



An Agency Perspective: How Leading With Intent Changes the Agency Conversation

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When agencies solve for customer intent, they elevate performance marketing to a strategic level. Mike Grehan of Acronym Media offers advice to mobile marketers on how to shift the conversation.

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Mike Grehan is CMO and managing director of the digital agency Acronym Media, which specialises in "intent-based digital marketing." The firm's focus is not only on search keywords, but also on understanding the intent behind those keywords and how its clients can better serve potential customers in response. With people looking to their mobile devices to find answers and discover new things, understanding customer intent is more important than ever. We sat down to talk with Mike about how his agency is using intent to create strategic content that drives value for clients.

Q: Where does your focus on intent-based marketing come from?

Mike Grehan: We learned early on that building marketing programs that solve for customer intent produces stronger business results. That's why we've spent 20 years helping our clients identify the intent behind customer searches—whether it's navigational, informational, or transactional in nature. And based on that, we match the intent with the right content response. It's a formula that's really worked for us—because it works for consumers.

So it made perfect sense when Google introduced the concept of [moments that matter](#) and the idea of these I-want-to-know, I-want-to-go, I-want-to-do, and I-want-to-buy moments. These help shape how marketers think about consumer intent. Each of the different moments reflects different flavours of intent and calls for a specific content response. That's our sweet spot.

Q: How do you think about the role of intent for businesses? Is a transaction the ultimate goal?

It is. But even so, nobody wakes up in the morning with a credit card in their hand and says, "My name is Jane and I want to buy something." That's not the way that it works.

For bigger-ticket items, customers need to gain confidence in their purchases. They use their phones wherever they are, in short bursts,

to explore and research what they want to buy. There isn't one linear customer purchase path or one channel anymore.

Yet, many brands still wait until the I-want-to-buy moment to make their pitch. That's the hardest place to come in. That's where every other brand is bidding. In many cases, customers have already made up their minds about the brand they're going to buy.

My advice to brands is: Don't slug it out with everyone else solely at the I-want-to-buy part of the lower funnel. Reach these customers long before your competitor does, such as during the I-want-to-know moments, and build brand affinity. When you start at the top of the funnel, you have the largest addressable audience and you can position yourself as the authority in the field so customers will have you in mind as they progress on their purchase path.

Don't slug it out with everyone else at the I-want-to-buy moments. Reach these customers before your competition does in the I-want-to-know moments.

Q: What's an example of a brand that has been successful in addressing an I-want-to-know moment?

We were discussing Moments that Matter with our client, Scotts Miracle-Gro recently, explaining how to develop content for I-want-to-know brand-building searches. We imagined a guy who wants to invite his friends over for an amazing barbecue at his new house. He bought a new grill, apron, and even a hat. Everything seems great. Then he goes to the back garden ... and the lawn looks terrible. He hadn't thought about how to keep his lawn healthy.

We saw an opportunity to connect with this new homeowner planning his first barbecue and came up with the idea to create the world's greatest barbecue playbook—and lawn care was a part of that. Since we help

the homeowner anticipate and solve a problem, the likelihood is that he'll think about Scotts Miracle-Gro when he's ready to buy lawn care products.

Here's another: We were working with a woman's fashion retailer who concentrated their paid search on I-want-to-buy moments—"I want to buy a red dress from Brand X," for example. With such a narrow focus on checkout, they were missing an opportunity to position their clothing for what-to-wear-for-interviews moments, a potentially large, new segment for their business daywear.

Preparing for job interviews is a time when consumers are seeking help and are receptive to useful content from marketers, so we advised them to create a video on interview etiquette or put together a professional LinkedIn page. These are perfect times to talk about what to wear and what not to wear to job interviews.

You're not selling anything in the moment, but the likelihood is, when the customer is ready to buy that interview outfit they're going to go to your store.

Q: How do you help your clients decide what content they need?

The first thing we do with our clients is a content-mapping exercise. We use a proprietary intelligence platform to help us group search keywords based on similar intents. We then do a content gap analysis by combing through the client's website to look at every landing page, to see if the customer is getting the appropriate experience for a particular keyword or phrase.

In many cases, we find that clients don't have content to meet a specific customer intent or, worse, they provide the wrong content. In some cases, we've found an I-want-to-know moment sent right into checkout.

Q: There are so many moments, how do you choose the right ones?

You don't have to be there at every moment. You have to learn what's most important for each brand and prioritise the moments where decisions are being made and preferences established. Your messaging and content choices should stem from that.

Q: What's your advice for marketers to help them tap into these moments that matter opportunities?

If you work in paid search marketing, you've got to debunk the historical notion that paid search is only a direct response mechanism. That's not right anymore.

Smart agencies and marketers are now looking beyond the I-want-to-buy moments, and building customer connections well before they get to a checkout. You have to be in that game. Get your clients in that game. It's better for everyone.

For fellow agencies, think about starting client conversations with customer intent. You'll make your discussions much more strategic and will be able to better identify new opportunities. And again, "intent" is not synonymous with buying in that moment.

If you're a marketer on the client side, challenge your agency to conduct a thorough content analysis to identify gaps in your brand's content strategy. Invest in those upper funnel search strategies to get people to that content. You'll begin a customer dialogue that can shape a preference for your product when they are ready to purchase. It's worth it.

Mike Grehan is a search marketing pioneer, author, keynote speaker, and CMO and managing director of intent-based digital marketing firm, Acronym Media. He is also chairman of SEMPO, the global trade association for search marketers. Mike is based in New York City, on the 65th floor of the Empire State Building.