ABM Roundtable
Key Insights

From data to deals: Maximising ABM tech ROI

This document represents anonymised insights from an ABM roundtable discussion. All participant information has been removed to protect individual privacy while preserving valuable learnings for the broader ABM community.

Key Insights

ABM technology promises to transform how B2B organisations identify, engage and convert high-value accounts. Yet many teams struggle to translate platform capabilities into tangible business results. Proving ROI takes years not quarters, attribution remains fundamentally broken, and intent data doesn't deliver immediate opportunities. Here's how ABM leaders are navigating the gap between time to value pressure and operational reality.

Theme 1: Years not months: Time to value vs. immediate pressure

The roundtable's most sobering consensus: demonstrating clear ROI from ABM technology takes far longer than vendors promise or boards expect.

Early justification relies on efficiency gains, not revenue

ABM Lead, industrial software company: "We're about four and a half, five years into transformation from demand gen to ABM. We're only now at a point where we can use intent data and long-term revenue charting to say: this is where we're seeing intent signals pay off. But for the first few years, justification came from scaling efficiencies. I cannot point at an opportunity and say this revenue came from this ABM action. But we used intent data to more quickly build account lists, to more quickly pivot campaigns. We told an ROI story in terms of hours saved, strategic changes. It’s taken a good five years before you can confidently say there's real revenue that truly came from these activities."

This is the most pragmatic path for most organisations: justify initial investment through operational efficiency, build towards revenue attribution over multiple years.

The "buy first, ask questions later" problem

ABM Lead, industrial software company: "We are definitely an organisation that buys first and asks questions later. Why are we buying new technology for a problem that could be solved with a couple of meetings and hiring a few more people?”

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“The objective needs to come before tech, not the other way round. But so often it goes: buy it now, let's find an objective to justify it later because it makes a great press release."

Multiple leaders noted the pressure to appear innovative, leading to technology purchases before clear use cases exist. This can extend time-to-value dramatically as teams reverse-engineer strategies to justify sunk costs.

Critical resource constraints slow progress

Marketing Director, financial services: "For me it's budget and resource - having somebody dedicated to the ABM function. What should the ABM strategy be? Are we talking one-to-one, one-to-few? Everyone's got different ideas."

Campaign Marketing, IT services: "Resource around content generation is the challenge for us, particularly for earlier in the buyer journey."

Insufficient headcount and ABM relevant content inventory, particularly thought leadership, limit the teams' ability to activate on intent signals even when technology functions properly. This creates a vicious cycle that undermines the business case for additional investment.

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Theme 2: Measurement: Last-touch dominates despite known flaws

Despite increasing investment in martech, most organisations cannot accurately track buyer journey behaviours in real time. The problem isn't technology, it's fragmented data, organisational silos, and attribution models that don't reflect B2B buying reality.

Post sales manual forensics for a single account journey

ABM Lead, industrial software company: "Hard metrics are spread across 10 different platforms, 14 different dashboards, it's a disaster. We pick out major opportunities and manually build out the last five years, every touch that happened. It's hours of work for one PowerPoint slide. The question is: how do we do a better job of telling that full story?"

CMO, business information services: "We use our marketing automation platform's profiler to look at deals and their journey over the last year or two. Same experience, a lot of hours of manual work for one slide. Our other reporting is purely last-touch, so some activities like events get a really bad reputation."

While this manual forensics approach provides retrospective indications, it doesn't scale or provide insights in real-time. Teams therefore invest significant resources to prove what they intuitively understand: that B2B deals involve multiple touchpoints across extended timelines.

Last-touch attribution undervalues marketing

ABM Lead, industrial software company: "We have stakeholders that believe last-touch attribution is king. That ends up with our holiday e-card having tens of millions of dollars of revenue associated with it. Well yeah, because we send it to every Stage 5 opportunity."

Last-touch systematically undervalues early-funnel activities and multi-touch engagement, yet remains the default because it's simple to implement.

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On top of this, last-touch attribution has resulted in sales falsely claiming opportunities to hit their KPIs. As a result, marketing leaders are having to put guardrails in place to ensure this doesn’t happen.

Marketing Director, financial services: "We've got field marketing and SDRs putting opportunities into our CRM for sales so they can't go rogue and put it down as a direct source. You have to check on sales teams because sometimes they edit things to show they get credit."

CMO, business information services: "We have that exact same issue. In our December CRM release, it's going to be fixed - they won't be able to change things. I've made estimations as to how much we're under-reporting by, and I'm curious to see if my estimations are true."

Sales teams editing CRM records to claim "self-generated" opportunities reflects misaligned incentives and further undermines accurate tracking. In the end, it shouldn't matter as long as the business is won, but it can lead to a focus on the wrong channels and KPIs.

Board-level distrust emerges from metric confusion

CMO, business information services: "We set up a lead generation steering committee with board members. We're producing a level of detail I'd never recommend presenting to such senior people. They're asking loads of questions because they don't understand it. Distrust is starting to build. Everybody's measuring lots of stuff, but it's not joined up into one cohesive story, so it gets pulled apart."

When marketing metrics don't align with board members' understanding, the instinct is to question the data - creating a vicious cycle of over-reporting that generates more questions and deeper distrust.

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Theme 3: The commercial marketer: Building skills beyond campaign execution

Measurement and ROI challenges reveal a deeper issue: the evolving skill set required of modern B2B marketers. A critical gap has emerged between what boards expect and what marketing teams can deliver.

Moving from activity metrics to business outcomes

ABM Lead, enterprise technology company: "I'm seeing reports that say a campaign was successful because we launched 18 ads in a quarter. That's not a success metric, that's activity. The question remains: what business outcome did those ads drive, was it worth it?"

Many marketers now struggle to move beyond reporting what they did to demonstrating what it achieved. This isn't just a reporting problem, it's a skills gap in thinking commercially and framing marketing value in terms of business impact and revenue outcomes rather than campaign deliverables.

More concerning, a potential cultural challenge is emerging around measurement discipline and continuous improvement. Several leaders described teams that deliberately avoid connecting activity to outcomes, eliminating any accountability or learning loop. Therefore losing the crucial champion-challenger mentality of testing, iterating and optimising that leads to great marketing.

Without the discipline to measure transparently, learn from failures, and systematically improve performance, even the most sophisticated ABM technology and programmes underperform.

Structural evolution and refusing inappropriate targets

Marketing Director, professional services: "We're splitting out lead generation from brand, demand and ABM. We've been very metric-driven, everything about the sales qualified opportunity…"

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“...We'd go to huge global events but wouldn't generate much, even though they were really about brand. We need to re-educate the teams and say we can go to an event with no metrics on leads because we're building brand visibility. We'll feed that into demand gen and may convert later, but we have to think about this as a much longer journey. That requires different team structures and new people."

This structural shift requires marketers who can operate across the full funnel whilst maintaining a coherent narrative about how these activities connect to revenue, and the ability to refuse inappropriate demand targets like cost-per-lead when driving ABM strategies.

Global Campaigns Lead, payments technology: "We are very lead-focused, and the common metric is cost per lead. There's a lot of change management that needs to happen around: it's not just about lead costs, but surrounding the right accounts at the right time. Sometimes that costs more. The KPI shouldn't be cost per lead but intent, account engagement and account lift - things that take time."

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Theme 4: Intent data: Research signals, not purchase intent

Once teams have the right measurement frameworks and commercial skills in place, they encounter another fundamental challenge: understanding what intent data reveals.
The term "intent" itself creates unrealistic expectations.

Intent appears 12-18 months before purchase

ABM Lead, enterprise software company: "When I think of intent, I'm thinking of the Google Commerce definition, someone's ready to buy today, they're standing in the store with their wallet in their hand. But what we saw from our pilot was intent signals appearing 12 to 15 months before a purchase actually happens. With 18-month sales cycles, intent is really an indicator of research happening. It's less about getting our sellers involved immediately, and more about: do we have the right content for that research phase? Do we have the right thought leadership so that when they're doing searches, we're showing up?"

Intent data can identify when buying committees begin investigating solutions, not when they're ready to purchase. This distinction completely changes how teams should activate on signals.

ABM leader, data platform company: "I convey intent data as the bat signal, you still have to be the detective to figure out what's going on. Sellers want to understand the who, the what, the when, the why. I make them understand this is just the starting point. We work backwards to understand where that intent is coming from."

Several leaders noted the need to layer multiple sources: web analytics, intent platforms and ABM tools, to validate genuine research activity versus noise. Single-source intent data proves unreliable without corroboration.

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Sales engagement varies dramatically

Marketing Operations, technology company: "Our sales team who are positive and embrace intent tend to get opportunities from it, even if they are two years down the line, because they can see they need to start building relationships now, not selling directly. But it depends on the seller. I find myself focusing efforts on accounts where sellers are more responsive and open, which fragments our ABM strategy."

Intent data only converts when paired with patient, relationship-focused sellers. This creates a difficult trade-off: ABM teams can invest heavily in high-value accounts with unresponsive sellers and see limited results, or focus resources on accounts where sellers actively collaborate, even if those accounts have lower strategic value. Many leaders described gravitating towards the latter, allowing seller engagement to drive strategy rather than account potential, which fragments ABM execution.

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The bottom line

The ABM technology challenge isn't primarily technical, it's organisational, cultural and skill-based. Leaders navigating this successfully are:

Setting realistic timelines (in years) for revenue attribution. Abandon 12-month ROI promises and build political capital early by demonstrating operational wins (faster list building, better campaign pivots, hours reclaimed) whilst the revenue case develops over years.

Accepting attribution will remain imperfect and investing accordingly. Choose your battles: manual forensics for board-level storytelling, CRM controls to stop attribution gaming, and multi-year data infrastructure projects for scale. Perfect single-touch attribution isn't relevant, workable attribution is enough.

Building commercial literacy in their teams. The skills gap isn't about marketing tactics, it's about commercial thinking. Teams need to connect activity to business outcomes, revive experimental discipline, and push back on vanity metrics. Without this foundation, technology investments consistently underperform.

Reframing intent as research signals requiring patient cultivation. Intent platforms don't deliver hot leads, they identify accounts entering 12-18 month research cycles. Success requires appropriate content for early research phases and sellers willing to build relationships without immediate conversion pressure.

Prioritising integration and real-time data flow. Disconnected tools guarantee failure regardless of their individual quality. The unglamorous work of data normalisation and system integration determines whether ABM functions or frustrates.

Yet despite these common challenges, there's no universal playbook. As one leader summarised: "ABM has been implemented five times for me across different organisations, and it's never been the same twice. It depends on your business, your structures, your market. You're learning from each other and adapting to your context."

Modern roundtable facilitators
Biographies

Nicola Ray, Modern

Nicola is founder and CEO at Modern, the B2B digital consultancy. Nicola has over 20 years' digital agency experience, with brands including Broadcom, Square, Zendesk, Coca-Cola, Eurostar and Virgin. Nicola consults with the CMOs of global enterprise technology companies on how they use marketing technology to best effect in their businesses. Her passion is about challenging the status quo and supporting businesses through change as they grow, transform, consolidate or centralise. As Modern enters its twelfth year, it has specialists in marketing technology strategy, marketing automation, account-based marketing and demand generation, B2B strategy and content marketing, amongst other disciplines, and has clients spanning the US, Europe and the UK.

Stuart Ray, Modern

Stuart is Chief Commercial Officer at Modern, an agency he founded with his partner Nicola Ray in 2012. He works with forward thinking, innovative businesses to support their marketing teams as they transition towards more mature digital marketing approaches. His role is to design systematic frameworks to enable the knowledge transfer between Modern and client teams. Stuart's ultimate aim is to empower CMOs to deliver more effective marketing programmes that increase their capability and return on investment.

About Modern

Modern is an award-winning B2B Marketing Consultancy.

We'll translate your vision of a modern marketing function - embracing the latest ideas, methodologies and technologies - into a high performing reality.

That means helping you deliver on the promise of new technology, the potential of ABM and the power of customer data to supercharge business growth.

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