

How to Move from Opt-Out to Community Relevance: 31 Keys to Success in the SAP Ecosystem

We're in a different marketing era, and those who don't get that are struggling to keep up. The SAP ecosystem is no different. The "New Rules of Marketing" mean that customers are empowered to research and evaluate companies on their own. They are resistant, sometimes even downright hostile, to receiving unsolicited promotional content. Even the trusty email inbox has become treacherous ground for the marketer as prospects weed out non-essential queries, and priority filters limit all but white-listed content. If the prospect doesn't invite you in, you're not sticking around.

The guidelines in this document have been used by my clients to create a better "content marketing" approach. Content marketing is at the heart of a broader strategy called "inbound marketing" that engages prospects on social channels while also attracting search traffic via compelling content. In turn, these new visitors are measured and qualified into the pre-existing sales funnel. At the heart of this approach is the goal of becoming relevant to the SAP community by making a difference in people's lives. That may sound ridiculously subtle by marketing standards, but in the new rules of marketing, good content takes center stage and lead generation becomes a byproduct of building trust.

On the upside, there is tremendous opportunity in content marketing. Very few vendors in the SAP ecosystem utilize all the best approaches in a coherent overall strategy. Too many still overpay social media and SEO (Search Engine Optimization) "gurus" instead of seizing the opportunities to create truly awesome content and get involved in community projects. The good news is that you don't need SEO gurus anymore - many of these content methods can be bootstrapped when money is tight. On the flip side, a serious time commitment, and an overhaul of stale marketing culture is required to take advantage of these new approaches.

Following are 31 guiding questions and best practices, all of which were compiled while helping the most successful third party SAP firms execute. Some of them were refined in collaboration with these firms via good old trial and error. Not all of them should be used – you want to play to your strengths. However, I recommend a three year roadmap that incorporates all of the tactics – even if there is a conscious decision to postpone some until a later point. These 31 points are in rough order of priority.

1. Sales comes first: before expanding into content marketing, make sure existing leads and prospects are not being lost due to inefficiencies. Content marketing strategies take time.

- Does your sales team have adequate input into your marketing strategy?
- Are you using marketing automation and demographic analysis tools to make sure that you give your best salespeople only the most pre-qualified leads rather than wasting their time “fishing”?
- Has your sales director provided the marketing team with a profile of your ideal customer?
- Is there a transparent way for the sales and marketing team to share and collaborate on lead information, perhaps via an online portal?
- Have you formed the right partnerships with complementary firms who can cross-sell your products or refer leads, jumpstarting sales while content marketing and search-based lead generation approaches take hold?

2. Does your sales team have the pre-sales content they need to nurture prospects into sales?

Once prospects are in the sales funnel and interested in kicking tires, the whole mentality behind content changes. Inside the sales funnel, prospects expect content that will help them evaluate a product and make a purchasing decision. Product demos and case studies are particularly powerful in this regard.

3. Existing customers also come first.

Serving existing customers is also a top priority before moving into broader community engagements. Are there glaring needs in customer support that would aid in retention and cross-selling opportunities? Examples: Creating help videos for tricky software areas, conducting satisfaction surveys and (very important) implementing the feedback, creating a public ideation site that solicits product improvement ideas, or even creating virtual customer events and live help sessions via Google Hangouts. What is the ultimate accomplishment in this area? An actual on-the-ground user conference. Facilitating peer-to-peer interaction between customers is a cutting edge tactic in the new marketing, which means: *step out of the way and let customers learn from each other.*

Final tip for the first three points: have a sales and customer nurturance strategy document that outlines the steps towards a full fledged user conference.

4. Craft a three year strategy that centers on content marketing but also considers classic marketing tactics such as pay-per-click, trade show booths, and event participation and sponsorship.

An inbound marketing strategy in the SAP ecosystem should have two guiding themes: ***thought leadership and community involvement, NOT branding products and pushing services.***

Example: Instead of pushing a product that makes SAP security easier to administer, focus on a thought leadership goal around becoming a recognized leader in governance, risk, and compliance, which could include sharing presentations, blogs, conference keynotes, and contributing to community projects such as wikis and educational programs. Developing a genuine passion around the core topic underneath your product can become a rallying cry for the internal team, while pushing them to become experts in their field and share impactful content themselves.

Once thought leadership is sorted, the logical implementation steps get sorted.

Example: Don't create a LinkedIn group about your company, create (or participate in) a LinkedIn group around your firm's areas of expertise, and so on.

You may want to flesh out your new marketing vision with two other themes: customer relevance and the power of narrative:

Customer relevance means stepping back from the classic pitfalls of overhyped product development/messaging around "technical revolutions" and "game changing technology" in favor of a more immediate question: **what SAP pain point does my solution solve?** You want to be able to say in a simple, buzzword-free sentence how you make a customer's life easier. Those firms who can't explain how they help SAP customers save money or grow markets end up lagging behind – an ironic fate given that they were trying to conquer the market with transformative solutions.

Incorporating the power of narrative means framing everything your company does in terms of a compelling story. Example: "Our product began with a consultant in his spare time in his garage trying to solve a customer problem. The customer loved it, and shared it with her peers. It was a solution that customers demanded." From a marketing angle, that story might then be fleshed out by smaller stories that fill in the big picture. It's hard to tell a good corporate story if your company is not transparent and you aren't able to put a human and sometimes imperfect face on what you do. People relate to stories they can get behind and root for.

If the community is rooting for you because you are doing your best to offer a far better value in your area of expertise, and **if you are going the extra mile to share not only**

your successes but sometime your struggles, then you are creating a rootable story. People love the underdog, and there is something to be said for a company that ruthlessly serves customers in a market where big fish often dominate through “golf course relationships” rather than providing true customer value.

5. Do you have a top-down and/or a bottom-up approach to targeting decision makers?

Ultimately, you want to be able to reach those who can make purchasing decisions, but contrary to the hype, most of those folks are not on social media channels - yet. Frame it like this:

Do you understand the behavior of decision makers in your area, what job titles they have, and how to reach them?

Do you understand the purchasing process and what role hands-on subject matter experts and SAP technical pros play in the decision making process? **These hands-on experts are the folks more likely to be accessible on social channels. My research has found that social-media-savvy subject matter experts do have a “bottom up” impact on the SAP decision making process.** Note: there is an in-depth piece on the topic of [SAP, social media, and decision makers](#) on JonERP.com.

6. Do you have analytics in place on your web site to measure referrals and traffic increases, and to evaluate the results of all your campaigns and social media activities?

Do you benchmark your web site traffic to weight the effectiveness of different campaigns? Do you study marketing automation and create scenarios for folks to opt into exactly the kinds of content and updates they want from your firm? Have you inserted URL trackers into your social campaigns and links so you can get at least a better, if not perfect, the idea of how your social traffic flows into web referrals? And how, in turn, some of those become legitimate prospects? Do you study your “first click” traffic and lead results rather than only focusing only on the very last click (“last mile”) in the lead gen process?

7. Have you defined how your social media “hub and spoke” model will work?

In almost all cases, your web site will remain the hub (rather than, for example, Facebook – a terrible idea as a hub for most B2B businesses). Which “spokes” will you focus your resources on? LinkedIn? Twitter? The Sap Community Network? (You may

want to include timeframes for when you will roll out to each spoke, as you won't be able to hit them all in year one). **Remember that consistency of content creation and active participation is vitally important, so don't launch more spokes than you are ready to maintain in a quality manner.** And resist the compulsion or social media pressure to be on a spoke just because some "gurus" think it's cool or the industry press gets excited about that site's pending IPO.

8. Are you ready for the challenges of transparency?

Social and community participation will generate plenty of feedback, some of it difficult to swallow and challenging to your current approaches. Are you prepared to enter a tough feedback loop, engage openly with the community, and provide transparent ways of showing how you've incorporated key feedback – **even if feedback that might have been relayed in a harsh manner?**

9. Social is almost always a fail unless you have quality free content to share.

(In this case, "free" should mean that the majority of the shared content does NOT require a sign up first, though some shared content such as webinars can require a free sign up). But make sure that free-for-registration content is a minority of what you share.

10. Have you developed a curation strategy? In other words, have you identified the key bloggers, analysts, and influencers in your space and subscribed to their content?

And are you sharing the best of that content with your own audience? Ideally, when you curate and share content, you are doing it in a way that adds a human element, such as annotations on why you think the content matters. *Over-automating curation can turn into a fail.* Remember not to define your area narrowly in terms of SAP-only, but to look at overall trends. Example: If you have an SAP mobility product, make sure you are tracking overall influencers in the mobility space and you know who these folks are. **Tip #1:** Over time, you can begin to engage with them as you develop your own content and share more of your expertise. *This is not done from the vantage point of "we'd like you to give our firm some coverage," or "we'd like to schedule a briefing," but rather from the vantage point of "two experts talking to each other."* **Tip #2:** Once you have tracked such influencers, subscribe to them in a newsreader or an email client, putting you in a position to "curate" and share some of that content. Curation can be part of a broader content creation strategy, though be careful not to overdo it on aggregating other people's content. Curate with selectiveness and thought. Check out the JonERP piece on the [power of pull and ERP content curation](#).

11. Set up “sentiment trackers” to monitor when you and your brand are mentioned in social channels.

Have you figured out how you will prioritize these mentions if you cannot reply to all of them? Do the team members who will be public facing in social channels have adequate training and clear social media guidelines to follow? **Do they have some power to resolve issues that are raised by the community? (If not, they will seem like ineffective mouthpieces).** Are they given some freedom to express their own personality? (If not, they will come off as inauthentic product pushers). Note: Do NOT overpay for expensive “sentiment analysis consulting.” Many of the best tools are free – see my aforementioned “power of pull” piece for more on that.

12. Define a content strategy that includes free, easily shareable content as well as premium content.

If you have higher revenue SAP products and services, you will be giving away your content in order to share valuable work with the community and heighten your visibility. **Don’t make the mistake of trying to charge for content that should be used to build visibility, goodwill, and increased lead generation.** You will want plenty of free content, particularly on your web site. SEO is not a key consideration other than titling your content in a relevant way for search.

There is a detailed piece on the myths of SEO and [how to avoid getting ripped off by SEO “gurus.”](#) on JonERP.com. Great – make that awesome – content is the key here. There’s so much content in the SAP marketplace that it’s become very difficult to compete on quantity and timeliness with the big news sites. That means you’ll need to achieve real quality – not quantity - in order to have value. **Many still mistakenly think quantity is the key, but it’s actually consistency.** I have one contact who does a great blog post once a week, and that one post has a big impact. It comes out like clockwork.

Here’s how free and “free premium” content work together:

Free content is a true asset for search engines and the best content to share on social channels. The best free content combines thoughtful blog posts as well as stand-alone how-to articles in a library format. (See [the myths of SEO piece](#) for more details on this.)

“Free premium” content typically sits behind a firewall and requires a free sign up in order to access the content. This type of content can also be shared on social channels, though ideally it is not the only type of content you share. Free premium could mean signing up for access to a white paper library or webinar replay archive, but more

often, it could mean future webinar signups or signups for individual surveys or quality PDFs. **The signups themselves should not be cumbersome, but should include a few relevant fields that meet your salespeople's needs**, such as job title and phone number and/or email address. Get your sales team's input on the data they want captured there, and *make clear to the registrant what they are signing up for in terms of future communications*.

Ask your marketing team regarding "free premium" content: are the signups integrated into your CRM system and automatically or easily sorted based on lead relevance? When signing up, do your registrants have clear options in terms of the frequency and type of communication they are opting into? **Make sure the premium free content truly is worthy of the time it takes to get access to it. And make sure access is immediate, rather than a manual step to wait on once information is submitted.**

Note: Few – if any - vendors in the SAP ecosystem have figured out how to balance these kinds of free content. Some even make the mistake of requiring visitors to pay for such content. That means there is real opportunity here for savvy firms who want to make a lasting contribution to the community and gain a good result for their efforts.

13. Do you insist that folks visit your hub to get your content, or do you go where the conversations are?

You want to strike a balance between building up your hub and recognizing that people want to access content in the form they want it, on the web site or application they want to consume it on. *Note: This does NOT mean cross-posting the same blog content all over the place.* Cross-posting is a no-no for a couple very good reasons: the community finds it irritating, and it can seriously hurt you with organic search. (Google is aggressive about penalizing duplicate content and is not very good at determining the site of origin for such content. This means, unfortunately, truncating your RSS feeds rather than syndicating full posts. And yes, make all your content RSS subscribable – it's not as popular as "like" buttons but a minority of super users and decision makers use this format.)

14. Have you identified a need in the community or a cause that people care about you can offer your resources towards?

Have you considered building an app (example: iPhone app) that will help others in the community? Past examples: some enterprise SAP Mentors have built "SAP Mentor Expertise" apps to allow the community to easily locate these community leaders based on location and/or expertise. Another community member put out a mobile-friendly way to access the SAP Community Network. There is always another community need that can be turned into a user-friendly app.

15. Assess the “hierarchy of content” and determine where you will invest your time and resources.

Here’s a content hierarchy flow from least powerful to most powerful:

- Tweets
- Blog posts
- Deeper articles and white papers
- Podcasts (with iTunes feed)
- Regular newsletters (that people want to read, paper.li doesn’t count!)
- Videos (with YouTube channel)
- Webinars
- User group presentations
- Keynote speeches
- Unique data gathering and sharing (surveys, etc.)
- Virtual trade shows and events
- Creating a free mobile app that adds value to the community
- Hosting an in-person trade show or event

16. Do you have a plan to multi-purpose the quality content you create? Examples include:

- Embedding a video in a blog post
- Transcribing a presentation and posting it
- Posting a presentation on slide share, including audio commentary
- Transcribing a podcast or video and posting that on your site for search.

Remember that search still struggles with multi-media content, so you’ll want to look to text-based repurposing whenever possible for search. And if you post multi-media on other sites, do your best to keep a good amount of the transcribed text on your own site for better search impact.

17. The highest level of content is community-generated content by passionate users of your product (Think Apple).

It’s not easy to generate true passion around your product, and it can never be forced – that’s the phoniest content out there and it’s always rejected. But a truly passionate community built around your product means user-generated content, and that’s a great multi-year vision to have. You can start by cultivating that kind of passion around your internal team. If they don’t have it, no one else will.

18. Have you developed a brand advocate strategy?

Have you thought about how you would engage and recognize those leaders who are truly passionate about the topics that are relevant to your product? Note: SAP has done this via the creation of the SAP Mentor Initiative. [See the JonERP article on Mentors and leadership](#) for more on this. This is likely a longer-stage goal for your company, but it's never too early to think about where passionate community involvement could ultimately lead, and what it would take for folks to become passionate about your company and your products. Just remember that advocates have their own agenda and don't care about broadcasting your message (they might criticize you often as not). They care about community and long term excellence rather than the success of your latest discount or email campaign. *The more you are willing to make course corrections – even painful ones - based on advocate input, the more powerful such a program will be.*

19. Are you engaging with user groups in your regional markets? Are you doing so by providing speakers on topics users care about, helping to plan events, and doing the hard work that goes into creating a viable community?

This item isn't in the top ten because you shouldn't approach user groups until you have a clear identity around industry expertise, community involvement, and have some practice weathering the new rules of marketing (though you can certainly join user groups early on if they will sign you as an affiliate member, and start listening).

20. Reject the quest for “viral” content in favor of sustained community involvement.

Viral is hit and miss, and even when it hits, the hit is temporary and sometimes comes at the expense of credibility. Too often, attempts to go viral are wedded to sensationalism, such as hyperbolic (“such and such product is dead”) blog titles. That doesn't pay off in the long run - not in a community like SAP where the key players know each other, and everyone has their BS detectors on.

21. Most bloggers and analysts don't want “free” briefings on your product.

You want to engage them as experts with their own business models if you want to build effective relationships. Some analysts WILL do paid vendor engagements – in that case, don't try to get something for nothing. Pay for the advice you contract them on, but without any obligations on their part to blog or promote. Just pay them to listen, absorb,

and give valuable feedback. It's a big mistake to oversell free briefings that don't provide a clear value to the analyst, or to pay a PR firm that doesn't know SAP to pursue those analysts all over the Internet.

Do amazing things and create amazing content and the analysts will come to you.

And when you do develop an influencer program, design it to suit the interests and agendas of each key influencer in your product area. Ignore Klout scores at all costs. Study up on your influencers and how they are perceived by others you know and respect. Create an individualized plan for engaging with each of them. Depending on whether they work for a larger analyst firm or are independent, they may have very different agendas in terms of how they do business, the firms they cover, and the compensation they expect.

22. Have you made a careful, long term decision on your web site architecture? Have you chosen a content management system that makes it easy for those with no programming skills inside your firm (including executives) to easily post content?

Does that web site framework also include social sharing plug-ins to make it easy for visitors to share your content socially? (*Yes, for some firms, this action item should be higher up if you are planning a near-term web site launch or upgrade*). The pain and investment of designing great site architecture will cost you in the short term, but it will pay off big in the long term. You won't have to pay your designer every time you want to make a change, and your people across departments will be able to easily add content, including your executives if needed, which will have a noticeable impact on the amount of content on your site over time and the credibility of that material.

23. Have you considered hiring a talented young journalist or writer to help manage your content creation process?

There are some real editorial talents out there - folks who have been shaken up by the changes in media - who have a lot to offer a site that is passionate about getting content out into the world. **Investing in a talented content creator or editor is a far better investment than expensive SEO or social media "gurus".**

24. Have you seen through the lie that email is irrelevant in the age of social?

Even taking into account tighter inbox controls and spam filters, a well-maintained, truly opt-in list is an incredibly valuable marketing asset, unsurpassed in terms of getting folks to events and getting “warm” leads to sign up for additional content items and promotions. Make sure you have plenty of content consumption and email frequency options for subscribers, rather than a clunky “one subscription gets all our correspondence” approach.

25. Kick ass content, fueled by a true passion to contribute to the SAP community and solve customer problems, is what gets the job done – not trying to buy influence or pay for page views.

By and large, inbound marketing and lead generation is a natural byproduct of this process. You earn your community and then the rest takes care of itself. Yes, you want to measure and evaluate, making course corrections based on your analytics and campaign successes, but all the analytics are driven by solving genuine problems and creating value.

26. “Teased content” doesn’t work. You have to give away some intellectual property to create the value that builds the trust that leads to client engagements.

This document is being issued for free, even though it contains info that took me years to compile. Sharing openly is a great incentive to learn more and create more, and in the process, earn “virtual trust” which has an amazing way of creating leads. If you haven’t already, consider reading Chris Anderson’s *Free* for more on the power (and harsh realities) of the digital economy.

27. Is your web site “sticky” and interactive, with action steps you can measure?

Too often, SAP web sites are all or nothing, with the option to kick tires on a product demo (often with minimal pre-sales information) or buy. No other action items are offered, such as subscribing to newsletters, commenting on executive blogs, signing up for webinars, responding to polls and surveys, live customer chats, etc. All those action items can be measured and evaluated via Google Analytics or other marketing analysis tools. **Of course, if the web site is just an online brochure, then a newsletter sign up won’t mean a thing.** You need compelling content and a generous attitude about sharing it in order to inspire people who aren’t ready to formally enter the sales funnel to

complete action steps. Without inspiration, no action steps will be taken. Without welcoming content and a human touch, visitors won't want to prop up their feet on your virtual living room table and learn more. They'll want to get away from your "always be closing" web site as soon as possible.

28. Are there immediate (real-time) ways to engage on your web site, including instant message live help or video chats?

And is that help knowledgeable in SAP and ready to take appropriate action steps? Are email inquiries responded to in 24 hours? **Fast is definitely a competitive advantage for SAP vendors since so many bigger players are sluggish - as long as fast means fast, relevant, and thoughtful.**

29. Put a human face on your corporate web site and social media presence.

People don't want to interact with brands, they want to interact with people with opinions, personalities, and a desire to learn what makes them tick. Having pictures, including pictures of your team at informal community events, makes a big difference. **Yes, professionalism is important, but too many vendors still err on the side of polish over community.** Be wary of stock photos and overly polished videos. Informal often works better when it comes to building enterprise trust. Why? Because so many customers are wary of over-produced vendor messaging that is loaded with technical hype and is designed to keep the sales pipeline flowing, rather than speaking specifically to their problems.

30. Do you make it easy for prospects to interact with other customers and get the information they need?

Beyond case studies and video testimonials, do you have a customer reference process where your most passionate customers agree to co-present on webinars, at user conferences, and act as references for other customers? Do your sales people get customers to agree to such testimonials early in the sales process? Example: If the prospect is getting a deep product discount for a deal closing that quarter, they agree to do a testimonial or reference in return. It's often much easier to get a customer to agree to act as a reference up front during initial negotiations. Of course, leave them an out if they aren't 100 percent satisfied with the result.

31. Have you connected the dots between your online and your “face time” strategies? Have you incorporated all the relevant SAP trade shows and user group meetings in your focus area?

No, in most cases you don't need a booth – certainly not until you are extremely well established - but you do need an integrated plan for community building online and off. The online activity often comes to fruition face to face. The interconnections between the online relationships and the personal meetings cement the connection and make the prospect feel like you are a consistent resource in their lives.

That's a wrap – for now

There are 31 keys to get you started. I've seen each one very effectively – though not all by the same firm at the same time, so don't worry about reckoning with all of them immediately. **If you even have partial answers for most of these, you are ahead of the game – even if many of the action steps are still in the early stages.** You don't need to be moving on all these points at once – you simply want to incorporate them within an overall multi-year strategy. Preferably, you will put that document in writing so you can return to it and assess your progress. As I was going to press, one of my clients said to me, “Remind folks that this stuff is hard.” Indeed it is. I don't want to give the impression these approaches are easy – if they were, more firms would pursue them. But they are effective.

You may have noticed I didn't mention product quality in this document. **Yes, you need to have a quality product or service. Make that a *phenomenal* product or service!** And yes, it needs to be SAP certified for customers to take it seriously. There are indeed pitfalls on the product side, some easily avoidable, some not. My only advice there remains: Don't go for “game changing” pie-in-the-sky stuff. Go for products that solve real customers' pain points right now.

Yes, your products can be delivered in modern “cloudy” or mobile forms with sexy and/or efficient user interfaces, but for most third party SAP firms, the quality of the product or service is not the biggest obstacle. **The biggest obstacle is that either no one knows who the firm is, or in some cases, the firm is somewhat well known but not well liked due to their tone deaf approach and spammy marketing style.** If you work these 31 points, you'll get a better result.

Read on for more links to free content and ways to reach me.



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Jon has been publishing SAP market analysis for more than fifteen years, and he is the author of the SAP Consultant Handbook. Recently, Jon and partner-in-video-crime Dennis Howlett launched [JD-OD.com](#) - a video commentary web site for the on-demand enterprise.

Links to additional articles cited in this document:

[SAP, social media and decision makers.](#)

[Power of pull and ERP content curation.](#)

[How to avoid getting ripped off by SEO "gurus."](#)

[On SAP Mentors and leadership](#)

Have follow up questions?

Email me at jonerp.com@gmail.com, or find me on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#), or [Google Plus](#).

Note that I've also created a yet-to-be-published four page appendix of advanced tips for SAP market success. Drop me an email and I'll send you a copy.