

B-to-B markets  
high intrinsic value  
relevance  
response paths  
limited-time  
B-to-B

## **B-to-B Offer Strategies:**

How to Keep Your Sales  
Pipeline Filled with  
Qualified Leads

**THE | kern | ORGANIZATION**

*Essential Direct™*

# B-to-B markets

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### Executive Summary

In today's hectic world, businesspeople are busier than ever and often view a sales call as an unwelcome interruption that prevents them from doing more meaningful work. In order to get them to even take the first step of raising their hand, you need to provide an incentive that makes it worth the effort.

There are two types of offers—"soft" and "hard"—that should be employed at different stages of the buy-cycle. Someone just starting to think about a future purchase is not ready for a sales call and should be offered a low-commitment incentive—perhaps a USB flash drive or a calculator.

Conversely, someone who is planning to make a purchase decision within the next 30 days will understand the value of a hard offer—a one-on-one meeting or product demonstration.

Regardless of what kind of offer you are using, it should be relevant, easy to deliver and of value to the audience. When it's time to develop an offer, look at what your competitors are doing, brainstorm a list of possibilities, segment your audience and get into their shoes to map out the buy-cycle for your industry.

Once you have an offer, spend some time crafting the title. Finding the right words to describe it can make a huge difference in response. Be sure to convey a benefit to the reader.

Traditionally, the best-performing offers are informational, such as guides, reports or white papers. And nowadays, the Web makes it easy to bundle content into an online resource center.

To maximize the performance of your offer, have a clear call-to-action and instill urgency by limiting the time the offer is available.

## I. Why Lead Generation Campaigns Need a Great Offer

It's a painful truth. People simply don't like to speak to sales representatives. They may be afraid that a salesperson is going to talk them into buying something they don't want or need. It's human nature. No wonder people are so reluctant to walk into a car dealer's showroom.

But in B-to-B marketing, the problem is compounded. Businesspeople need to stay productive. They legitimately feel their time is precious and avoid investing time speaking with people who won't be of service to them in the near term. In addition, at different levels of the corporate ladder—from an operating manager to a C-level executive—the particular interests of each decision maker change, so the conversation needs to change.

This is exactly why a lead generation campaign needs a great offer. You need to overcome businesspeople's natural reluctance to speak to a salesperson, and you need to provide the prospect with relevant, meaningful assistance. Your offer allows prospects to raise their hands and indicate they have interest in knowing more—all without having to make a commitment to speak to a salesperson.

What kind of assistance do businesspeople want? They want help solving a problem or gaining insight into new trends.

Unfortunately, sometimes businesspeople get so enamored of their product's benefits, they believe "it will sell itself." They delude themselves into thinking they don't need an offer to motivate a prospect to respond. Therefore, they produce lead generation campaigns around this ill-conceived strategy. "Let's just tell the marketplace about our wonderful product," they say to themselves. "The buyers are sure to want it once they hear about all its features and benefits."

Although that may be true for some products, this type of approach leaves many business opportunities on the table. Why? Because in B-to-B marketing, there is a natural progression of steps in the buy-cycle that moves from soft interest in a product to serious consideration and eventually to specific evaluation of criteria before a final purchase decision is made.

Thus, to generate all the business you deserve, you need a way to overcome people's fear and reluctance by helping them take an easy first step into the buying process. You need to generate desire and motivate potential buyers to take the action you are seeking, whether it's clicking through, mailing back your reply form, visiting your URL or attending your event.

You need to overcome businesspeople's natural reluctance to speak to a salesperson.

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### The function of an offer

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To move a prospect to action

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To overcome inertia

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To imitate the persuasive power of a salesperson

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To move a prospect along the buy-cycle

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To attract a profitable customer

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## II. The Two Types of Offers

Essentially, an offer asks a prospect to take some action in exchange for receiving something of value. The mission of the marketer is to identify the offer or a series of offers that will attract the most potential customers, without attracting people who will never buy.

Lead generation offers can be divided into two major categories: “hard” and “soft.” The more an offer connects a buyer with a sales rep, the harder it is. For example, “Respond today for your free consultation” is a hard offer. Hard offers tend to stress the business value and require more effort on the part of the respondent. Other examples include a free seminar or an invitation for a salesperson to call.

Conversely, soft offers are a lower commitment, with high perceived value and broad appeal and with a low risk of having to speak to a salesperson. Typically, soft offers are educationally oriented, such as a guide, book or white paper.

Another category of soft offers is incentives like free premiums, for example, a USB flash drive, T-shirt or calculator. The use of a sweepstakes is also considered a soft offer, being generous and low risk.

There is a clear inverse correlation between lead quality and lead quantity when it comes to offers: If you are looking for higher-quality leads, use an offer that requires more commitment. You will receive fewer responses, but they will be more qualified.

As a B-to-B marketer, you should experiment with combining hard and soft offers to find the right balance between lead quality and lead quantity. For example, a nice fountain pen in exchange for a meeting with a salesperson is a good hard/soft offer combination. The free pen is the appealing soft side, but the fact that the pen will be delivered by the rep when he/she arrives for the meeting increases the offer’s ability to qualify.

One common mistake business marketers often make is thinking that their offer is about selling their product. Indeed, eventually you want to sell your product or service. But for lead generation, the objective is to motivate initial response and warm up a prospect’s interest. Trying to motivate a prospect to buy before he or she is ready can introduce fear or confusion, thus reducing response rates.

## III. Five Characteristics of a Great Offer

A compelling offer is:

1. **Of value** to the prospect
2. **Exclusive**, something the prospect can’t get anywhere else
3. **Tangible**, something the prospect can visualize
4. **Easy** to deliver
5. **Relevant** to the prospect’s business or personal needs

An optional—but important—characteristic of a great offer is that it engages and entertains the prospect while delivering relevant information. Engagement comes in many forms, including being touched, watched, used or interacted with. Please see Section IX on “Where B-to-B Offers Are Heading” for examples of entertaining and engaging offers.

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## THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES WITH B-TO-B OFFERS

What not to do	Why	Example
Complicated offers	Making prospects figure out complexity gets in the way	<i>Free trial available to new customers only and subject to credit approval; offer expires December 31, except in the case of customers headquartered in Georgia.</i>
Vague or generic offers	Confusion reduces response	<i>Call now for more details.</i>
Sell the product	Your job is to sell the reason to respond, not the product itself	<i>Call today, and we'll send you a new network analyzer for just \$99,500.</i>
Too good to be true	Credibility is essential, especially on the Internet	<i>Our SSL Certificate will prevent online fraud forever and save your company millions.</i>

## IV. Six Steps to Developing a Superb Offer

There are literally hundreds of offer possibilities that are relevant to business buyers. So identifying the most compelling offer can be daunting at first. But if you break down offer development into its component parts and address each one in turn, you will successfully navigate your way to a superb offer.

### STEP 1: LOOK AT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Some simple background research can save you time in offer development. The Direct Marketing Association, for example, publishes data on the tools found effective by marketers. Here are offer usage statistics from DMA members who rated the relative effectiveness of various offers based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "very effective."

Type of incentive	B-to-B	B-to-C
Free information	3.64	2.78
Free gift	3.43	3.59
Discount	3.33	3.47
Free trial	3.13	3.00
Free sample	3.00	2.92
Sweepstakes	2.83	2.67
Free/Reduced shipping	2.20	2.60
Frequent buyer/Loyalty program	2.20	2.77
Buy one, get one free	2.00	2.94

Source: DMA, *Getting Creative with Direct Mail*, 2007.

Another way to stay abreast of trends is to check out your competition. Sign up at your competitors' Web sites and get on their mailing lists, so you can keep track of the offers they are using.

## STEP 2: GENERATE A LIST OF OFFER IDEAS

Begin to assemble a list of ideas for later assessment. Beyond industry statistics and competitive analysis, there are many useful sources of offer ideas:

- Talk to your customer-facing personnel, such as field reps and call-center teams. They have their ear to the ground about what customers are looking for, and this can be a rich source of offer ideas.
- Reach out to customers using surveys, focus groups or outbound phone calls. If you have an advisory board, this is a perfect job for them.
- Analyze the results of your offer history. There may be an offer that worked in the past that can be dusted off or refreshed for current use.

## STEP 3: GET INSIDE THE MIND OF YOUR PROSPECT

The best offers are those that are relevant to the needs of your customers. So what better way to evaluate offer ideas than to understand the motivations, business problems and personality of your target? Focus groups are a useful tool for probing for customer insight.

Don't be afraid to offer something of personal benefit. Remember, business buyers are still people with their own self-interest. They may be buying for their company, but their response motivators are as much about personal benefit as the company's.

Focus groups are a useful tool for probing for customer insight.

## STEP 4: SEGMENT YOUR AUDIENCE

Design your offer to motivate the various decision makers within an organization. Each has different interests, needs and motivations. For example, in technology markets when selling to large enterprise companies, there are three key decision-maker units that play various roles in the buying process:

- The economic buyer (also referred to as the strategic buyer or decision maker)
- The technical buyer or specifier
- The end-user or recommender

When crafting an information-based offer, such as a white paper, for these three roles, you want to adjust the title and slate your copy to serve the particular interests of your buying population. See the table on the following page for examples.

Buying role	Concerned with	White paper titles
Economic buyer	Revenue, profits, competitive advantage, growth, customer and employee satisfaction, ROI	<i>Data Management as a Profitability Driver, 11 Tips to Slash Data Center Bills, Rack vs. Blade: A Manager's Cost Comparison Guide</i>
Technical buyer	Functionality, compatibility, availability, reliability	<i>How to Select the Right Data Management Software Solution for Your Business, Save Power with Computational Fluid Dynamics</i>
End-user	Ease of use	<i>Keys to Data Management Productivity, Streamlining Data Center Virtualization</i>

## STEP 5: MAP YOUR OFFER SEQUENCE TO THE BUYING PROCESS

As prospects move through the buying process, their interest levels change. As a result, the type of information they need to help in their purchase process also changes over time. So it's a best-practice strategy to craft a series of offers to help move a given buying population from one stage of the buy-cycle to the next. Continuing the example of a white paper, here are possible titles that appeal to a technical buyer at various buy-cycle stages.

Buying stage	White paper title	Why it works
Interest	<i>Latest Trends in Data Management</i>	A broad topic can appeal to anyone thinking about data management.
Consideration	<i>The 7 Most Important Issues to Consider when Selecting a Data Management System</i>	This title is more specific and attracts prospects in the consideration stage of the buying process.
Evaluation	<i>How to Select the Right Data Management Software Solution for Your Business</i>	This is a very specific title that will attract buyers who are well along in the purchase process.

Try using the offer itself as the next stage in the buying process. If the customer needs to see a demo of the product before they will buy, offer a free demonstration.

In short, seek to match your offer strategy to the short- and long-term sales objectives within your business. Initial soft offers will gain many inquiries that can be nurtured into qualified leads. Nurturing offers must provide information that will move the prospect along the buying chain. Hard offers are useful at the end of the chain, when the prospect is ready to see a salesperson and make a commitment. Retention offers, like frequency discounts, make sense after the transaction is completed.

Titles/Buy-cycle	Strategic buyer	Technical buyer	User buyer
Interest	Media-sponsored benchmark comparison report	Technical briefing and deployment study, knowledge center	White paper on category issues, knowledge center
Consideration	Breakfast briefing with Wall Street	Webinar on successful deployment	Webinar on successful deployment
Evaluation	Competitive case studies	White paper on technical issues to consider before implementation	Template for RFP development and ROI payback

## STEP 6: CRAFT AN OFFER TITLE THAT MAXIMIZES RESULTS

How you position your offer and merchandise its value is critical to its success. The offer title is the single most important element to attracting attention and motivating response. Offer titles are the equivalent of advertising headlines, and their role is to create interest for the respondent to find out more about the opportunity.

In fact, 90% of the interest in your offer comes from its title. So be sure to spend plenty of time crafting a compelling title for your offer. Tips for a winning title:

- Make it very specific. Include numbers if they are relevant (e.g., *9 Tips to Boost E-mail Performance*).
- Avoid jargon. But use keywords relevant to the prospect's current business issues.
- Use clear and crisp words, including action words.

In lead generation, more than 50% of your success will come from selling the benefits of responding to your offer. So how you show your offer—in effect, how you merchandise it in your marketing materials—is important. For example, make sure the headline is easy to read on the cover of your brochure. Clearly tell readers what they will learn, gain, reveal and take away from your offer.

In lead generation, more than 50% of your success will come from selling the benefits of responding to your offer.

## V. The Best B-to-B Lead Generation Offer Ever

Hands down, the most effective type of offer for lead generation is about information. Highly desirable offers are those related to helping businesspeople do their job better or faster, solve a big problem or make them look like a hero.

Business buyers need information to do their job, and they will gladly accept any help they can get. So a marketer who provides research, statistics, guidance or success stories can capture a buyer's attention and motivate response.

Informational offers drive the best results for business marketers. Why? They combine three magic ingredients:

- 1 A strong appeal that has high perceived value
- 2 An innate ability to qualify the prospect by the nature of the offer title
- 3 Relatively low cost and risk

When creating offers, you want to think about the myriad benefits your information can bring to a business buyer:

- Ideas for cutting costs or improving productivity
- Proof points, such as testimonials, research reports and case studies
- Insight into what's working for the competition
- Data that will help sell the idea internally
- Fresh insights and trends that make the prospect look good and smart, and feel like a valued contributor to the firm

Examples of information-based offers that appeal to business buyers:

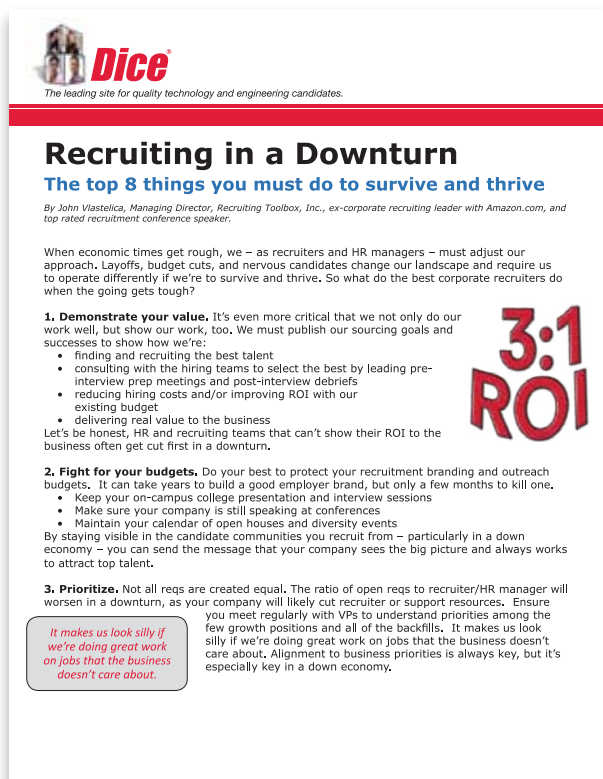
- |                    |                  |
|--------------------|------------------|
| ■ White papers     | ■ Brochures      |
| ■ Case studies     | ■ Newsletters    |
| ■ Research reports | ■ Tips documents |
| ■ Article reprints | ■ Podcasts       |
| ■ Videos           | ■ Books          |
| ■ Demo CDs         | ■ Webinars       |

### HOW TO DEVELOP THE PERFECT INFORMATIONAL OFFER FOR YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

When crafting an informational offer, begin by answering these essential questions:

- 1 Who is the content for? A technical buyer will appreciate very different content than that preferred by an economic buyer.
- 2 What can you give the audience that is of real value?
- 3 Are you going to speak about the product category as a whole, including your competitors, or will you focus solely on your own product?
- 4 What stage in the buying process is your target audience?
- 5 Do you need to bring in an authoritative third party, or can the content be produced by your firm?

## SAMPLES OF INFORMATION-BASED OFFERS



**Dice**  
The leading site for quality technology and engineering candidates.

### Recruiting in a Downturn

The top 8 things you must do to survive and thrive

By John Vlastelica, Managing Director, Recruiting Toolbox, Inc., ex-corporate recruiting leader with Amazon.com, and top rated recruitment conference speaker.

When economic times get rough, we – as recruiters and HR managers – must adjust our approach. Layoffs, budget cuts, and nervous candidates change our landscape and require us to operate differently if we're to survive and thrive. So what do the best corporate recruiters do when the going gets tough?

**1. Demonstrate your value.** It's even more critical that we not only do our work well, but show our work, too. We must publish our sourcing goals and successes to show how we're:

- finding and recruiting the best talent
- consulting with the hiring teams to select the best by leading pre-interview prep meetings and post-interview debriefs
- reducing hiring costs and/or improving ROI with our existing budget
- delivering real value to the business

Let's be honest, HR and recruiting teams that can't show their ROI to the business often get cut first in a downturn.

**2. Fight for your budgets.** Do your best to protect your recruitment branding and outreach budgets. It can take years to build a good employer brand, but only a few months to kill one.

- Keep your on-campus college presentation and interview sessions
- Make sure your company is still speaking at conferences
- Maintain your calendar of open houses and diversity events

By staying visible in the candidate communities you recruit from – particularly in a down economy – you can send the message that your company sees the big picture and always works to attract top talent.

**3. Prioritize.** Not all reqs are created equal. The ratio of open reqs to recruiter/HR manager will worsen in a downturn, as your company will likely cut recruiter or support resources. Ensure you meet regularly with VPs to understand priorities among the few growth positions and all of the backfills. It makes us look silly if we're doing great work on jobs that the business doesn't care about. Alignment to business priorities is always key, but it's especially key in a down economy.

*It makes us look silly if we're doing great work on jobs that the business doesn't care about.*

**3:1 ROI**

Dice: Article



SuccessFactors: CD

VeriSign: Newsletter

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF INFORMATIONAL OFFERS

**White paper**—White papers are still at the top of the list among powerful informational offers. Today, the secret to an effective white paper is value. Make it very specific, both in title and content. Give prospects an objective, non-salesy piece of research that analyzes a business problem and its potential solutions. If you do include information about your product or service, put it in a discreet sidebar.

**“10 tips” document**—It doesn’t have to be exactly 10 tips. But the content needs to be short, snappy and easy to skim. Choose a theme that addresses an important pain point and provides real business value. Here are some examples:

- *10 Tips for Making Your Business More Profitable*
- *7 Ways to Reduce Your Accounting Expenses*
- *The Top 5 Strategies for Cutting Buy-Cycle Time*

**Case study**—Business buyers crave case studies because they make the solution real. A case study not only conveys credibility (shows that the product works) but also offers an appealingly detailed view of *how* it works.

**Newsletter**—Newsletters can be delivered in hard copy or electronically. In either case, they make a powerful offer if they are strongly positioned as material that will help readers do their jobs better. Avoid self-serving copy. The key benefit of newsletters to marketers is their use as an ongoing communication device. If the content is useful, the newsletter will be a low-cost way to nurture the customer relationship over time.

## VI. Creating Highly Desirable, Exclusive Offers Through Content Aggregation

The Web has now made it possible for marketers to combine offers. The sum of the content is greater than the individual parts, so to speak. Thus, bundling a related group of white papers can make a unique and exclusive offer. This strategy is called content aggregation or “kitting.”

Today, marketers are creating online knowledge centers or resource centers and making them available to prospects as the focal point of their lead generation campaigns. These centers not only demonstrate the firm’s thought leadership but also become an irresistibly attractive reason to get engaged with the company.

An online resource center might be populated with a library of content, such as:

- Five white papers covering all aspects of the buy-cycle
- Four video case studies
- An ROI calculator
- Links to relevant sites as further resources
- A contact-me-now link and call-to-action
- A blog from the company president or senior technical executive

## VII. Checklist of Proven Lead Generation Offers

To stimulate your thinking, here is a variety of offers that have stood the test of time in lead generation campaigns. In terms of the buy-cycle, this list is ranked from interest stage to closing stage:

- Trend briefs
- Problem-solution information
- Benchmark/Best-in-class results comparisons
- Premiums or gifts with response (in limited quantities)
- Educational seminars or Webinars
- Self-assessment tools
- Case studies and success stories
- Breakfast briefings
- ROI calculators
- RFP development guides
- Consultations, audits or assessments
- Free trials or samples
- Demonstrations
- No-obligation estimates
- Money-back guarantees of satisfaction
- Discounts
- Free shipping, training, installation or other services
- Low-cost financing/terms

## VIII. How to Maximize the Performance of Your Offer

Once you have developed a compelling offer for your target audience, it's time to consider how to make the offer work as hard as possible. The purpose of the offer is to overcome inertia and motivate a response. You have decided what the terms of your offer shall be—in other words, what you will do for the prospect and what they have to do in exchange.

There are certain techniques you can use to pump up your offer without changing its terms and make the offer more productive with no additional investment:

- **Add a clear call-to-action**—As appealing as your offer is, it will benefit from a clear statement of what you want the prospect to do. Phrases like “Click here” and “Call now” will dramatically increase response. Make your call-to-action clearly visible and repeat it often.

- **Eliminate choice in the offer**—You may think that it’s a great idea to invite respondents to select the option they prefer: “Free! Your choice of white papers from our technical library.” This kind of offer appears generous and empowering. But in fact, when you ask people to choose—to put some effort into the decision—you will lose some of them. The no-choice offer will pull better. Why? It’s easier to react to, it takes advantage of impulse and it’s less likely to be put aside for later.
- **Create a sense of urgency**—Urgency stimulates action. Introduce limits in your offer, such as deadlines or quantity limits. Use a premium as an early-bird offer, but limit it to the first 100 responders or while supplies last.
- **Make it easy to respond**—Reduce the number of clicks required. Shorten the registration form. Add a prepaid postage indicia to your reply card or envelope. Anything you can do to remove obstacles will increase response.
- **Add risk-reducers**—Use guarantees, testimonials and success stories. Stress your company’s stability and long track record in the industry. Make it easy for the customer to feel comfortable about doing business with you.

When you ask people to choose—to put some effort into the decision—you will lose some of them.

## IX. Where B-to-B Offers Are Heading

Who said B-to-B is boring? Businesspeople may buy on behalf of their companies, but they are still people and respond as human beings. Some companies are taking advantage of the power of consumer-generated media and the viral nature of the Internet to introduce offers in an exciting new way.

- **The “Friendly Advice Machine”** offered by the data security firm Iron Mountain Digital features hilarious videos of Monty Python alumnus John Cleese skewering the pomposity of businesspeople while getting across important messages about the critical nature of data protection. First introduced in January 2008, the site has built an enthusiastic following and generated millions of visits, blog posts and video downloads. [www.friendlyadvicemachine.com](http://www.friendlyadvicemachine.com)
- **Kimberly-Clark’s Do-It-Yourself** division is a small, entrepreneurial group of 35 employees within the corporation whose mission is to mine existing product lines and repurpose items for the \$347 billion home-improvement market. The group discovered that a duckbill-shaped face mask used in hospital operating rooms could also help with home-improvement projects by keeping dust and paint out of do-it-yourselfers’ mouths and noses. The team staged a contest to create the funniest online video that presented the effectiveness of the dust masks and promoted the contest on message boards and blogs aimed at do-it-yourselfers, contractors, remodelers and plumbers. The company selected videos from four amateur filmmakers to make available to the public via one-click downloads at [www.duckbill.tv](http://www.duckbill.tv). The DUCKBILL video competition received 115,000-plus mentions on blogs and message boards, and the Web site has received more than 65,000 hits.
- **Cisco Systems** is using Internet video to demonstrate product benefits by inviting their current customers to participate in vivid, dramatic case studies. On the Public Safety and Homeland Security page, for example, the Boulder County Police Department shows officers at crime scenes calling back to headquarters on their reliable Cisco IP phone network. Cisco is posting hundreds of these video case studies monthly. [http://www.cisco.com/web/strategy/government/pshs\\_index.html](http://www.cisco.com/web/strategy/government/pshs_index.html)

Businesspeople may buy on behalf of their companies, but they are still people and respond as human beings.

## X. Offer Self-Evaluation

Before developing a new offer or promoting an existing offer, be sure to ask yourself the following offer development best-practice questions:

- 1 How relevant is your offer to your target audience?
- 2 How educational is your offer?
- 3 How independent and unbiased is your offer content?
- 4 How unique is your offer?
- 5 Is your offer exclusive?
- 6 How recent and timely is your content?
- 7 How powerfully does the offer title intrigue the reader to find out more?
- 8 Does your offer engage and entertain while educating at the same time?
- 9 Do you have offers for each of your key decision makers?
- 10 Have you created offers for each of the three stages of the buy-cycle?
- 11 How well do you merchandise the benefits of responding to your offer in your lead generation materials?

## About The Kern Organization

Over the past 20 years, The Kern Organization has developed unique expertise in helping B-to-B marketers optimize their go-to-market operations. TKO brings to its clients the experience of working with more than 50 leading B-to-B marketing companies, developing thousands of campaigns and generating millions of qualified sales leads. TKO provides evaluation, consultation, design and implementation services for all aspects of integrated demand generation and lead management programs using its exclusive B-to-B High-Tech Lead Farm™ approach.

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