The SaaS Marketer's Toolbox Series

HOW TO FIX SaaS LEAD GEN IN 90 DAYS OR LESS

AUSTIN LAWRENCE GROUP

BUILD SOMETHING BIGGER

YOU'RE RIGHT—BUILDING A PIPELINE IS GETTING HARDER

Lead generation used to be a slam dunk for marketers. It was reliable and affordable. It used to work so well that we all thought we were done with cold outreach… forever!

Companies built their go-to-market strategies around it—producing content, pouring money into email and digital ad campaigns, and making sure they had enough business development reps (BDRs) to follow up on a dependable flow of inbound leads.

Performance was almost push-button predictable. Need a bigger pipeline? Just increase your lead gen budget and you could be confident of seeing the numbers tick up.

Today, not so much.

Marketers are increasingly frustrated by the declining performance and increasing cost of lead gen programs. Great content is table stakes, click-throughs mean less than they used to, sales reps are losing faith that marketing can help, and CEOs are impatient for results but unwilling to grant more budget until there is evidence of marketing traction.

It's tough out there—no wonder the median tenure for a tech CMO is little more than two years.

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So why stick with it?

Marketing gurus preach demand creation over lead generation—and normally we'd agree. Demand creation, where you build a standout brand and commanding market position, is ultimately the best way to build a long-term pipeline with a high ratio of conversion. It's also rewarding work for marketers, both in terms of what you put in personally and what you see in business outcomes.

But demand creation takes time and money. You need to be original, prominent, able to mount arguments that open minds to new ideas, and develop a deeply convincing product-market fit. In combination, these factors will win credibility in target markets and enable you to form a shared vision with prospects that is the foundation for successful sales deals.

These are absolutely the right techniques for a marketing and sales strategy that delivers informed, engaged prospects who are ready to buy. Of course you should do all this, but how long will it take? How much will it cost? Probably more than your CEO and CFO are willing to give.

Think about it from their point of view. Investors and the Board are piling on the pressure, fundraising is a nonstarter without a proven business model and revenue, an expensive sales staff keeps missing quota, while inflation and rising interest rates threaten demand.

In this context, your brilliant demand creation strategy—the kind of richly compelling marketing that you know in your heart is right—looks to them like a risky bet.

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There are no shortcuts...

...but it is possible to accelerate near-term results.

Marketing leaders must show they can get short-term lead generation humming to earn the privilege (time and budget) to execute a long-term strategy.

If this feels like putting tactics before strategy, cart before horse, you're not wrong. Console yourself with the idea that it's possible to focus on both. Many of the fundamentals are the same.

So, let's hush up those demanding sales folk. This eBook will help you to keep them busy with solid leads that have clear intent for a problem you know your business can solve. And you can achieve this within 90 days, if not sooner.

Getting started will be highly tactical. It will be scrappy. But everything you learn from this effort will inform and improve your long-term strategy. It will also give you the results that will persuade your bosses that marketing is a revenue driver and worthy of more investment.

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STEP 1: SLOW DOWN TO SPEED UP

The lead gen equation used to be simple: Increase resources to see increased performance. You could think of it like a racing car—push harder on the gas and your speed would increase. Drag would put an eventual limit on how fast you could go, but to a great extent you were in control.

If you're finding that target customers are no longer moved by your current lead gen program, doubling down will not translate into better results. Your racing car is spinning its wheels.

The reality is that connecting with buyers has become harder. To give a practical example, consider that until quite recently most buyers would start with a Google search. That made it relatively easy for marketers to identify buyers with high intent and put marketing content in front of them.

Today, search is trending downward as buyers try to cut through marketing "noise" and focus on sources that are altogether more human. They join online communities, discuss problems and solutions with their peers, and read review sites. They're accustomed to lead gen tactics and "screen out" generic messages cluttering their inbox and social feeds.

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For marketers, this means connecting with buyers is harder. Figuring out what will cut through is essential. Rather than racing, lead gen today is more like sailing. You're propelled by mastery of an external force (your buyer's motivations and whims), and progress is rarely in a straight line. You've got to assess the conditions and be prepared to tack your way forward. It's harder to get results, but practice will improve your ability to catch the wind.

How Cisco Connects with Hard-to-Reach Buyers
TrustRadius' Founder and CEO, Vinay Bhagat, spoke to Rebecca Stone, SVP, Cisco Customer Solutions Marketing & CMO, Cisco Meraki, to discuss how Cisco uses a customer-centric marketing strategy to attract today's self-serve buyers.
https://www.trustradius.com/vendor-blog/trustradius-trust-talks-ciscos-strategy-to-attract-the-self-serve-buyer

A. Get Specific

If your lead gen programs aren't delivering, your messages are probably too broad. You may have tried to address common pain points, but you need to zero in on how small niches of buyers think about and express those based on their personal experiences.

To be successful today, you have to start from their point of view. You have to show that you "get" what's holding them back.

Nailing this means being highly specific from the start—the more it feels to them that you understand their problem, the more niche you can be, and the higher your chance of success in winning a buyer's attention.

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We've paraphrased the following from a Challenger Sale Newsletter that sums it up well:

1. **Really know your customer.** Develop tighter, qualitative descriptions of ideal customer profiles to focus your effort on buyers who are a good fit for your solution. Closely examine the reasons why they start looking for answers to a problem, instead of using traditional demographics such as revenue, number of employees, industry, and location.

2. **Question the status quo and offer an alternative.** Motivated buyers are looking for answers, so your content needs to provide them. Offer insights that help buyers "reframe" their thinking while giving you intent signals. You'll hit the mark if you can mirror their understanding of their problem, can demonstrate that it is solvable and worth solving, and give a compelling vision of how to take action. A buyer's engagement with the content will give you a solid intent signal.

3. **Tailor emails as tightly as possible.** Emails will stand out in busy inboxes when the subject line and main message are tailored for context and relevance. Email is a one-to-one medium and more likely to be read if the buyer recognizes their situation in the very first line. Experiment with different subject lines and copy based on your best understanding of the buyer's problem.

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B. What is a Lead?

You have no time to waste—anything that requires buyer education will not help you deliver results within 90 days. If your contacts are not problem aware, you won't generate leads fast enough. Set problem awareness aside for demand creation.

To consider a contact a lead, they must satisfy two criteria. First, you have to be able to solve their problem. Second, they must have intent.

That means finding the decision-maker (or key influencer) who fits your ideal customer profile (ICP), has awareness of the problem (that you can solve), and is interested in talking about it.

Lead generation is all about capturing that demand—finding people you know you can sell to who are entering a buying window right now.

It may be that you already have an ICP defined and a list of customer pain points. If you're struggling to make traction, those definitions and assumptions may need to be revisited.

C. Refine Your ICP and Problem Definitions

Be prepared to dump what's not working and try something new. Don't get hung up on strategy—the aim here is to examine your ICP and uncover the most relevant, productive intent signals. When you have data on what works and what doesn't you can use that to guide strategy. But let's get some data first.

Start by interviewing internal subject matter experts and salespeople—people who talk to customers regularly and can safely help you test out early thinking. You're looking for:

- Prospects who see the problem the way you do and are willing to move off the status quo.
- Specific problems or niche situations where you've demonstrated success and can define the triggers that will bring a prospect to the table.
- A large enough yet manageable total addressable market (TAM).

Pro Tip: Handling Multiple ICPs

An ICP should be distinct and relatively homogeneous. The organizations, buyers, and the problems they're experiencing should look alike.

If your early research reveals several problems or niches, it may well be that you have more than one ICP. That's fine. You should plan distinct programs for each ICP so that you can get specific with each one.

Don't go crazy trying to tackle all your ICPs at once. Start with whichever one you think will deliver the best results in the least amount of time. It's probably the one where your business has the most experience. You can then rinse and repeat the processes in this eBook for your other ICPs.

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D. Design Your Interviews

Lead gen interviews can look a bit like case study interviews, but here you are focused on intent signals rather than success stories. The goal is to have conversations that reveal problems and, crucially, the way that buyers talk about those problems.

The language buyers use when talking about their problems is what you want to capture. We all respond to someone who shares our worldview, so mirroring a buyer is the simplest way to stand out and get that initial engagement.

- Formulate questions that probe their experience of the problems you can solve.
  - How did they become aware? How were the problems manifested? What were the effects of those problems on their business and their role?
  - Inquire about how they began to find their way to a solution, what was their search process, and how effective was it?
  - Ensure you asked about the outcomes from making a change and what would have happened if they didn't take action.
  - You also want to know how they learned about your solution, their experience of your sales process (good and bad), and also how the decision was made within their organization.

- Once you have some specific problems or niche situations, try to get granular with your follow-up questions.
  - What had to happen for them to act?
  - Were there limitations with existing software that created or exacerbated their problem? These can be great intent triggers that lead to highly relevant messages.
  - Where did they go to research solutions? Did they talk to peers? Do they participate in communities? Did they look on Google and, if so, what did they type in the search box?

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E. Build Your Confidence

These interviews won't generate leads, but they will help you to craft more effective lead gen campaigns and content. You want to be confident in your approach before you spend time and budget on campaign and content resources.

Interviews take a bit of time, but you should be able to get enough insights within a few weeks. Remember, we're looking for fresh, relevant ways to connect that you can test rapidly and refine later. Taking a moment to slow down and uncover more resonant approaches is the way you'll be able to speed up. It will help you avoid poor results and weak explanations for failure. Even if your first lead gen campaigns give underwhelming performance, your interviews will be the basis for figuring out how to improve and, if necessary, justifying your approach to bosses.

What if you don't have enough customers to feel you've validated your approach? In this case, look for prospective clients in your ICP and ask if they'd be willing to do an interview for research. Look in your network first, offer an incentive for their time (like a gift card or donation to charity), and promise that it won't be a sales call! Even if you have a solid base of customer interviews, talking to a few prospects can provide a stronger validation for new ideas.

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Questions for prospects are a little different because they may not have problem awareness.

- Do they recognize the problem you've described? Remember, we want to focus on buyers who are problem aware, but use these interviews to probe how they think about problems you suspect they may have.

- If they are problem aware, find out if they're motivated enough to solve it and if they're aware of solutions and brands.

- If they're not problem aware, don't lose the opportunity of their time. Ask what problems they are experiencing. Maybe you can help them, but the way they and you are thinking about the problem is not aligned.

- Even if they don't have a problem you can solve, don't stop the interview. Ask more about where they go for information, what their buying process has looked like with other vendors, and anything else that helps you understand how buyers think and buy.

- Ask what products they're familiar with and what they already have in their tech stack. What do they like about them? Why did they buy it? What are its limitations? What do they wish they had?

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F. Any More?

You'll want to move from interviews to campaigns within a few weeks, but a pipeline of interview subjects is a great resource as you refine your messages and develop content.

Record and transcribe all interviews so they can be distributed to colleagues in sales, marketing, and customer success. When everyone understands what your target looks like, they can bring their connections to the table. Talking with customers and prospects is always a good idea, so don't hesitate to welcome more opportunities.

Once you've reviewed the interviews, it's time for the next step.

Pro Tip: How to Get Candid Insights
We recommend using an agency or freelancer for customer interviews. You usually gain richer and more honest insights when customer interviews are conducted by an independent third party rather than directly with you as a vendor.

Pro Tip: Capture and Compare
Put together a standard list of questions in a spreadsheet. You'll be able to capture answers in real time and your interviews will be consistent, making it easier to compare responses later. We recommend asking for permission to record the interviews—most people don't mind—and use an AI notetaker like Otter or Fireflies.

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STEP 2: BUILD CAMPAIGNS

Campaigns before content? Not quite, but creating brand new content takes time that you don't have. To generate leads comfortably within the 90-day time frame, we recommend repurposing existing content.

Remember, we're defining a lead as someone who fits your ICP and has intent. Unless your product-market fit is badly off, your existing content probably does a good enough job of speaking to how your solution addresses a buyer's problems.

What matters most at this stage is using the right language to make it clear that you understand those problems and have ways to help. The aim is to find the people who agree with the problem, connect with them by describing it in terms they recognize, then give them an "Aha!" moment by reading your content.

Use the pain points identified in your interviews to identify just one piece of content (i.e., a webinar, white paper, blog, etc.) that can most easily be repurposed with a headline and some opening messages based on insights from your interviews. You'll need more content as your campaign progresses, but one good piece is sufficient to make a start.

Whatever content you choose, the act of opening or downloading must provide you with some sort of "sales intelligence"—that click or form-fill should be a signal that they are curious about the problem and open to doing something about it.

For example, because you downloaded this eBook, we can assume that you're having difficulties generating leads and need to change this quickly. If we've done a good job of targeting our campaign at decision-makers within our ICP, then we have a solid indication that you are problem aware and ready to act. That means we can have some confidence that if we reach out, you may be willing to talk to us.

A. Repurpose Content

Follow these three steps and you'll be on your way to presenting your content in ways that resonate with leads and give you an intent signal.

1. "There's a big problem out there, and companies try to solve it by doing X." Make your own version of this sentence by developing problem statements that have been verified in your interviews.

2. "But that doesn't work/isn't a complete solution because they will still experience these problems." Challenge a buyer's status quo by pointing out why solutions to their problem (other than yours) have not been sufficient. Again, these insights should be gleaned from your interviews.

3. "Here's how our customers have solved that problem, and you can, too." If you've done a good job with steps 1 and 2, most buyers will want to hear about what you can do differently.

Resist the urge to create new content—in most cases, you should have usable evergreen content that hasn't been marketed well enough in the past. If you really don't have something, you'll have to create it, and that will extend the timeline. If that's your situation, running a webinar that can later be converted into a white paper or eBook is probably the fastest path to creating something relevant and engaging.

Check out this blog post on how to create content based on pain points, gaps, and triggers.

Pro Tip: To Gate or Not to Gate?
When offering content through email, don't gate it (put behind a form). Any modern marketing automation system, such as HubSpot, will know who is interacting. Avoid putting up barriers that will cause buyers to disengage.

When advertising, you will need a landing page to convert anonymous traffic. Demand creation best practice does not advocate landing pages, but since ad clicks don't identify a contact, you'll need a way to determine who is engaging.

Whatever the campaign media, always consider the next step a buyer might take after reading your content. More engagement is a stronger signal of problem awareness and intent. Consider what other content you could link to that strengthens the signal.

Pro Tip: Skip Landing Pages with LinkedIn
If you're advertising on Linkedin, the system can collect email addresses without the need for a landing page. You'll need to host the content on LinkedIn rather than your own website, but this is better than the barrier of a form-fill.

B. Prepare Your Email Campaign

Crafting good email copy is worth the investment of your time (or that of your outsourced creative agency or freelancer). We've seen plenty of well-written eBooks and white papers that never get looked at because the lead gen email promoting the content lacked relevancy and punch.

Think of your email as a movie trailer—what's going to get your audience excited and keen to see the main feature, i.e., the content you're offering? Prospects must feel like you're reading their mind.

- The subject line is the most important. It should compel buyers to open the email and read the first sentence. It needs to capture the problem or niche scenario using language that they would use.
- The email should start with a headline, opening question, or statement that builds on the subject line. The aim is to get them to keep reading after they've opened the email.
- The body of the email should be concise, strive for relevance, and compel the buyer to click through to your content. Use steps 1, 2, and 3 as set out above and you'll have most of what you need.
- End with your call to action—make it obvious that they should click or tap to open the content. That's the action your campaign is striving to make happen, so be sure it's as easy and attractive as possible.

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Make no mistake—this is direct response copywriting. These are specialized skills that are often overlooked—even by content agencies. We take a lot of time and consideration with subject lines and different copy versions to see what pulls them through the text.

Don't worry if your first attempts don't work. We all get it wrong—the key is to keep testing. Email provides a low-cost way of doing that. With our clients, we generally test three different email concepts to see which one gets the most response. We use these insights to refine future email campaigns and to inform our advertising creative.

No one wants email spam—excessive, irrelevant messages that lead to unsubscribes and junk reporting. Modern marketing automation systems make it easy to avoid this. When we send out email one, someone downloads the asset, we put them in a suppression list so they don't get the second email, and so on.

We'll address later what to do if your contact engages, but it's best to assume that opening a single piece of content is not a strong enough signal for you or a BDR to follow up. Unless your contact replies and asks for more information, you should not follow the outmoded "speed to lead" approach, where your company pounces on them within five minutes.

Just because someone downloads an asset does not mean they're interested in taking an appointment or demo—give them the opportunity to absorb your content.

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C. Prepare Your Advertising Campaign

Generating leads within 90 days means that email will likely be your most powerful channel—it's the most direct and personal route to your primary decision-makers. However, there's only so much email you can send in a certain time frame. Too much, too fast and you'll find that contacts unsubscribe.

You ideally want to capture more than one intent signal before you or a BDR start picking up the phone, so this is where digital advertising can help. When you see the same organization engaging with your email and ad campaigns, that's a stronger intent signal. When you see your key decision-maker engaging in this way, it's a solid bet they'll be willing to have a conversation.

The messaging in your ads can and should be based on your email campaigns. That makes it quicker and easier to spin up some messages for search engine ads and some complementary visuals for social media ads.

Take time to understand how to target your ads. For search, you'll need to test what works best from the search terms you asked about in your interviews. Ad copy based on what your ICP searches for will stand the best chance of winning their attention.

Social channels offer a range of targeting options. For B2B marketing, LinkedIn provides the best options for being highly targeted. You can narrow your lens to specific companies, skill sets, role seniority, and geographic location.

Many B2B companies think that their ads should point directly to demos or sales appointments. That can be too aggressive and can prevent buyers from clicking and tapping—it's better to capture two or more intent signals, research the organization and contact more thoroughly, and plan a conversation rather than a sales pitch.

Be prepared to experiment with a range of ad messages and visuals. It's easy to run multiple versions of similar ads alongside each other, then focus budget on whichever performs best. This data can help you to refine the messaging for future campaigns—both advertising and email.

Pro Tip: Don't Over-Target

LinkedIn offers the most options for targeting your ICP, but be careful how tightly you draw the line. We avoid using job titles as a targeting criteria because titles can vary and may not fully represent the responsibilities held by your decision-makers and influencers. A more flexible option is to select relevant skills and seniority. In combination, these criteria do a solid yet flexible job of getting your ads in front of the right people.

Pro Tip: "Surround-Sound" Lead Gen

Most business buying decisions involve more than one person. For example, if you're selling marketing automation software, your key decision-maker might be the head of marketing, but you might also need to win support from the heads of sales & finance.

Each role should receive tailored messaging—the concerns of marketing and finance are likely to be different. But you don't necessarily need to have full, multiphase email and ad campaigns for every target role. Focus your effort and budget on the key decision-maker, then think of supporting campaigns for others.

The aim should be to get all the roles that matter hearing about you around the same time, but with messages that resonate for them. That will give your lead gen program a "surround-sound" effect and enables you to capture multiple intent signals.

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D. Building and Maintaining Your List

It's surprising how many companies don't constantly build and improve the quality of their contact database. This is a major source of your leads; it's the most important asset you have.

That's not to say that most firms don't have a database—they do. The overarching question you need to ask is if it's of good enough quality and depth to deliver the results you need. Consider the following points:

- How up to date are your contacts? Databases turn over at a rate of 25% per year, so this process never stops.

- How well-aligned are the organizations with your ICP? Make sure that includes all the target organizations that fit your profile for industry vertical, size, revenue, location, technographics, and more. If you have gaps, you can purchase data from ZoomInfo, SalesIntel, or build manually using LinkedIn Sales Navigator.

- How well-aligned are the contacts? Make sure you have the key decision-makers and influencers.

- Cut out what isn't in your ICP. It might be tempting to go wide, but you'll end up being less relevant and falling foul of spam filters. Remove organizations and contacts that don't align with your ICP. You don't need to delete them; just move them to a separate list.

- Have you got engagement data? It's incredibly helpful to know if you've been in touch with contacts in the past and, if so, whether they responded to your content (or not). Ideally, you should be adding appropriate contacts on a regular basis through research and keeping the database clean.

- For social sellers, build connections on LinkedIn on a regular basis by connecting with target personas, commenting, and liking their posts, and asking them questions—do not pitch.

- We've got a "cold email playbook" for marketers who find themselves starting at square one, and you'll preserve your sender score, too. Contact Jason Myers to learn more.

E. Give Sales a Playbook

"Speed to lead" was state of the art in 2015 (following up with all leads within five minutes). Today, it's considered aggressive and can be counterproductive, unless the contact has directly asked for more information.

- Most of the leads you generate will not be instantly ready for a conversation.

- You need to provide salespeople with the thinking behind your campaigns and content, so they can prepare to have relevant, productive conversations about buyers' expressed problems and niche situations. Include the pain points, gaps, and triggers that you found in your research so they can probe for it.

- Provide sales with email template responses, call and voicemail scripts, and links to more content on the subject that can be sent to the prospect to further their journey.

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STEP 3: MEASURE AND EXPAND

Well done—if you've implemented this far, your lead gen program is up and running. Now you need to assess the effectiveness of your messages and campaigns.

A. What to Measure

- **Open rates** – because email programs track opens based on pictures in email preview panes, open rates are an indication but nothing to brag about. If you're getting open rates above 20% on a cold list, that's pretty good.

- **Click-through rates** – This is the next level of measurement but you should be careful here, too. It could count as a click if they unsubscribe. And some recipients' email systems send back an indicator of a click on everything we send, and we know they're not.

- **Asset downloads** – This is the most valuable number in our lead generation process. If they meet our basic definition of ICP, and your asset provides sales intelligence (predicts problems in their status quo), this is a good lead that can be passed to sales for follow-up, nurturing and opening the door to sales conversations. Many use this as the definition of marketing qualified lead (MQL) as it meets the threshold for passing to sales, and sales can't come back and say the leads stink if you've agreed to this definition in advance.

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B. Generating Genuine SQLs

Your sales colleagues will prioritize leads that have a declared interest and are in a buying cycle. These are sales qualified leads, or SQLs. To create an SQL, you need to capture intent signals from your target contact—ideally more than one—then follow up with an offer of a conversation.

When we say conversation, that's exactly what we mean—your next move (or that of your BDRs) is about understanding the prospect, learning more about their problem, and helping them to understand how you can help. Don't think of this as a sales call —that will come later.

If your contact is willing to talk, and you/your BDR has qualified their needs in detail, leave them with the offer of a demo or sales call. If they accept, this is a very high-quality SQL that any salesperson will be delighted to receive.

C. Track Your Progress and Success

- What ratio of contacts showing intent accepted your invitation for a conversation?
- How many intent signals did you have, and do more of them produce a better conversation rate? If so, expand your campaigns to capture more signals.
- What ratio of conversations accepted a demo or sales call?Find out the reasons why prospects decline as well as accept?
- What ratio of demos or sales calls leads to a deal? Find out what objections or blockers are harming conversions.

D. Rinse and Repeat with Different ICPs

If you can identify buyers who are entering a buying window or close to it, you'll maximize your demand capture process so you can move on to bigger picture marketing initiatives.

And because you've already talked to customers and have developed a good understanding of what triggers them to act, you can then build more educational content for the 97% who are not currently in a buying window.

This allows you to start initiatives like podcasts, where you can invite your best-fit prospects to an interview, find out what motivates them, develop relationships, and discover sales intelligence.

You can also use that to drive your overall content strategy based on what's important to them and not problem assumptions on your end.

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ALG helps SaaS accelerate revenue through quality lead generation campaigns. We design and implement comprehensive marketing programs, including go-to-market strategy and demand generation (thought leadership), but we understand that marketing leaders often need to show results fast.

If you need to generate leads before now or sooner, book a meeting with Jason Myers to learn more about how we can help.

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