The B2B SEO Trap: Why High-Intent Visibility Can Still Underperform via @sejournal, @coreydmorris

In B2B SEO, typically, the ultimate goal is to attract high-intent searchers who convert into qualified leads.

But, not all high-intent visibility translates to sales-ready traffic, especially in long sales cycles or complex buying journeys.

As we get deeper into an era of diminishing importance of keywords that translate directly into attributable clicks, a focus on quality of traffic is as important as ever.

Don’t get me wrong. Quality has long been a critical component and key performance indicator (KPI) in the sense that most of us know our conversion rates and stages of the funnel someone might be in related to intent with B2B and lead generation.

However, now, as much as ever, we have to scrutinize intent and the traffic quality even more.

When SEO teams over-prioritize high-intent visibility and focus under the false assumption that intent equals urgency, we can find that we’re not getting the conversions or leads that we expect.

In this article, I’m unpacking seven ways to help go deeper with mapping visibility to actual funnel stages, differentiating decision-makers vs. influencers, and building SEO content that nurtures, qualifies, and educates before the

handoff to sales.

1. The Myth: “If It’s A Bottom-Of-Funnel Topic, The Traffic Is Ready To Convert”

While we may think about our website, our content, and analytics data in customer journeys and conversion funnels, our target audience doesn’t.

Maybe my nerdy search brain thinks that way when I’m consuming content on a website I’m interested in, but most of the world doesn’t.

There are too many variables that impact someone’s conversion decision to fully unpack here. I can personally tell you that a couple of times, I filled out forms while lying on the floor next to one of my kids in bed, falling asleep.

And, other times, I sat with a tab open on my giant desktop work monitor for months before eventually finding that tab again and filling out the form.

Those are two extreme examples, but as more possible ways to be found (e.g., AI search) enter play, we’re going to see myriad behaviors and paths that we couldn’t have anticipated just a few years ago.

Things are not going to make sense in a simple way, and what might seem like a home run conversion will be frustrating when you dig into the data, and things that might have felt like top of funnel that convert quickly will be equally (but pleasantly) surprising as well.

2. B2B Searchers Are Often Researching, Comparing, Or Gathering Info, Not Buying

Beyond the intent challenges and varying entry points and sources I noted above, we have a hand to play at times as well in how and where someone converts.

Our best converting content can still be standing in the way of getting the actual conversion. Just like the head scratchers that we might find when someone converts quickly without seemingly spending much time on the site or in "research" mode.

With more answers being given within search engines and large language models (LLMs), a lot of the research is done before someone gets to our site.

That being said, whether our content is helping inform AI, getting us found off-site, or to do the traditional education work on our site, we have to understand that, even on what might seem like a high intent page, someone might still be in research and information gathering mode.

They might be seeking pricing (if we disclose it) or building their own deck of us, plus competitors, to help with their own decisions for buying or outreach.

When we make too many assumptions, put someone on a singular navigation path, or take away options, we risk losing the opportunity for them to continue their research journey.

We've got to find a balance between prominent calls-to-action (CTAs) and long-form content so there's more flexibility for the user based on what their intent is in that visitor or session that we worked so hard to get.

3. How To Differentiate Between User Intent And Sales-Readiness

I've talked a lot about intent already. What I haven't unpacked is how sales-ready someone is.

Our brand story, content, and user experience can be persuasive and do the job of getting a form submission or phone call.

However, if someone isn't "sales-ready," they likely are going to consume everything up to the point of a conversion action, then leave. They may come back often up to that point and leave.

This might lead us to think there's something wrong with the form, or the CTA, or the content itself. Sure, that could be the case and should be validated. But, it could also be that they simply aren't ready to buy.

As an agency owner, I also operate a B2B business that relies on lead generation. I can personally validate that while we have received a lot of seemingly bottom-of-the-funnel traffic, my team has been told by prospects that they were ready to buy, but not ready to talk to anyone, as they were told to slow down the process or await a final budget approval before reaching out.

It's frustrating, but that's seemingly the nature of the world economically these past couple of years (probably not a "hot take").

4. Why One-Size-Fits-All CTAs (E.g., "Request A Quote") Often

Fail In B2B

I admit that I've been guilty of slapping the one-size-fits-all, generic CTA in the footer or sidebar of all pages of a site.

As I noted earlier, we need to expect the unexpected with matching intent to content and funnel levels. We should definitely review and evaluate our CTAs.

In line with my note above about someone possibly being close to a conversion but not sales-ready, if we have other areas of value we can provide like additional content they can subscribe to or ways to engage with us to get further acquainted (ex: webinars, Q&As, etc), that don't involve a direct sales process, then we can further engage with them and stay in front of them in a way that is welcome based on where they are right now.

5. Using Content To Build Trust And Qualification, Not Just Capture Form Fills

When we rush someone to a form submission and they're not ready to buy, not prepared for the sales process, or qualified, we often get feedback from sales about discrepancies related to marketing qualified leads (MQLs) vs. sales qualified leads (SQLs) or how leads are accepted by sales.

Wasting time on sales internally, while frustrating, someone who wasn't prepared for (or qualified for) the process is a loss for both sides.

Building trust through quality content, differentiation, setting expectations on what happens after the form submission, and other trust signals like transparency of

pricing can go a long way to ensuring higher rates of conversions to customers.

Don’t forget that quality trumps quantity if we look at additional metrics and KPIs in our marketing-to-revenue process.

6. How To Structure B2B Content Around Intent Clusters, Not Just Funnel Stages

If you aren’t convinced yet from what I’ve shared about how user behavior can differ from what we might expect or predict, then maybe thinking about content specifically will help.

In the zero-click searches and AI search push that has taken focus away from specific keyword and has put it more on visibility, one piece consistently is important: the content you create.

In topics, clusters, or however you want to think about how the content is organized on your website, you still need to focus on how it is presented to the user.

Starting with the user intent and mapped to where they are in the funnel, then working backwards, we can see where we have gaps in content and what we need to support answering all questions possible and moving the prospect forward in the process.

This will serve you well for search engines today and LLMs and AI-generated search results today and tomorrow.

While we used to (and in some cases still approach it today) as topics driven by keywords, I’m advocating for thinking about topics in how someone might be moving through a customer journey.

What questions are they asking at the phase they are in? Have we anticipated everything? Have we accidentally assumed too much about their knowledge or their sales-readiness?

We're not going to be able to think of everything. Much like long-tail keywords and queries, we can see people doing a lot more research and probing in AI research.

My company got a lead from ChatGPT a few months ago, and we could see that they visited our site seven times from ChatGPT in the process before eventually filling out our form. This is not user behavior that we would have planned for or anticipated just a few years ago.

7. Creating SEO Content For Both Decision-Makers And Gatekeepers

We can't control who comes to our website. Humans aren't as blockable as robots and web crawlers. However, we don't need to be worried about those who might not be the ultimate prospect or decision-maker.

Whether you're seeing traffic from AI engines, search engines, or those that never convert and seem like unqualified human visitors, I encourage you to still work on building your authority position, be helpful with your content, and to know that you might be helping get critical information to gatekeepers (human or systems) that go further upstream to a human who is a decision-maker.

Whether you're educating the search committee for a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, an assistant or intern doing field research, or something automated trying to learn so it can feed good info to a decision-maker, it isn't wasted effort, even though narrow thinking and reviewing of conversion metrics at the bottom of the funnel may make it seem that way.

Final Thoughts

Customer journeys, funnel thinking, search intent, and how it all works together in generating conversions and leads for B2B focuses can be complex and hard to track. It is getting even harder.

That doesn’t mean that we should give up or try to force everyone through a narrow funnel or one-size-fits-all approach.

We can’t predict all the ways that our content will be understood, consumed, and engaged with.

What we can do is be helpful, leverage a strong brand, be transparent, and do everything we can to present users (and other sources) with a complete picture of our products, services, and how we are the right fit (or not) for our website visitors.

Leveraging our moments of visibility to generate quality traffic, but understanding that the bottom of the funnel isn’t a slam dunk to convert, and what it all can mean, can go a long way for engaging and re-engaging bottom of the funnel traffic to get every conversion we deserve.

More Resources:

Featured Image: vittaya pinpan/Shutterstock

https://www.searchenginejournal.com/the-b2b-seo-trap-why-high-intent-visibility-can-still-underperform/551751/