineffective and untrue.

Marketing, much like psychology, is now transcending into a data-driven field that no longer relies on “throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it will stick.” When you combine science and statistical research methods with marketing or psychology, they become more effective; however, when you combine all three, marketing campaigns can be extremely successful. This e-book aims to help you connect the science of psychology to marketing campaigns, but specifically to inbound marketing.

# The Scientific Method And Proving Inbound Marketing ROI

Today, because it is a scientific field, psychology is built on the scientific method. At the basis of the scientific method is a theory. A theory is an explanation or observation that has not yet proved to be true. In many cases, it is an explanation for historical events, but it can also be used to make predictions. Every theory is built on one principle: It must be falsifiable. This means that a theory is only acceptable if it can be proved untrue. The whole purpose of testing a theory is not to search for evidence that supports it, but instead to try to find evidence that is unsupportive. With this approach, scientists have developed a general way of testing theories.



This is known as the scientific method, and its steps are outlined below:

- 1 A hypothesis is formed. A hypothesis is a predictable and clear statement.
- 2 Researchers test a hypothesis using various methods.
- 3 Results are measured and reported.
- 4 Researchers interpret their results and any implications.

As mentioned in the introduction, psychology has not always relied on scientific methods for explanations. After the first psychology lab was founded, more than 30 years had passed before behaviorism was born and the scientific method became prominent in psychology. In the words of Lindstrom, psychologists, much like marketers, were “throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it would stick” until the behaviorists shifted psychology to focus on the more measurable and observable aspects of the human mind and behavior.

Today, many of the limitations of the scientific method for psychology in measuring the human mind have been surpassed with MRIs and other technology. This is where we find marketing today. Finally, after years of simply guessing what works, marketers are seeing the importance of more measurable strategies and campaigns, and technology is helping make this possible.

Technology such as marketing and CRM (Customer Relationship Management) solutions is helping to achieve this; however, technology alone cannot advance marketing to the level of sophistication reached by psychology. Like psychologists, inbound marketers must adopt a more scientific and analytic approach if they want to find the campaigns that work. This is why closed-loop marketing and analytics are a key component in ensuring success, but having the people who can execute these technologies is equally as important. The approaches taken in psychology or the “analytical” mindset of many researchers should also be used in inbound marketing to produce the best possible ROI.



# Major Branches Of Psychology

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Like many areas of science, psychology has grown into multiple branches. Each branch not only applies psychology differently, but also explains a different aspect of psychology. Here are the more basic and relevant branches that apply to inbound marketing:



**Cognitive:** Studies the “unseen” of mental processes including memory, perception, sensation, problem solving, motivation, and learning.



**Evolutionary:** Studies how evolutionary processes influence human thinking and behavior.



**Social:** Investigates how the social presence of others and society as a whole impact human thinking and behavior.



**Neuropsychology:** Looks at how thinking and behavior are influenced by the biological structure of the brain.



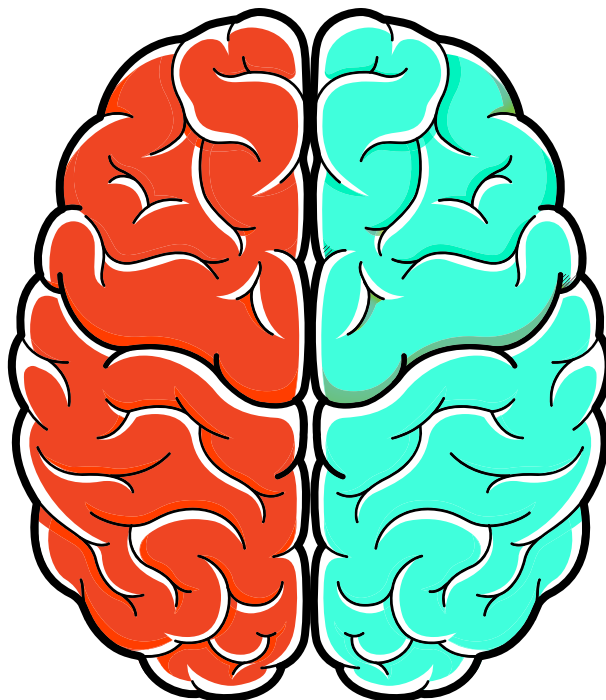
**Behavioral:** Focuses on the study of observable mental processes and learning from the environment.



Psychology, at its best, considers theories from each of these branches as possible explanations for the actions and thoughts produced by humans. For example, when your visitors consistently navigate to the products page, it isn't simply a behavior or what we can see in the data. There's a cognitive process that is driving the behavior too. In each of the following sections, we apply many of these theories and branches of psychology to the practice of inbound marketing.



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# Using Psychology To Grow Website Visitors

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What do Salt Bae and Spotify playlists have in common? Both were among the most viral topics on the Internet in 2017. Why does content such as this go viral in an online world already swarming with content? Psychology theories can help to explain why.



## Emotion Plays a Big Role

If you've ever seen the Sarah McLachlan commercial for the ASPCA in which her song "Angel" plays while animal lovers, like myself, whimper at the sight of a wounded kitten, you've seen the power of emotion in marketing. Emotion helps make content go viral because human behavior is driven by our emotions.

So, emotion helps content go viral, but what type of emotion should your content convey or elicit? According to research from Fractl, emotional complex (the combination of two emotions to make the response more complex) is most important.

By surveying more than 800 men and women between the ages of 18 and 54, Fractl found that the most common positive emotions that led to viral content included:

- Amusement
- Interest
- Surprise
- Happiness
- Delight

On the other hand, the negative emotions were not as frequent but still contributed to viral content when paired with anticipation or surprise. These emotions, from most common to least common, included:

- Anger
- Politeness
- Frustration
- Doubt
- Embarrassment

For both positive and negative emotions, emotional complex worked to multiply the effect. This means that the content was more viral when positive emotions were paired with surprise or amusement, and negative emotions had a multiplying effect when paired with empathy.



## Long-Form Content Will Get You More Visibility

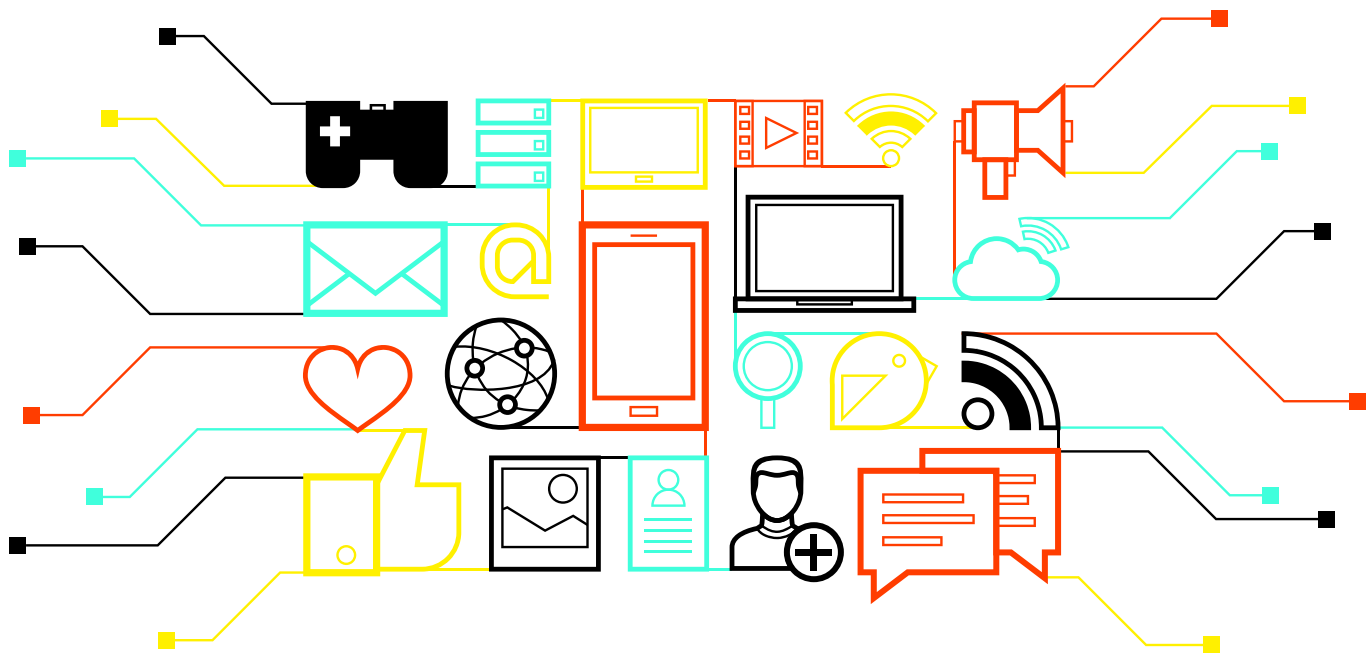
In a research study analyzing more than 100 million articles, Buzzsumo found that articles with 3,000-10,000 words get the most average shares. This study also found that there were 16 times more articles with fewer than 1,000 words than those with more than 1,000. Ironically, because the attention span of website users has been found to be around 8 seconds, many content marketers have emphasized the use of short-form content in everything from blogs and emails to website pages and CTA copy. However, Buzzsumo speculates that the flood of short-form content has led to more viral long-form content because the latter is scarce and more share-worthy. Another explanation of this phenomenon relates back to a psychological principle: reciprocity.

The reciprocity principle states that we are more likely to say yes when we feel we owe it to someone. In the case of long-form content, readers are more compelled to share because they want to reciprocate the favor for all your great content.



## The Brain Processes Images Faster— Use Them in Social

Human senses are the bridge between our brain and the world. Moreover, visual information is processed 60,000 times faster in the brain than text.<sup>1</sup> Using visual content in campaigns means that your message gets processed faster, which is critical in a hyper-speed online world. An interesting marketing-based stat that provides support for visual content comes from Socialbakers.com. Out of the top 10 percent of posts from 30,000 Facebook brand pages examined, they found photos made up 87 percent of interactions and generated the most engagement of any content.<sup>2</sup> Psychology supports it—visual content including photos, videos, infographics, and, dare I say it, GIFs.



## Controversy in Content: Does It Work?

You know that saying, "Don't discuss politics at work"? Well, it turns out you should avoid this controversial topic and others such as religion, tragedies, and war in marketing too. According to research from Jonah Berger and Zoey Chen at Wharton School, only moderate levels of controversy are shown to increase the likelihood of conversation, which means you'll want to keep controversial topics out of your promotions.<sup>3</sup> The mediating effect here is the level of discomfort the person feels when discussing controversial topics.

Furthermore, this discomfort can be explained by the psychological principle known as cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance, proposed by Leon Festinger (1957), is a theory that states people will seek a balance whenever an event conflicts with their beliefs or attitudes. Our mind naturally seeks harmony by either discounting conflict or avoiding it altogether. So, if you want to use controversy effectively in content marketing, don't push the envelope so far that cognitive dissonance causes readers to bounce.



**Using visual content in campaigns means that your message gets processed faster, which is critical in a hyper-speed online world.**

## Social Proof and the Types You Should Use

You're a marketer, so you've likely heard of social proof and implemented it to an extent in campaigns; however, do you really know why it works? First of all, humans are social beings. Although there are several evolutionary theories that explain why this is, let's focus on what's applicable to inbound marketing. So, what is social proof? In "The Science of Social Proof: 5 Types and the Psychology Behind Why They Work," Ed Hallen, a contributor to Buffer Social, describes social proof as "the concept that people will conform to the actions of others under the assumption that those actions are reflective of the correct behavior."<sup>4</sup> Below is a summary of the five social proof examples he shares that will ultimately help to grow visitors to your site:

- **Use Social Proof:** This would include any type of collateral such as product reviews, testimonials, and case studies that demonstrate how the product or service has worked for others. Hallen suggests using storytelling because it is easier for the user to empathize.
- **Celebrity Social Proof:** As you would guess, this is an endorsement from a celebrity. Psychologically, people gravitate towards celebrity-endorsed products because we want to improve our self-worth. Hallen warns, however, that the celebrity and brand should be well aligned for this type of social proof to be effective.



- **Expert Social Proof:** This type of social proof comes from the endorsement of a product or service from an industry expert. The psychological explanation is that we will think positively or negatively of a product or service based on our opinion of the expert endorsing. Thus, if we find the expert endorsing the product credible, our overall opinion of the product will be positive.
- **“Wisdom of Friends” Social Proof:** Not only do we tend to form positive opinions toward those we find credible, but we also do the same with those we find to be most like us. Because research shows that friends share many common interests and characteristics, social triggers of friends consuming content work to improve marketing.
- **“Wisdom of the Crowds” Social Proof:** For this principle, Hallen points out FOMO, the Fear of Missing Out. As he admits, FOMO is sadly a real thing that causes us to become anxious at the thought of missing out on something that everyone else is doing or consuming. One way that this principle is often used in marketing is by displaying a running total of subscribers or users on the website.



## Logos May Cause “Unconscious Aversions” to Content

In a 2012 study published in Harvard Business Review, Thales Teixeira and colleagues examined the viral ad through the use of facial and eye-tracking software<sup>5</sup>. One thing they found is noteworthy: Out of thousands of reactions, intrusive or prominent brand logos turn viewers away even for well-known and favorable brands. The reason why: They form what the researchers describe as an “unconscious aversion.” Although the study does examine video ads and not online content, it's probably safe to assume that most content in your marketing funnel should avoid product promotions and heavy branding to eliminate unconscious aversions as a possibility.



## The Mere Exposure Effect Works in Marketing; Subliminal Messaging Isn't Required

The mere exposure effect states that by simply being exposed repeatedly to something, a person is more likely to act favorably toward it without a conscious awareness of this or a rationale. One way that marketers can take advantage of the mere exposure effect without subduing to subliminal messaging is to keep content fresh to your audience. Even if a subscriber only opens a blog notification email every six months, he or she likely has been exposed to you in the thread repeatedly. In addition, search engine marketing can also benefit from the mere exposure effect when a prospect has multiple pain points or researches the problem or solution for an extended period of time. If you're at the top of search results for your industry topics, prospects see you every time.



# Actually Turning Website Visitors Into Leads And Customers

Contrary to the wishes of 99 percent of salespeople out there, the majority of visitors that come to your website aren't ready to buy. Although the average number of website visits before purchasing is debatable, it is most closely related to the amount of investment. For example, to a consumer planning a vacation on a budget, the expense is high. In an Expedia study, travel sites were found to be visited on average 38 times in the 45 days leading up to the vacation.<sup>6</sup>

Although this data only supports the visitor behavior for planning a vacation, the main point here is that people don't usually buy on their first stop, which means you'll need to do more than hit up visitors for a sales call to keep them engaged with your brand.



Here's how psychology and inbound marketing work to do just that:

## **Foot-in-the-Door Technique and the Inbound Marketing Funnel**

In inbound marketing, the foot-in-the-door technique is a central principle, although it is rarely discussed. The foot-in-the-door technique works because a person is more likely to comply with a larger request if a smaller one precedes it. Because inbound marketers use top-of-the-funnel or less committal content early on but then request more of the lead later, conventional wisdom would suggest that the lead says yes to the larger requests (e.g., demo, quote, or trial offer) because of the foot-in-the-door technique.

This principle's efficacy dates back to the 1960s, when two Stanford researchers conducted an experiment in which they contacted 156 women by phone. In three of the experimental groups, the women were first asked a small request to answer questions about household products followed by a larger request that came three days later asking to take an inventory of products in their cabinets. Another experimental group skipped the smaller request and went straight to the inventory. The results showed that 52.8 percent of those treated with the foot-in-the-door technique complied with the larger request, compared with 22.2 percent of those who did not receive the foot-in-the-door technique.

## Cost-Benefit Analysis, Emotions, and Form Submissions

In a research study published in the *Journal of Decision Support Systems*, researchers examined online information disclosure for an unfamiliar website.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the amount of information the participants disclosed was first mediated by their emotional reactions to the website and a cost-benefit analysis. The participants were more likely to disclose information if their reactions to the website experience were positive and if they felt the benefit of disclosing outweighed the cost. For inbound marketers, research such as this offers support for something we see often: low conversion rates when requesting too much information on forms. Until you can be sure that the visitor sees the benefit of the offer, you shouldn't request more private information because they likely aren't going to see the benefit for top-of-the-funnel offers.



In addition, other findings in the study reveal another important takeaway. If the website experience leading up to the information request forms a negative emotion, the visitor may not be as likely to submit. Think about those pop-up subscription requests—you've likely found them annoying and intrusive in most cases. However, if the request comes from a well-known source such as the Huffington Post, where the benefit of submitting is already known, you may submit because it is worth the cost. Now, this is complete speculation, but major news sites continue to use pop-ups, which has to make one think that they actually do work for those brands.



The takeaway here for inbound marketers is that the experience leading up to the form can actually facilitate higher submission rates. Additionally, you should never ask for too much private information on forms if the benefit doesn't outweigh the cost.



## Cialdini's Principles of Persuasion

Being in marketing, you've likely heard of Robert Cialidini's principles of persuasion applied to advertising or sales, but how do they apply to inbound marketing?

### 1 The Principle of Reciprocity and Landing Page

**Conversions:** Simply put, when someone gives us something of value, we inherently feel compelled to give back. So, when you ask for a name and email on forms in return for a piece of your content, reciprocity makes the visitor feel OK with providing information in return for the content. They may even send you a thank-you after reading because they still feel the need to reciprocate the favor. This is why showing the value of your offer on a landing page is important. Visitors need to feel they should reciprocate by providing their information prior to submitting the form. However, there are limitations in what we are willing to reciprocate, which leads to the next topic.

**2 The Principle of Consensus to Convert:** When we aren't sure what to do, we usually look to others to determine how to act. For inbound marketing, this means you should reassure visitors that others are acting the same way. In your top-of-the-funnel content, show leads that others are going through the same problem with facts, stats, or stories.



### 3 The Principle of Scarcity in Webinar and Event Marketing:

Scarcity is a tactic that has been abused in advertising for many years; however, its effect on inbound marketing activities isn't so cheesy. As demonstrated in TV ads, scarcity makes the audience feel there is a limited amount of something and time is sensitive. In the inbound world, it isn't so much an "act now or miss out on the \$19.99 deal," but a more effective and less cheesy message that works when used correctly. For example, it is extremely effective in webinar or event marketing, for which space really is limited. HubSpot uses scarcity when offering discounts for those who book early.



**Social Proof Applies to Conversions, Too:** Though social proof and all of the types discussed above are effective at helping to attract visitors to your website, they are also effective at growing conversions. When you place testimonials, case studies, and other forms of social proof on your product or service website pages and landing pages, visitors will be more likely to say "yes" when they are ready to convert or purchase.

- 4 The Principle of Commitment and Consistency:** Once we make a decision or commitment, we want to stay consistent with that. As inbound marketers, we do this all along the way by first getting a visitor to say yes to reading our content, converting on the website, and, ultimately, saying yes to a sales call or purchase. If you sense that a lead is going cold because you haven't heard a "yes" in a while through continual engagement of email campaigns, blogs, or new downloads, work to re-engage with more personalized follow-up or a phone call. If you find that an entire campaign is doing a poor job, do not continue with that campaign.



## A Little to Be Said on Gestalt and Website Design

Gestalt psychology dates back to the mid-1800s, when the term was first created to describe a concept that German psychologists at the time discussed. Gestalt conceptualizes that we perceive things in wholes or as complete as possible. What do you see in the image below? When you look at it, you try to look for a pattern that makes the image a whole rather than a sum of all its parts. You either see a vase or two faces because you either focus on the figure or the background, but not both at once to see there are actually two images.



Gestalt theories, although nearly two centuries old, still make sense today, especially as we become smarter at designing websites and the user experience to be more effective at accomplishing the brand's goals. A few key concepts of Gestalt psychology that can be found in Web design today are outlined below:

- **Continuation:** A principle in which our eyes continue down a line or along a path that seems to lead to a point of attention.

- **Closure:** If you picked up a Starbucks drink this morning, you saw the closure principle in the logo. Although the mermaid isn't fully outlined, our minds automatically create a closed form.
- **Similarity:** This principle states that we tend to see things as one group or pattern when the various elements are similar. This means that if one element is different, it will stand out from all the rest because we tend to group the similar elements.
- **Symmetry and order:** Symmetry and order are important in design because they keep the visitor from getting distracted. When there is an imbalance or something out of order in the design, our minds will try to correct this and become distracted.
- **Proximity:** When elements are grouped together in an organized pattern to create a larger picture, we see the principle of proximity. Proximity is like similarity, but it differs in that the elements are grouped simply because they are close to one another.
- **Figure/ground:** This principle is demonstrated in the vase and faces image above. As explained prior, we tend to separate the focal point from the background.

# The Psychology Of Closing Sales

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To understand the psychology of closing sales, you'll need to know how the buying process works, as well as the differences between how consumers buy and how groups or businesses usually buy. Of course, building out and customizing the complete journey for your ideal buyer is important, but psychology tells us that there are some commonalities among the ways people and groups buy.

Let's explore first how consumers make buying decisions.



# The Consumer Buying Process

Below is a graphic from “Understanding Buyer Behavior” by John Burnett that demonstrates the typical sequence a consumer buyer undergoes when purchasing. For inbound marketing, this means that you should create content that helps the consumer buyer through each of these stages.

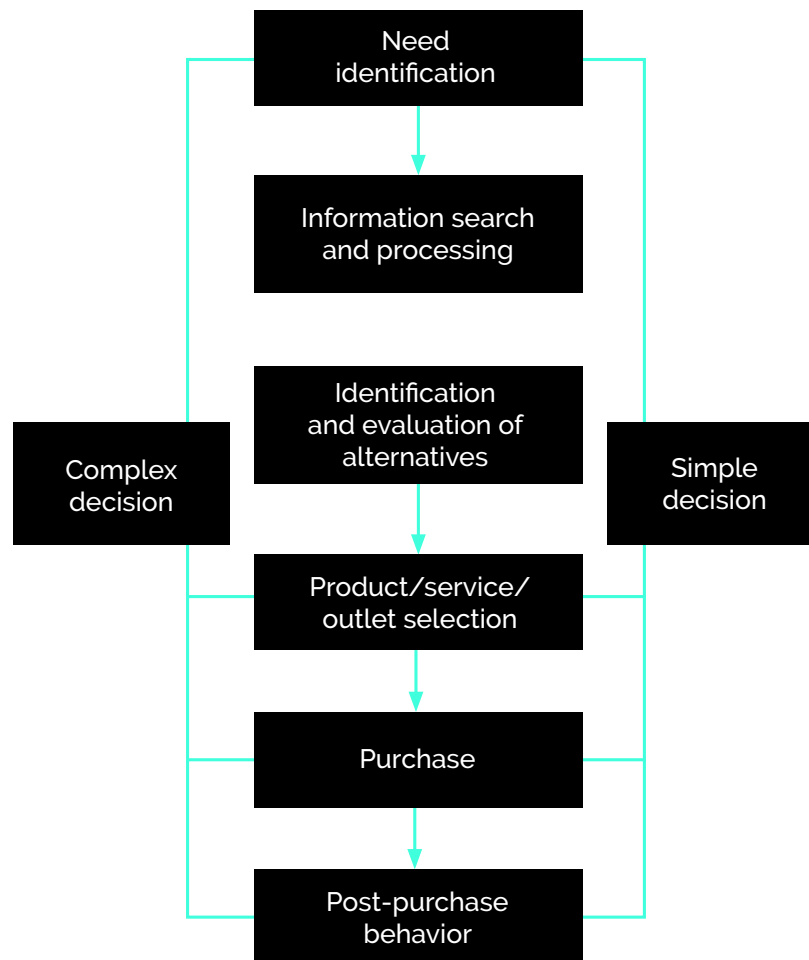


Figure 1: Adapted from “Understanding Buyer Behavior,” John Burnett

## The Organizational Buying Process

The following graphic from Burnett's book highlights how organizations purchase compared with a consumer. Primarily, they differ most because multiple decision makers are usually involved and the process becomes longer. Below are the typical stages:

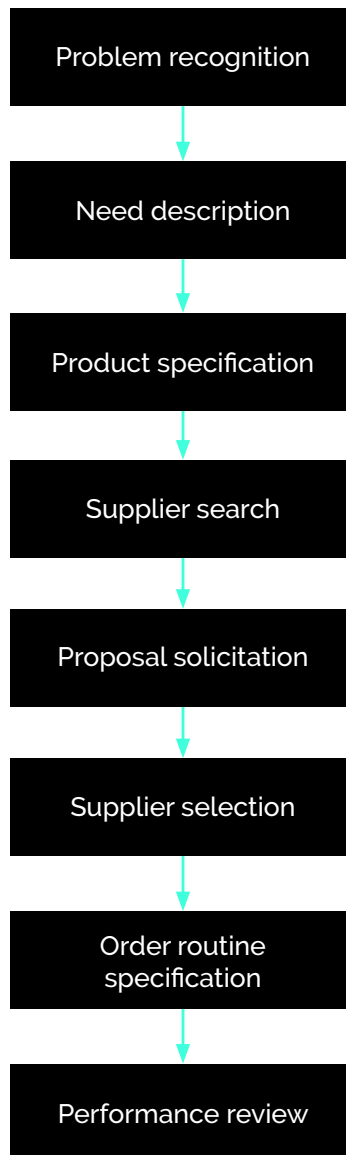
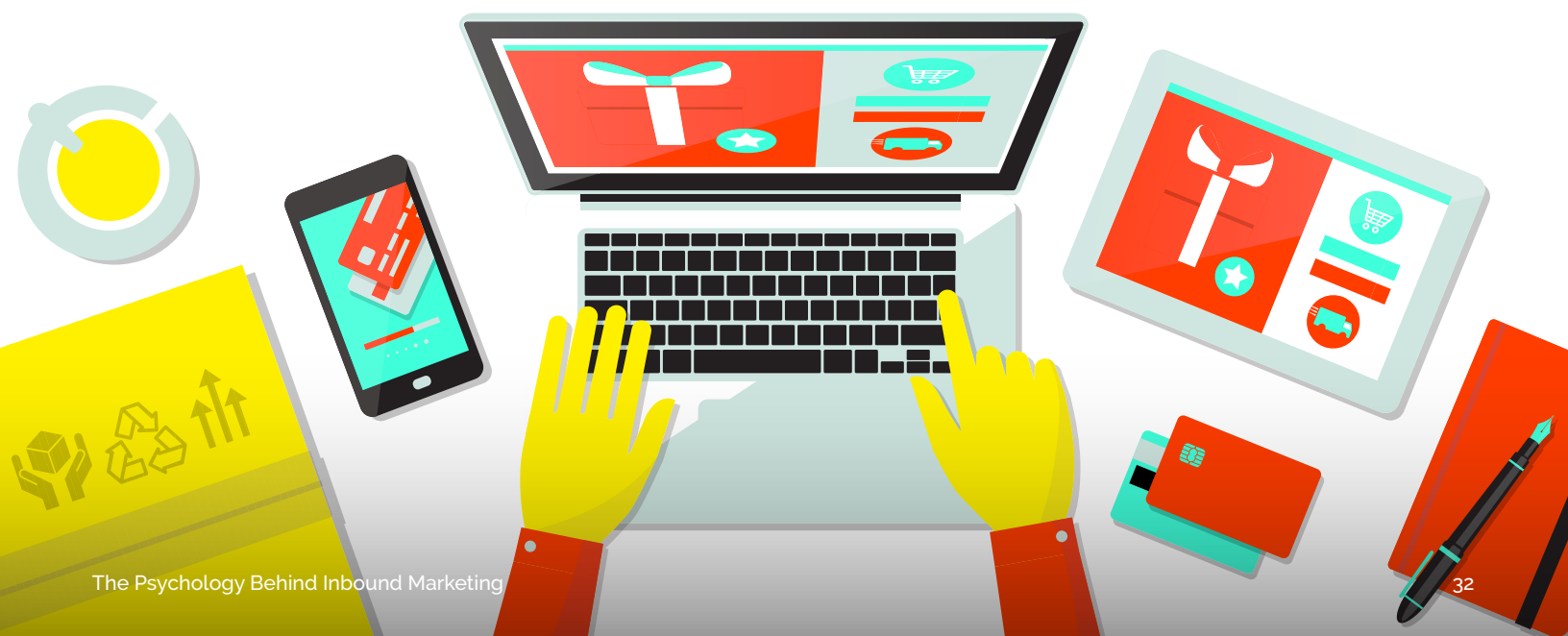


Figure 2: Adapted from "Understanding Buyer Behavior," John Burnett

## Buyer's Remorse and Post-Purchase Behavior

In a neuroscience marketing blog published on buyer's remorse, John Carvalho, consumer psychology researcher, points out that the online world makes it difficult, compared with brick-and-mortar buying environments, to make customers feel reassured in their purchasing decisions. He discusses a study<sup>8</sup> that supports the theory that post-purchase behavior reinforces satisfaction in the purchase and eliminates buyer's remorse.

In the study Carvalho shared, researchers found that simply closing a menu and handing it back to the waitress increased a person's satisfaction in his or her meal choice. For inbound marketing and the online world, this means that what behaviors happen immediately after the decision was made will influence repurchase, reviews, customer satisfaction, and referrals. So, what can you do in the online world to ensure behavior eliminates buyer's remorse and improves satisfaction?





To start with, follow up the close of a sale with an email that thanks buyers for their purchases. Below is an actual email from one of my favorite local boutiques. Not only do they know style, but they also know how to make their customers forget all about buyer's remorse.

*Thank you very much for your order. You really are quite lovely. This awesome email is to confirm a couple things you probably already know.*

*First. Your online shopping skills are top-notch.*

*Second. LOT 2029 and you are probably besties.*

*Just in case you were on a caffeine high, in a room filled with so much glitter you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face, here's a confirmation of the pretty things you bought.*

In the long run, you can create content that is geared toward the user or customer. If you are a technology company that requires user support, work on making this the best possible experience for customers or build out communities where users can find answers to commonly asked questions. You can use surveys or customer interviews to find out what type of content they prefer as they interact with your company. Just listen to them!

## **What Mobility and the Internet Are Doing to Buyer Behavior**

One of the branches of psychology described earlier in this guide is evolutionary psychology. Though this seems like it would be a concept that applies more to the evolution of humans from primates, our brains are evolving today as we speak. Sure, actual evolution takes thousands of years to occur, but our brains are quickly adapting to the mobile and online world.

We find solutions fast, have many vendors to choose from, and thus are likely to leave carts abandoned or quotes sitting on the table for months. On the other hand, if we feel the need to buy here and now, your inbound marketing efforts want to make it easy to do just that.

## **Bringing It Back to the Scientific Method**

To truly grow your business in a tech-savvy world, you must use platforms in new ways, but you also should remember the psychological or human component of inbound marketing campaigns. Use the tools and platforms you have as inbound marketers to measure the psychological aspects of your website visitors, leads, and customers. From this research, you can build campaigns that are not only successful, but also build on the foundations of human cognition and behavior.

# About SmartBug

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SmartBug Media is one of a handful of HubSpot Diamond partners in the world and is the highest-rated agency in the history of the HubSpot ecosystem. We also boast the highest ROI documented from any HubSpot partner—3,558% and 14,500% ROI on a six-month and three-year campaign, respectively. At Inbound 2015, SmartBug Media was the most recognized agency, having won or been named a finalist in nine awards.

SmartBug Media is one of the first HubSpot partners to implement growth-driven design and was an inaugural member of the HubSpot COS Advisory Board. For more than seven years, SmartBug Media has been helping businesses increase sales leads, close more customers, and enhance the reach of their brands. From building comprehensive online marketing programs to designing new websites, driving leads through social media or sales enablement, we're an extension of your marketing team that delivers.

**For a free inbound marketing or web design consultation, or to learn more, visit [www.smartbugmedia.com](http://www.smartbugmedia.com) or call [949-236-6448](tel:949-236-6448).**

# About the Author

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Amber Kemmis is an Inbound Marketing Consultant and Team Lead at SmartBug Media. Using her psychology background, leadership experience as an in-house marketer, and nearly two years as an agency inbound marketing consultant, she helps industry-leading companies build and implement inbound marketing strategies that go beyond generating buzz to completely bridging the gaps between sales and marketing to create sustainable and predictable ROI.

Have a question? Curious how we can help grow your business?

Let's Talk

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