

A Deep Dive Into the Dark Funnel

Learn about the wealth of anonymized buyer intent data that wasn't visible to revenue teams ... *until now.*



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Introduction

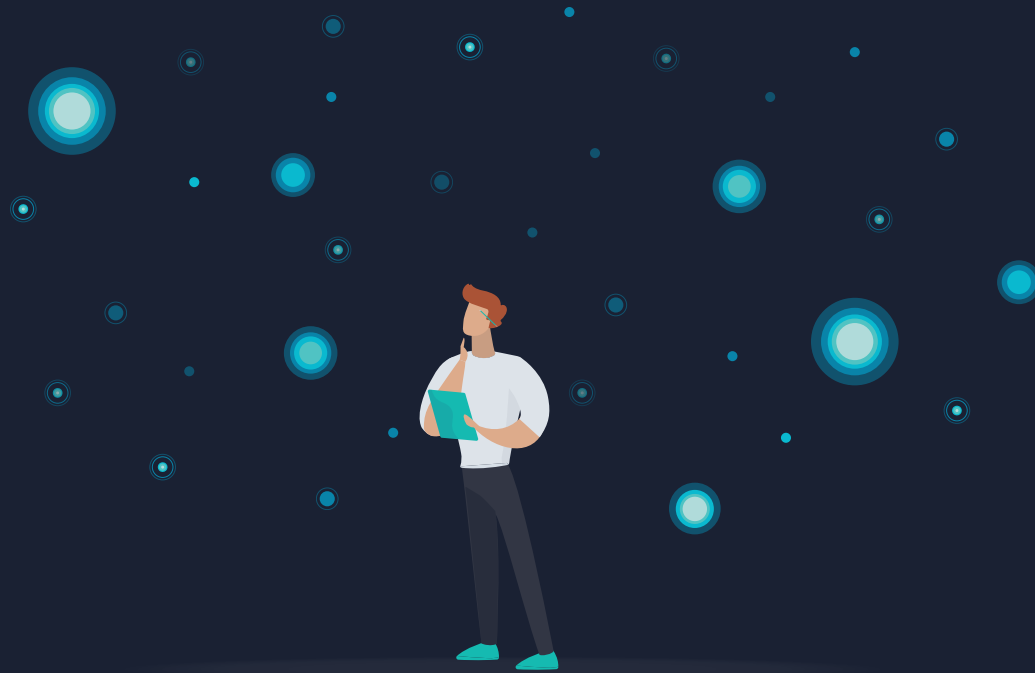
About 85% of all the stuff *within the entire universe*—we’re talking everything from planets, galaxies and even outer space itself—is made up of something that we can’t see and experts aren’t even close to understanding yet. It’s everywhere, floating around you, even floating *through* you.

It’s called dark matter, and it plays such an important role in our existence, some astronomers say it’s “the glue that holds galaxies together.”

Account-based revenue teams experience **a similarly spooky, invisible and super-influential force** every day, too. And like dark matter, this force often defies understanding, baffles even the saltiest professionals, and when ignored—and it often is—can threaten a deal faster than you can say, “*Houston, we have a problem.*”

We call it the Dark Funnel™. It’s a ghostly data-realm packed with buyer intent information that revenue teams historically haven’t been able to access. And this invisible data is *great* data, the kind that rapidly moves accounts through the sales funnel. It often includes invaluable intel from digital sources such as:

- Industry publications
- Blogs
- Social networks
- Influencer outlets
- Product review sites like G2 and TrustRadius
- And more



These signals, transmitted from B2B buyers who conduct research across thousands of websites and digital resources, are brimming with incredibly useful and actionable intent data. We know this vital information exists... but because we can't see it, we don't fully understand its significance.

This ignorance represents a missed opportunity. That's because the Dark Funnel isn't really the villain in this story. It's an untapped source of hidden and powerful knowledge. **It's game-changing uncharted territory** and it's worth exploring.

And much like assembling a multi-part pirate map that leads to buried treasure, the true power of the Dark Funnel lies in combining those countless, disparate intent signals spread across the internet

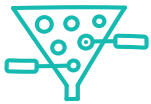
into a cohesive picture. This picture can empower your revenue team to navigate prospects through the sales funnel with absolute confidence.

Thankfully, world-class revenue technology platforms now exist that can illuminate the Dark Funnel and reveal this data. This never-before-seen sales intelligence can generate high-impact, actionable answers to questions like these (and many more):

- How many companies are in-market for what we offer?
- Where should you focus your marketing spend?
- Where should your sales and sales development teams invest their energies?

Why You Should Read This Ebook

Rather than focusing this ebook on platforms and service providers that excel at “lighting up” the Dark Funnel, we believe it’s critical for account-based revenue teams to:



**Meaningfully understand
the Dark Funnel**



**Achieve fluency in the
kinds of intent data that
reside within it**



**Understand the *external*
and *internal* sources of
Dark Funnel data**



**See examples of how Dark
Funnel data affects
outreach and deal health**

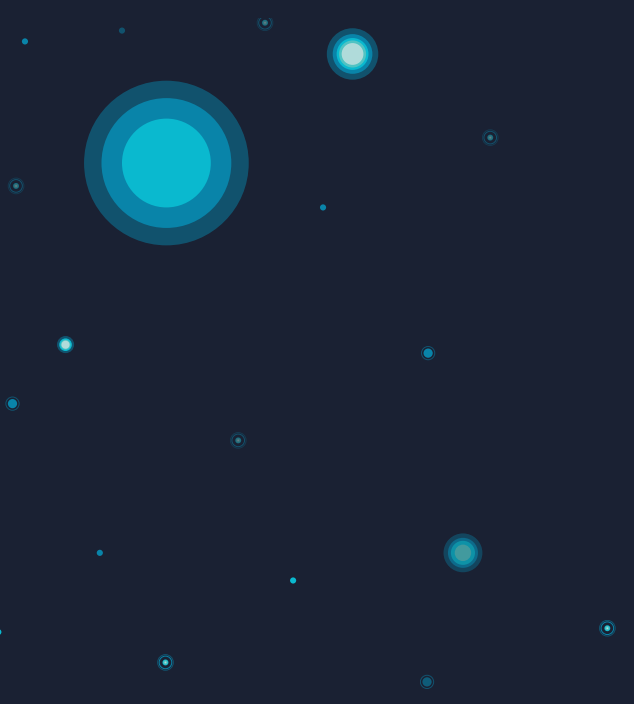
We feel uniquely qualified to provide this information. For nearly a decade, 6sense has helped over 600 companies—from startups to world-spanning corporations—understand the value of Dark Funnel data, and pull that data “into the light” where it’s leveraged by revenue teams to help solve their customers’ business problems.

Consider this document a soup-to-nuts exploration of the Dark Funnel, and how understanding—and illuminating—its contents can significantly boost new logo sales and customer satisfaction.



Anonymous Buyers and the Dark Funnel

We've all long known that buyers conduct most of their research online (nearly 70%, according to Forrester), and they do so anonymously, far from the curious eyes of B2B solution providers and their sales reps. They also conduct research so thoroughly that many already come to some kind of buying decision *before they ever explicitly engage with a company*.



Since buyers visit dozens—or even hundreds—of online resources far from where you can effectively track them, you're *never quite sure* in which stage a buyer might be in the buying process, or how that might align with your sales funnel. They might have just filled out a form on your website for the first time, but do you *really know* where they've been or what they know already?

This is the mysterious Dark Funnel at work. Unless you are able to unlock its hidden treasures, you run the risk of missing deals you could have won, or coming in so late to deals that your sellers can't effectively compete. You can even alienate buyers.

That's the bad news. The good news is that buyers—whether they know it or not—leave a kind of “breadcrumb trail” across the internet as they conduct their research. It's a record of what they're researching, when, and even on which websites.

How Misaligned Outreach Can Threaten Deals

Can a BDR or rep ruin a deal **on their very first interaction** with a prospect? Yep. And the Dark Funnel is largely to blame.

Let's say a buyer fills out a form on your site. Your marketing team assumes this is the *first engagement* that the buyer's company has made with your organization, and that the contact is in an early stage of the buyer's journey.

Your marketers and reps then "follow the process" and pepper the prospect with lots of early-stage interactions and educational content.

But this isn't the smooth move we've been led to think it is. Why? This prospect has

probably been anonymously researching their business problem—and even your specific solution—for *months*. They've probably read the same early-stage information your team is now breathlessly providing.

That's not a good look. Your team is bombarding the contact with noise, not high-value *information*. Buyers can be so put-off by this rookie move that they'll kick any future correspondence right into the spam folder.

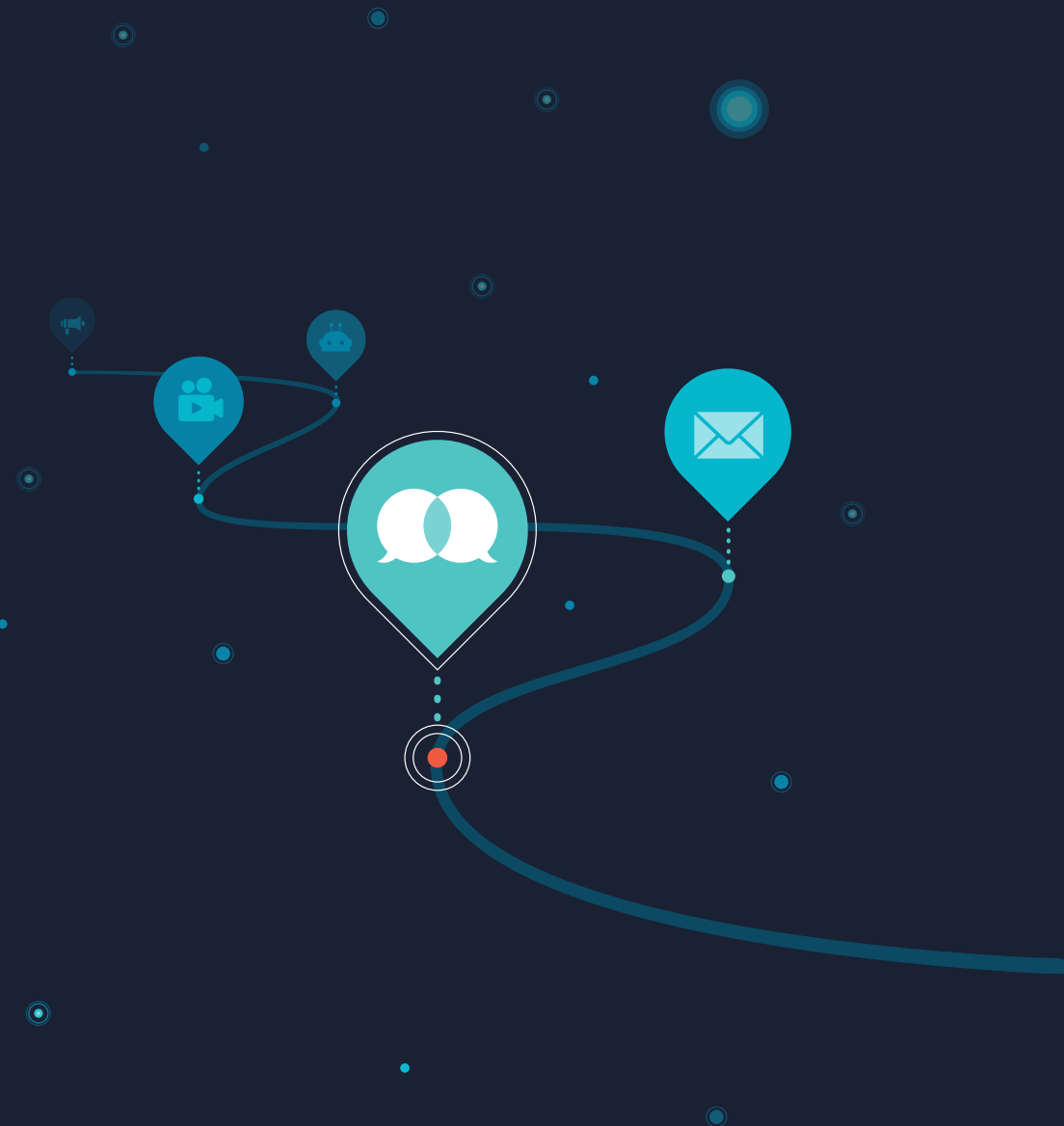


This digital breadcrumb trail is typically anonymous, living its best life in your Dark Funnel. But the right revenue technology platforms and data-science solutions—using privacy-compliant methods via partnerships with governmental organizations, third-party data collectors, regulatory agencies, financial reporting agencies and more—can accurately connect those signals back to the companies conducting that research.

These solutions can tell you:

- The duration of an organization's buyer journey
- The size of the buying team
- The sources where those team members get their information
- The financial situation their company might be in, which informs their ability or need to purchase new solutions
- The technological condition they're in, which informs if their tech stack is compatible with your solution
- And much more

Armed with that kind of information, those anonymous companies can quickly become engaged opportunities within your CRM.





What Signals Do Buyers Create As They Conduct Research?

It's hard for most folks to get their heads around just how much intent data buyers generate as they conduct online research.

Why? For starters, *it's rarely just one person conducting all that research.* As the internet has grown, so have buying teams. According to Gartner, most buying teams have about 10 stakeholders to satisfy during a typical buying journey.

However, Forrester says, some teams can have *more than 20 members* on their buying teams ... and they're all hunting-and-pecking their way through Google to find solutions for their organizational challenges.

Equally significant, these buyers are often generating at least a dozen digital interactions on each digital resource. When this Dark Funnel data is illuminated, its rich record of buyer behavior can provide clear insights on buyer interests and intentions.



Behavior Signals, Explained

At a high level, *behavioral signals* can reveal what topics buyers are researching and what solutions they might be considering.

Behavioral signals typically have three dimensions.

These determine the usefulness of a buyer signal and what it can be used for:

What Buyer Signals ‘Live’ Within the Dark Funnel?

As we’ve noted, the Dark Funnel includes highly relevant buyer research activity and intent signals generated mostly on third-party websites. But the Dark Funnel extends to buyer signals that **lie in plain sight** within your existing marketing automation tools and other solutions, too. (You’ll learn more about this *internal Dark Funnel data* in a few pages.)

There are three main categories of buyer signals that “live” inside the Dark Funnel:

- Behavioral signals
- Buyer readiness signals
- Buyer psychographic signals

Let’s unpack these categories, starting with behavioral signals.

- The buyer’s (or account’s) fit with your solution
- The solutions or solution categories that the buyer is interested in
- The source of the behavioral signals (what resources did the people or accounts interact with)

Buyer Behavioral Signals

Dimension #1: Person and Account Fit

Ultimately, all behaviors of interest begin with individuals. When a buyer's identity is known, job title and level within the organization can be extremely valuable in assessing the importance of the behavior. And, when individuals identify which organizations they represent, that too is hugely valuable in assessing the importance of their behavior.

However, in many cases, the *precise identity* of the individuals researching solutions isn't known.

But even when the individual is anonymous, their behavioral signals can still be extremely valuable if the behaviors can be **associated with a relevant buyer account**.



Dimension #2: Buyer Interest In a Solution (or Solution Category)

Some revenue technology platforms can identify the actual solutions that a buyer might be researching. This intelligence can be helpful, especially if the buyer is investigating a competitor or an influencer.

But this lone datapoint might not be good enough to activate the kind of marketing and sales motions that move an account through the sales funnel. Instead, it's usually necessary to know precisely what solutions buyers are demonstrating interest in.

Here, revenue technology platforms **that use artificial intelligence** become truly invaluable in illuminating and organizing Dark Funnel data. They can process the content from *hundreds of thousands* of digital properties across the internet and catalog the relevant topics or keywords contained in each.

By identifying which organizations are researching which solutions, intent signals in the Dark Funnel allow you to focus your marketing and sales actions where they are most likely to be effective.

Dimension #3: Source of Behavioral Signals

Buyer-behavior signals in the Dark Funnel are largely collected and organized by specialized providers, which use data science to acquire and aggregate data from a wide variety of primary sources, including:

- Industry solution providers
- Publications
- Blogs
- Social networks
- And more

Not all sources carry an equal weight in relevance, and can vary in which part of a buyer's journey they serve best.

For example, both syndicated content publishers and product review sites provide behavioral signals from identifiable individuals expressing interest in a category of solution. But consumers of white papers on syndicated content sites may be deemed to be earlier in their buying journeys than those who are comparing vendors on product review sites.

Buyer Readiness Signals, Explained

We've covered key aspects of the digital "breadcrumb trail" that buyers leave across the internet as they conduct research. But there's another type of signal that buying organizations emit in the Dark Funnel, and these clues reveal which organizations are truly ready to acquire and use the kinds of solutions you offer.

These signals are generally easy to capture from your existing customers (since they should be regularly communicating with your customer success team), but **most prospects' readiness signals lurk within the Dark Funnel**, far from your detection.

There are three main types of buyer readiness signals:

- Technographics
- Organizational performance
- Market forces

Let's take a closer look at each.

Type #1: Technographics

One of the best ways to identify near-term prospects is to uncover their organization's *technographics*—the technologies or technical infrastructures used to achieve their business goals.

This critical information can reveal if a buyer's company uses solutions that compete with yours, and whether those partnerships are new acquisitions or near the end of their contracts.

Technographics can also reveal if a company's tech stack is technically compatible with your solution, which is often a critical sales qualifier.

Type #2: Organizational Performance

A prospect organization must also have the right set of resources or business conditions that enable—or even *require*—them to make purchases. Even organizations that are otherwise great fits may not be good prospects now if their performance doesn't afford them the budget and resources to make the acquisition.

Key factors that strongly influence these time-sensitive purchasing decisions include:

- Is the company profitable or not?
- Is the company growing?
- Has the company recently received investment funding?
- Is the company gaining or losing market share?
- Is it hiring employees or laying them off?

Type #3: Market Forces

Market forces refers to external events that might impact a company's need and ability to make a purchase.

For instance, these signals might include regulatory changes, economic downturns or even the entry of new competitors in a market.

Here are some examples of how market forces impact buyer behavior:

- New regulations might require construction companies to make investments in health and safety equipment
- Changes in tax laws may accelerate the adoption of new financial reporting solutions for industry-specific businesses
- Governmental infrastructure spending could signal the need for machine manufacturers to purchase new equipment

Buyer Psychographic Signals

The third category of data available to support effective buyer enablement is called *psychographics*, which are used to classify companies and business contacts based on their attitudes and interests. This category, long studied in the B2C space, is now becoming increasingly important and impactful in B2B sales.

These signals are very useful in helping shape interactions between prospects and revenue teams, and can help sales teams more effectively engage prospects with more personalized—and personal—outreach.

Likewise, having insight into the communication style and engagement preferences of individuals (such as: *Are they active in social media conversations? Do they participate actively in business interest groups?*) can help sales teams formulate effective outreach.

How can psychographic signals positively impact your outreach efforts?

- Psychographic signals at the account level can accurately capture whether an organization supports charitable causes and community organization
- Or they might reveal associations with civic organizations or local sporting franchises
- They could reflect new organizational-level thinking or priorities resulting from market forces, too



The Dark-Funnel Data Hiding Within Your Own Systems

By now, it's clear that most intent data within the Dark Funnel hails from publicly available third-party digital sources. We call this *external Dark Funnel data*.

However, some Dark Funnel data hides in plain sight within your own website traffic and even your marketing automation platforms. **We call this *internal Dark Funnel data*.** Here's more information on what that data might be, and how your revenue team might access it.



Your Anonymous Website Traffic

Since anonymous website traffic has historically been challenging to de-anonymize, most revenue teams ignore it. This is why revenue teams rely so heavily on website forms to generate MQLs.

In fact, we lean on them so much, many pros have convinced themselves that mostly (or only) serious prospects fill out forms.

But that's not always true—and in fact, might be nowhere as common as we've been led to believe. (More on this in a few paragraphs.)

Depending exclusively on form fills is a missed opportunity. B2B website form-fill conversion rates represent only 2% to 5% of all website visits. But we know that there are far more legitimately interested buyers surfing your site than that anemic number.

When you think about who might come to your B2B website, it stands to reason that it would be relatively rare for visitors to reach your site accidentally. And while some visitors may be competitors, or folks who just have a professional interest, many buying team members will also be lurking in that anonymous traffic.

When you're able to trace most—or even just some—of that 95% of anonymous traffic back to its appropriate companies and buying teams, you can dramatically increase your understanding of which accounts represent near-term revenue opportunities.



Additional Buyer Readiness Signals

There are other signals that are probably “Dark Funnelling” in your CRM or MAP that can indicate buying readiness for both prospects and existing customers:

Re-examine Closed/Lost Data

For example, when deals are closed as lost, revenue teams can usually determine:

- Which company won the deal
- The broad terms of why the deal that was lost, and
- The timing for when that lost deal will be up for renewal with the winner

This information can be used to tailor future marketing and sales efforts to displace the current provider.

Analyzing customer data is also vital for upselling and preventing churn.



Take a Closer Look at Current Customer Data

There are substantially more signals available for your existing customers than non-customers. Here are just a few of the sources of data that may be available outside of traditional customer-facing marketing and sales systems:

- How customers use existing products and services
- Fluctuations in usage over time
- Changes in personnel using existing solutions

- The number of interactions with customer success and other internal personnel
- And more

Whether individually or in combination, these signals can reveal when the time's right to approach existing customers about renewals, cross-sell and upsell opportunities.

Additional Practices That Send Contacts Into Your Dark Funnel



Buying Group Blindness

Generally, only 25% of form-fills become a MQL. **Neglecting the other 75% can be a big mistake.** That's because more than one buyer from their organization is visiting your site at any given time. (Remember, B2B many buying teams are composed of 10+ members.)

By focusing your engagement efforts on that one buying-team member and ignoring the possibility of others visiting your site, you're not fully understanding the level of a company's interest, or the scope of its business problems.

Forrester Research calls this phenomenon *buying group blindness*.

Do You Suffer from Buying Group Blindness?

Conduct this experiment to see if your revenue team is unknowingly suffering from buying group blindness:

1. Examine your form-fill records for a particular period of time, such as a business quarter.
2. From those leads, examine domain and company names to identify their accounts.
3. Compute the ratio of leads to accounts.

4. Organizations rarely find 1:1 lead-to-account ratios, and frequently find ratios closer to 1:5 to 2:1.
5. But even when the ratio is 2:1—meaning that on average, you're receiving two leads per account that show up in your lead data—the distribution of leads will not be even.

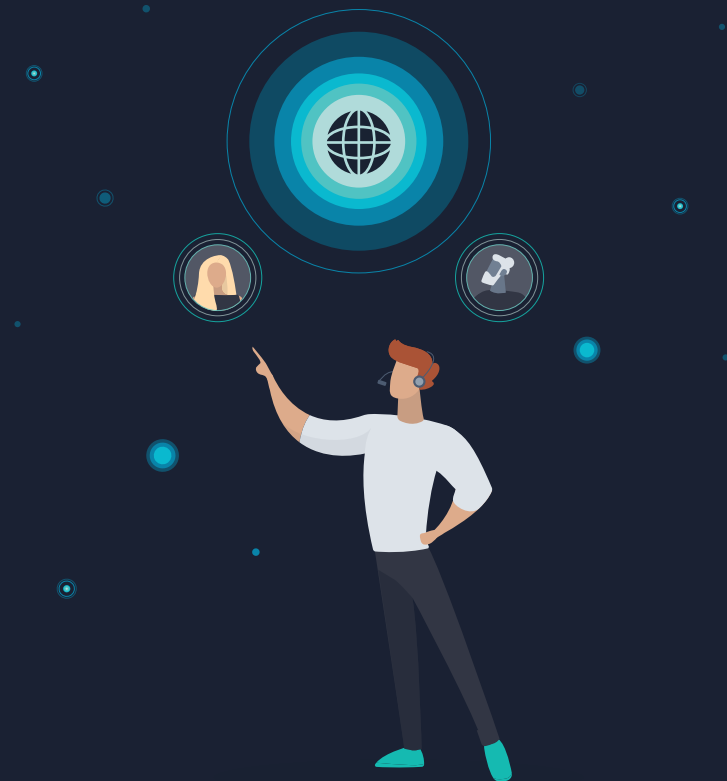
It will still be the case that the majority of leads are solos: there are no companion leads associated with it during that period. **But in some cases, potential buyers will be represented by numerous leads.**

Second Lead Syndrome

Second lead syndrome is a term Forrester uses to describe the circumstances in which a second MQL (or more) from a prospect's company is marked as bad or duplicate leads by BDRs.

This is another internal misstep that can dump great leads into your Dark Funnel, never to be seen again.

Leads that are related to the same solution **should be bundled together** for the sales and sales development teams. Ideally, the presence of multiple members of the buying team would prioritize that opportunity above opportunities exhibiting few buying signals.



An Example of Second Lead Syndrome

Here's how an internal sales process can toss actionable account data straight into the Dark Funnel:

- An employee at Acme Co. visits your website, consumes content and converts into an MQL
- The Acme Co. MQL is passed to the BDR team
- A BDR qualifies the prospect and passes the prospect on to sales
- The following week, *another buying-team member* from Acme Co. also qualifies as an MQL
- The BDR receives this second MQL, but notes that the first lead from Acme Co. was already qualified
- The BDR *marks this new MQL as a duplicate*
- The second MQL is discarded
- This means sales isn't notified that another member of Acme Co.'s buying team is displaying additional interest ... which compromises the team's understanding of the deal and its buyers.



Getting Real: Dark Funnel Use Cases & Examples

In the final section of this document, we'll explore some real-life use cases in which the Dark Funnel often meaningfully impedes the sales process—and how illuminating its hidden data generates positive outcomes for both buyers and sellers.

Preventing Uncontested Losses

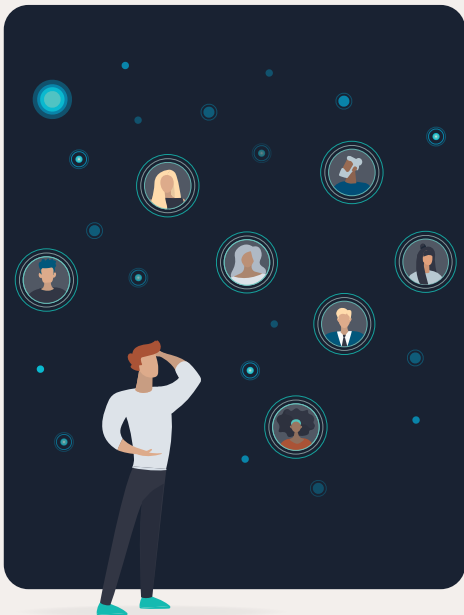
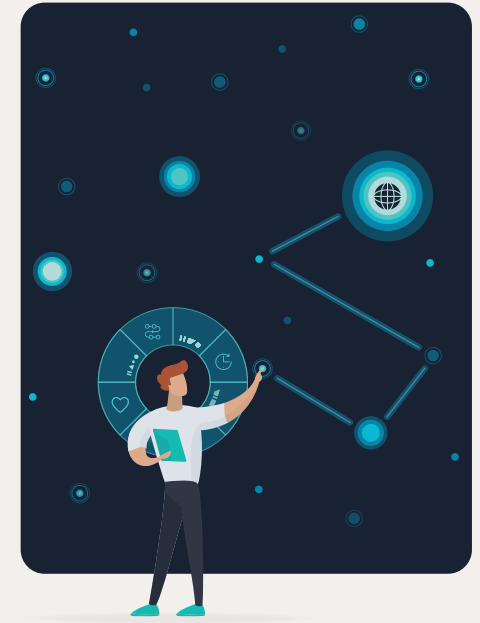
We'd all love to be the 500-pound gorilla in our respective industries, so that every prospect could immediately find us as they started their buying journeys. Most of us aren't so fortunate. Sometimes we discover that our competitors won deals with prospects we didn't even know about.

So as a B2B solutions provider, how do you ensure:

- That potential buyers always find you among the vast web of information they navigate as they progress through their journeys?
- That you don't miss potential opportunities?
- That you're involved in buying cycles early enough to be competitive?

The best possible way to cover these concerns is to know about buyer interest as soon as possible.

This requires using solutions **that effectively give you x-ray vision into the Dark Funnel**, highlighting all the relevant buyer signals that insure that your selling teams have a chance to compete for every deal—and engage buyers at the right time.

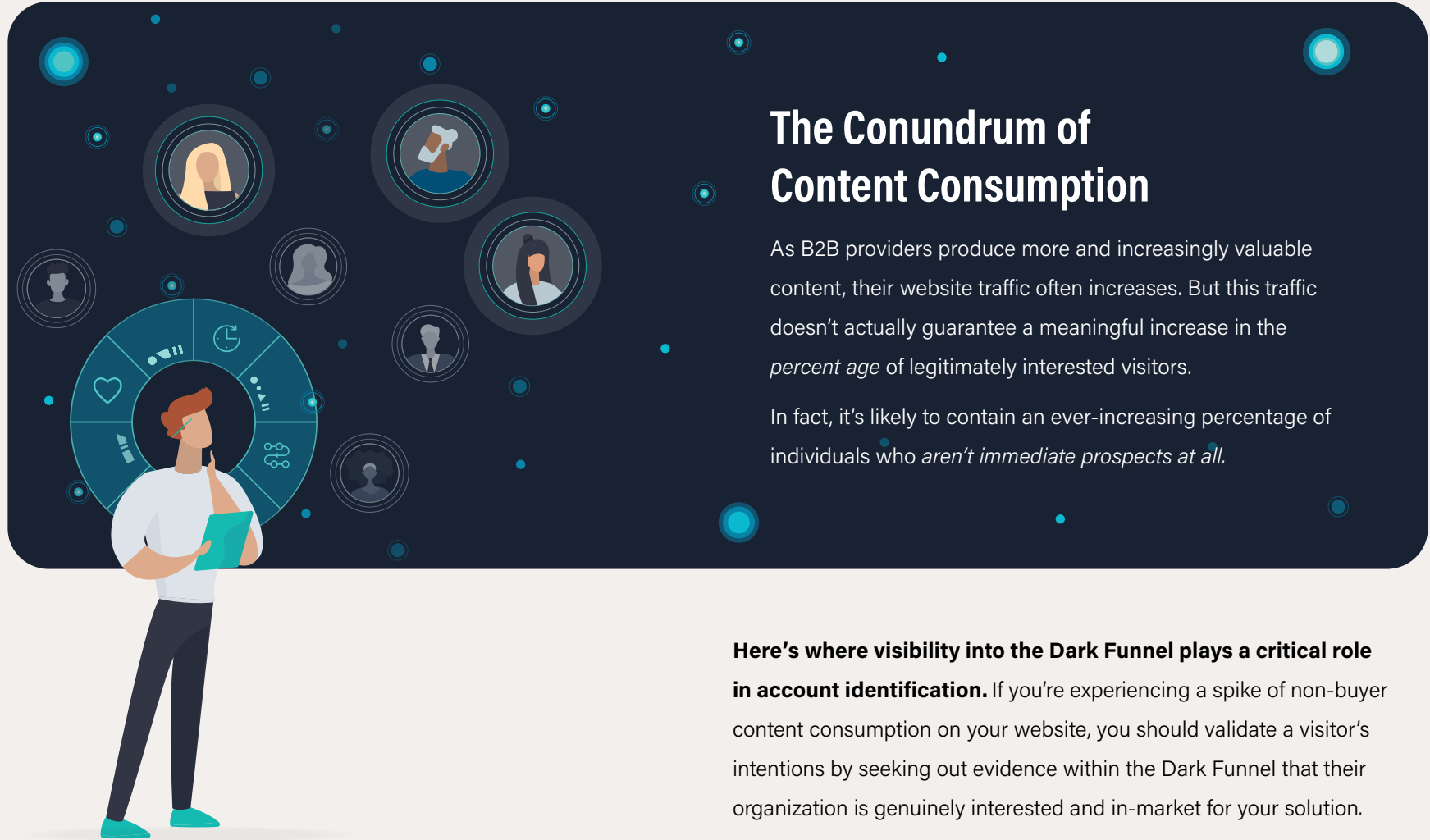


Validating Visible Buying Journeys

While most B2B brands are more concerned with missing deals than being drowned in leads, the most famous brands in a market may find themselves awash in leads with no clear way to differentiate real buyers from the casually curious.

Revenue teams have long used metrics such as the *volume of content consumed* as a proxy for whether a website visitor is a near-term prospect. **This can be a misguided strategy.** Users bebop across B2B websites for all kinds of reasons—and none of them may in fact be directly related to their company's immediate business needs.

In fact, there's *no real evidence* that any one website visitor's content consumption is related to their purchase intentions.



The Conundrum of Content Consumption

As B2B providers produce more and increasingly valuable content, their website traffic often increases. But this traffic doesn't actually guarantee a meaningful increase in the *percent age* of legitimately interested visitors.

In fact, it's likely to contain an ever-increasing percentage of individuals who *aren't immediate prospects at all*.

Here's where visibility into the Dark Funnel plays a critical role in account identification. If you're experiencing a spike of non-buyer content consumption on your website, you should validate a visitor's intentions by seeking out evidence within the Dark Funnel that their organization is genuinely interested and in-market for your solution.

Your investigation may reveal that there's an entire buying team, not just a lone individual, demonstrating interest. That's the one you need to prioritize!

Enabling Personalized Marketing and Sales Motions

Today's B2B buyers expect their purchasing experiences to match the context-rich, personalized, high-value experiences they have in the consumer space.

But contextualizing and personalizing content for B2B buying teams is really hard, especially since buyers are reluctant to share the kind of personal information that would enable such white-glove experiences.

Again, here's where the hidden info lurking inside the Dark Funnel can provide a wealth of information to effectively engage buyers. These details—especially those hailing from the *buyer readiness* and *psychographic* signal categories—can help personalize messaging and content to increase the likelihood that digital ads, emails and phone calls will be positively received.

The Impact of Personalized Outreach

Here's a real-world example of how illuminated Dark Funnel data informs the creation of an impactful customer acquisition campaign:

- Market intelligence and technographic data from the *buyer readiness* category can alert your revenue team that a competitor is being acquired
- With that data, you can produce a list of competitive-install prospects that might be affected
- This can trigger a competitive take-out campaign that points out the risks of remaining with the recently-acquired company



Dark Funnel Examples

We've covered a lot of ground in this document. We talked about how there's a Dark Funnel "out there" but also one within your own revenue team data and process. (*External* versus *internal* Dark Funnel data.) We've also detailed the different categories of data hidden in the Dark Funnel, from behavioral data and psychographic data to company readiness signals.

These tables offer a quick reference to see the kinds of data that exist in each part of the Dark Funnel and within each category:

	Behavior	Readiness	Psychographics
External Dark Funnel Data	Relevant third-party publisher content consumption Researching competitors Visits to product review websites	Technographic insights Market intelligence signals such as growth, funding, events, expansions, and other changes	Account psychographics, such as sponsorships and organizational priorities People psychographics, such as personal attitudes and interests
Internal Dark Funnel Data	Anonymous website traffic Pre-MQL leads	Product usage data Sales conversation content	Net Promoter Scores Account health scores

Dark Funnel Use Cases

And here's another table that offers sample use cases for each combination of Dark Funnel source and category of data:

	Behavior	Readiness	Psychographics
Use Cases for <i>External Dark Funnel Data</i>	Uncover early-stage buyer journeys Identify customer churn risk	Identify prospects with an acute need Identify competitive take-out opportunities	Aligning campaigns or sales outreach to key organizational priorities Charitable donations supported by prospect account as incentive to take a meeting
Use Cases for <i>Internal Dark Funnel Data</i>	Prioritize leads with anonymous web traffic data Identify pre-MQL buying team members	Identify future prospecting triggers from Closed/Lost data Identify upsell opportunities from customer-success call attendees	Customer success rep notes provide context for executive outreach



Conclusion

As we mentioned at the beginning of this journey, the Dark Funnel holds a treasure trove of information. It can tell us which prospects are in-market, which should be, and what their organizations need.

But because the vast majority of buyer research happens in the Dark Funnel, it's nearly impossible to effectively compete for all the potential deals that are happening. The path is clear: You need to illuminate your Dark Funnel.

This might sound daunting, but the good news is that the technologies and processes you need are well within reach. We hope you'll join us in lighting up the Dark Funnel to unlock next-level performance for your organization.



About the Author

Kerry Cunningham has more than 25 years of experience in B2B demand generation and management, spanning a broad array of industries and markets.

He is a thought leader in the design and implementation of demand marketing processes, technologies and teams for a wide array of B2B products, solutions and services.

Kerry authored and co-authored a wide range of key models and frameworks for SiriusDecisions and Forrester, and has spoken at dozens of industry events.

Kerry continues to drive the buying groups revolution in B2B, helping organizations transform from outmoded, ineffective lead-based practices to modern, buying team and opportunity-centric processes to unlock next-level performance.

About 6sense

The 6sense Account Engagement Platform helps B2B organizations achieve predictable revenue growth by putting the power of AI, big data, and machine learning behind every member of the revenue team.

6sense uncovers anonymous buying behavior, prioritizes accounts for sales and marketing, and enables them to engage resistant buying teams with personalized, multi-channel, multi-touch campaigns.

We help revenue teams know everything they need to know about their buyers so they can easily do anything needed to generate more opportunities, increase deal size, get into opportunities sooner, and compete and win more often.