GUIDE

Being there is not being noticed.

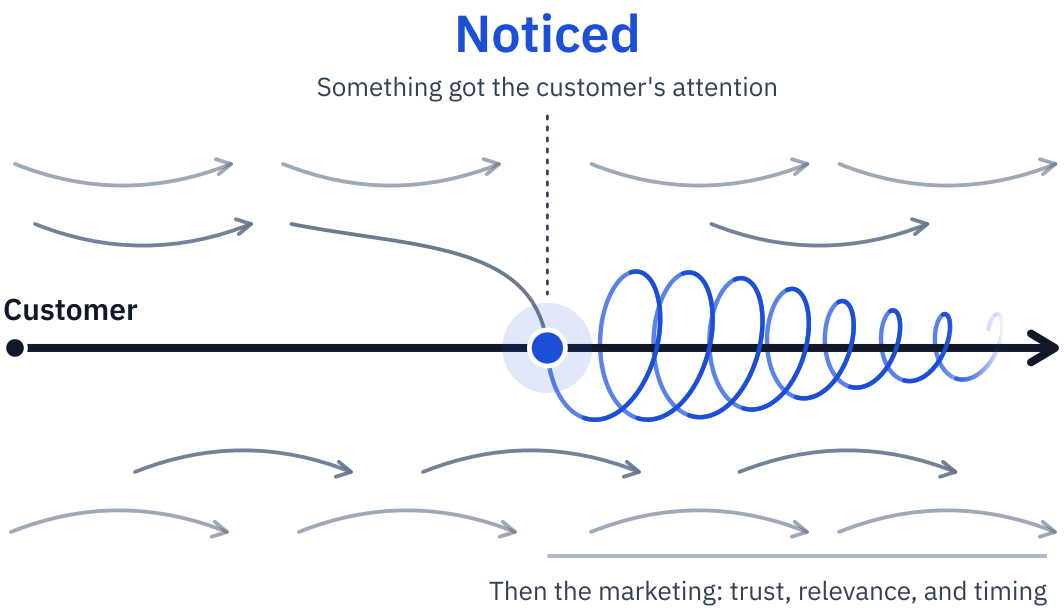
Attention is the moment a customer in motion notices a marketing message. In the Marketing Helix, marketing is already there, around the customer, and being there gives a message its chance. It does not get the message noticed, and a message the customer never notices cannot earn trust, prove relevant, or arrive on time. That is true however the message arrives: paid, earned, or organic.

October 11, 2026 · 14 minute read

Before the three forces · the model for customers in motion

Being there is not being noticed

The customer is moving. Most messages pass. One is noticed.



The customer is moving. Something shakes them. It gets their attention. It hooks them. Most marketing messages pass without that; one is noticed, and only from that point can trust, relevance, and timing matter. Being noticed is not being chosen.

What attention is, and where it sits in the model

In the Marketing Helix, attention is the customer noticing a marketing message: the point at which a message that was only present becomes a message the customer has taken in. It is something the customer does. It is not something the company sends.

The model is taught in a fixed order.

1. **The customer is in motion.** Needs, priorities, and circumstances are changing before any company makes contact. See Customers in Motion.
2. **Marketing is there, around the customer.** Messages are in the places the customer passes: a search page, a feed, a listing, a conversation. Being there gives a message its chance. It is Principle 05.
3. **The message has to be noticed.** Out of everything passing by, the customer notices some messages and not others. Being there is not being noticed.
4. **Then trust, relevance, and timing.** Once a message has been noticed, trust, relevance, and timing shape whether it draws closer or drifts past. Trust is the first test.

Attention is not a fourth force, and it does not replace the three conditions. It is what has to happen before they can matter.

That holds however the message arrives: paid, earned, or organic. In every case the message has to be noticed by a customer who is already moving. You have to get people to look.

The moment a message is noticed

The customer is moving. Something shakes them. It gets their attention. It hooks them.

That is the moment this page is about. A customer who was occupied with something else stops, for a moment, on one message. Nothing has been decided yet. The customer has not come to trust the company, has not judged the message relevant, and may not be ready to act. But a moving customer has given one message something scarce, and everything the model describes afterward depends on it.

It is a condition, not a law. Being noticed makes trust, relevance, and timing possible for that message. It does not make any of them certain, and many noticed messages are dismissed a moment later.

Why a message has to be noticed

The reason fits on one slide. A message the customer never notices cannot earn trust, prove relevant, or arrive on time.

Trust is a judgment about a source, and a customer cannot judge a source that did not register. Relevance is a match between a message and the customer's situation, and no match is made with a message that was never taken in. Timing is the message being there at a moment when the customer is ready, and a message that passed unnoticed was, for that customer, not there.

This is an order of explanation, not a strict sequence in time. In practice attention and the three conditions affect one another, as a later section describes. The claim is narrow: without attention, the other three have nothing to work on. Being there comes before all of it. A message that is not around the customer has no chance of being noticed, and a message that is around the customer still has to be noticed.

The funnel names attention too

None of this is a point against the funnel. The classic sequence behind many marketing funnels is known as AIDA: attention, interest, desire, action. Attention is its opening step. Who first formulated that sequence is contested, and the sources below say so.

The funnel is a useful summary of the company's process. Its first stage, often called awareness, counts the customers who have become aware of the company. But the funnel doesn't show what is happening. It does not show why one message was noticed and many others were not. The Marketing Helix describes that part: a customer already in motion, most messages passing, one noticed. The two are compared side by side at The Helix vs. Funnel.

The customer decides what gets attention

A company chooses where a message is placed. The customer decides whether it is noticed. Principle 3 of the model says the customer is in control: "Customers retain the ability to notice, ignore, compare, wait, leave, return, or choose a different solution." Attention is a place where that control shows plainly.

A customer in motion is occupied with their own life: searching, comparing, working, talking with people they know. Most marketing messages pass without being noticed. That is the ordinary case, not a failure of any single message. Principle 5 says it directly: "Many messages are never seen; others are noticed and then dismissed."

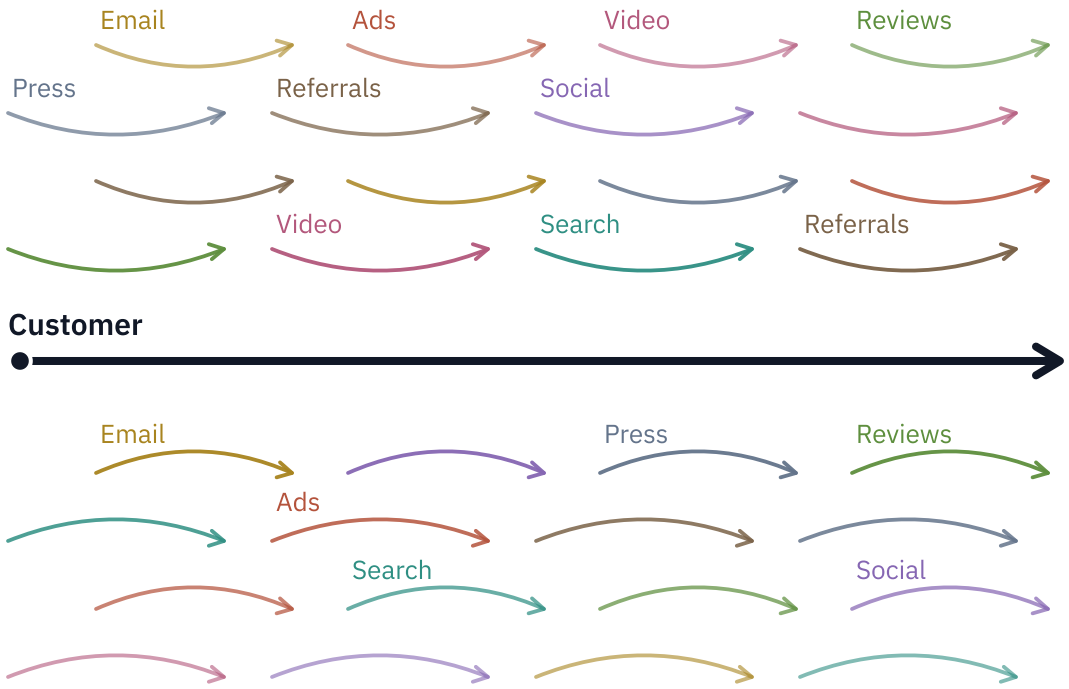
Herbert A. Simon described the general condition in 1971: "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." He was writing about organizations and information systems, not about marketing. The line is offered here as context, not as proof of the model.

However it arrives, it has to be noticed

A company can put out a great deal of marketing, paid, earned, or organic, and none of it is attention until a customer looks. The route does not change that, and neither does the volume. Making a hundred videos does not mean anyone sees them.

More messages does not mean more attention

However it arrives, a message has to be noticed.



A company can put out a flood of marketing: ads, search results, social posts, email, video, reviews, referrals, press. Making a hundred videos does not mean anyone sees them. Paid, earned, or organic, none of it is attention until the customer looks. In this figure color only tells the kinds apart, and each kind is also named. Blue is kept for the message that is noticed.

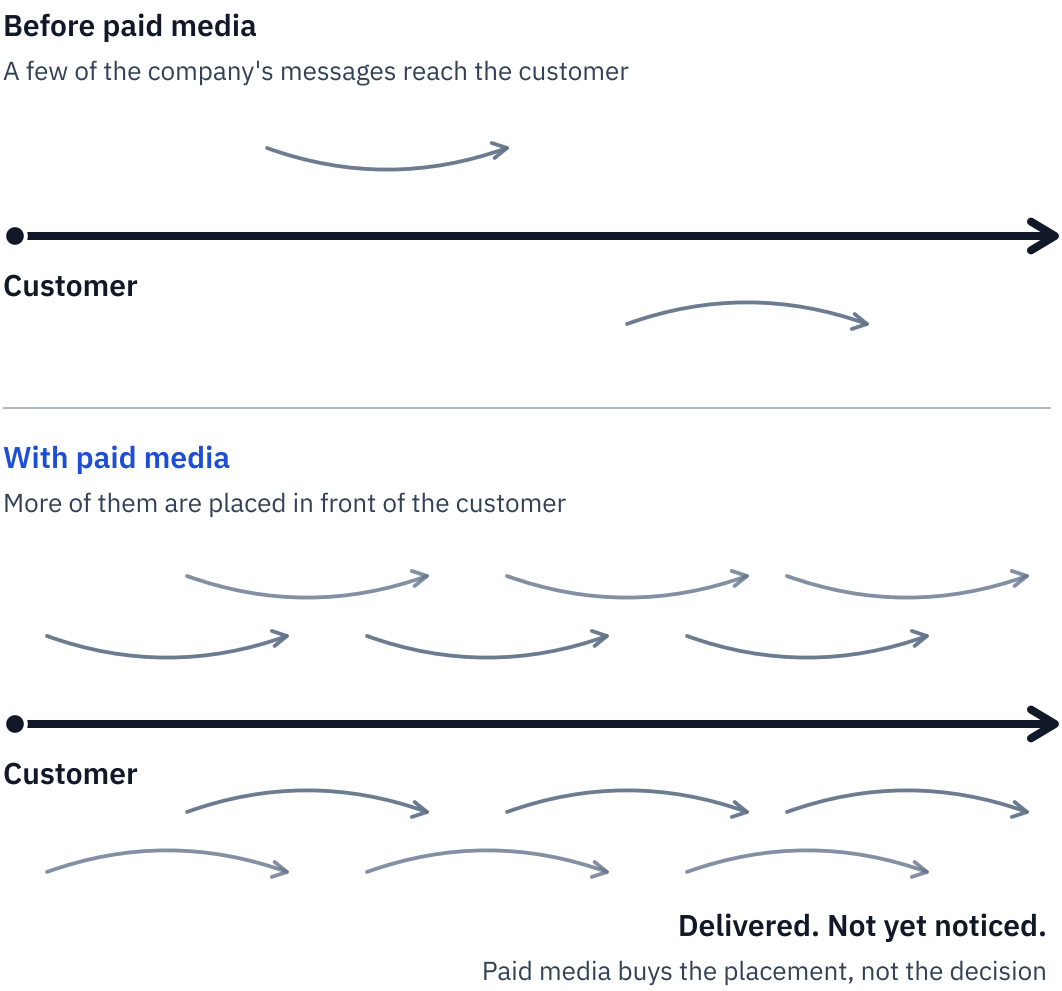
The routes do differ in what they deliver. Paid media buys a placement, which is exposure. Earned media, such as a review or a recommendation, arrives with someone else's trust, which can make it more likely to be noticed and does not make it certain. Organic media, such as a search result or a post, is often found by a customer who was already looking, and it still has to hold that customer's attention.

None of that is the point. Whatever the route and however much is made, the job is the same. You have to get people to look.

Exposure is not attention

Exposure means a message was put where the customer could see it: a paid placement, a result on a search page, a review on a listing, a post in a feed. Attention means the customer noticed it. These are two different events, and the first does not guarantee the second.

Paid media is one example, and the easiest to draw, because the delivery is bought and counted. Paid media buys delivery: more of the company's messages placed in front of the customer.

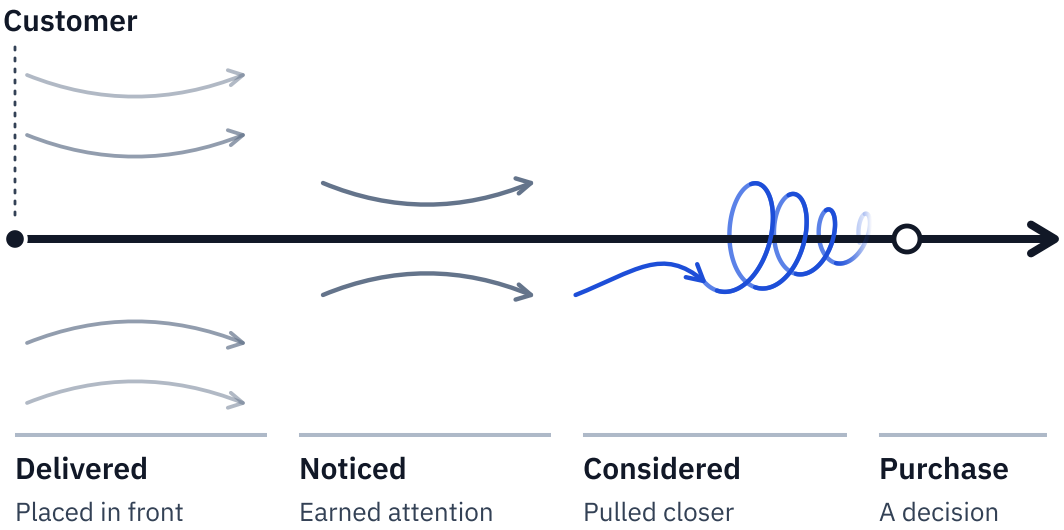


A paid media example. What paid media buys: more of the company's messages placed in front of the customer. Delivered, not yet noticed.

Principle 06 states it in one sentence: "Exposure is not attention, and attention is not a sale." Principle 11 repeats it for paid media. Delivery creates the opportunity for attention. Whether attention follows is the customer's decision.

Delivered is not noticed. Noticed is not chosen.

Four different things. Measure each one separately.



Drawn for paid media: delivered, noticed, considered, purchased are four different things along one customer's path, each measured separately. The same four apply to a message that arrives by an earned or organic route.

The same gap exists on the other two routes. A page can rank in search and not be read. A review can be published and not be seen. In each case the message was available, and whether it was noticed was the customer's decision.

A count of deliveries, rankings, or mentions is therefore not a count of attention. Principle 06 asks that attention be measured separately from delivery and from conversion, and Principle 11 asks the same of paid media: distribution, attention, consideration, and conversion, each measured separately. The paid media application of the model is set out at Applications: Paid Media.

What can earn attention

No message can command attention. Some conditions make attention more likely, and they are the model's own.

- A message that matches what the customer is already doing or looking for tends to be noticed more readily than one that interrupts with something unrelated.
- A message from a source the customer already trusts tends to get a look that a message from an unknown source may not.
- A message that is present at a moment when the customer is looking can be noticed, when the same message a month earlier passed by.

The second of these is where earned media fits. Principle 15 says that one customer's experience reaches the next customer. A review or a referral is earned attention: the message is carried by someone the next customer already listens to. The third is where organic media fits: a customer who is searching has already decided to look.

Here the three conditions feed back into attention. Trust, relevance, and timing shape what happens after a message is noticed, and what they leave behind can shape the next moment of attention. A company that a customer has come to trust can find its next message noticed more easily.

This is a tendency, not a law. Unfamiliar and untrusted messages are noticed every day, and trusted companies are sometimes overlooked. A loud, surprising, or repeated message can be noticed too. Being noticed that way does not make it believed.

From attention to trust, relevance, and timing

Being noticed opens the question. It does not answer it. Once a message has the customer's attention, the three conditions come into play.

- Trust: does the customer find the source credible?
- Relevance: does the message fit the customer's situation now?
- Timing: is the customer ready to act on it now?

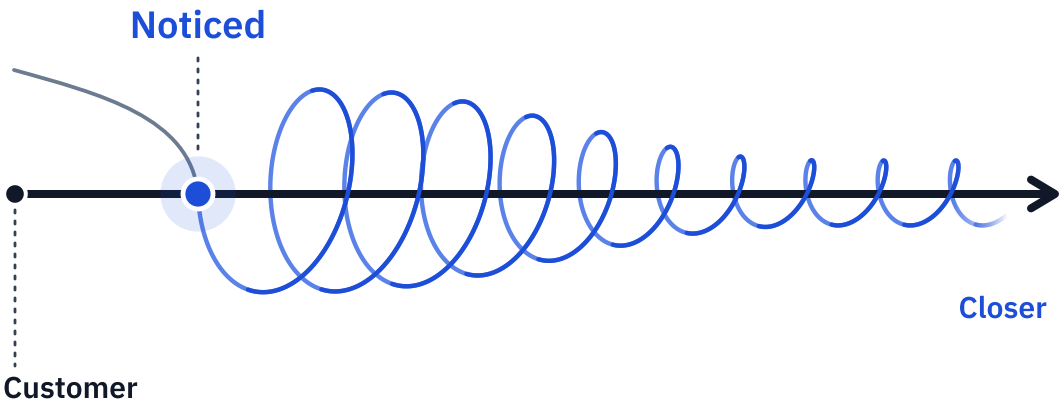
When enough of each holds at the same moment, the message can draw closer, toward consideration and possibly a purchase. When they do not, a noticed message can still drift past. Principle 10 puts it this way: "A message can be seen and still fail to move the decision."

Noticed is not chosen

Attention is where the marketing begins, not where it ends.

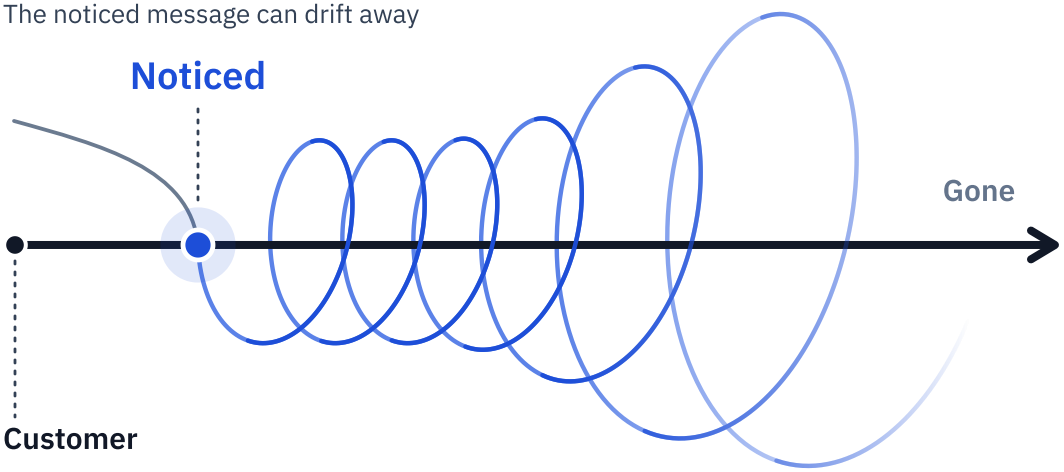
With trust, relevance, and timing

The noticed message can draw closer



Without them

The noticed message can drift away



Being noticed is not being chosen. Once a message is noticed, trust is the first test, and trust, relevance, and timing shape whether the message draws closer or drifts away. These are two possibilities, not the only outcomes.

So attention is not conviction, and conviction is not a guaranteed purchase. Each step is its own event. The full model shows how they fit together.

Attention after the purchase

Attention does not stop mattering at the sale. After a purchase the customer has direct experience of the company. Later messages from that company may be noticed more readily, or avoided, depending on how the experience went.

Attention also passes between customers. A review is often read by someone who went looking for it. A referral comes from a person the next customer already listens to. In both cases the recommendation arrives with attention already given: the next customer is attending to the reviewer or the friend, not to the company.

This is earned attention, and it is the model's own Principle 15 at work: one customer's experience reaches the next customer. It is not a guarantee that the recommendation is believed or acted on. The Post-Purchase Helix covers what happens after the sale.

What attention is not

- **Not a fourth force.** The model has three conditions: trust, relevance, and timing. Attention is a principle of the model, Principle 06, and it comes before the three conditions.
- **Not a paid media topic.** Paid, earned, and organic messages all have to be noticed.
- **Not a guarantee.** A noticed message can be dismissed a moment later.
- **Not conviction, and not a sale.** Noticing, believing, and buying are separate events.
- **Not a metric by itself.** Impressions and reach count deliveries, or opportunities to see. Whether a customer noticed is harder to observe, and no single number stands in for it.
- **Not something a company owns.** The customer gives attention each time, and can withdraw it.
- **Not a claim about the brain.** The model uses the word in its plain meaning: noticing. It makes no neuroscience claim.

Where attention appears in the figures and films

Three figures draw attention itself, and all three are in the attention group of the diagram library. More Messages Does Not Mean More Attention is the before: many messages of eight kinds stream past the customer, and none is noticed. Its colors only tell the kinds apart, each kind is also named, and blue is kept for the message that is noticed. Being There Is Not Being Noticed, at the top of this page, is the moment. Noticed Is Not Chosen is what can follow: the same noticed message can draw closer or drift away. Gray marketing messages pass before and after. One is noticed, and the moment is a solid blue dot on the customer's line. From that dot the message is blue, and trust, relevance, and timing come into play. The figure does not say how the message arrived: it holds for a paid, an earned, or an organic message.

Two more published figures draw the difference between delivery and attention: What Paid Media Buys and Delivery Is Not Attention. Both are paid media examples, both appear above, and both are in the paid media group of the diagram library. Figure 1, the model's opening figure, shows one marketing message and one customer. It does not mark attention as a separate moment.

Attention is a principle of its own: Principle 06 of the sixteen principles, "Being there is not being noticed." It sits after "Marketing surrounds the customer." and before the principles on trust, relevance, and timing, and it is named again in Principle 11, on paid media. Trust follows it as Principle 07: "Trust is the first test."

Two short films cover the paid media side: What Does Paid Media Actually Buy? and Why Doesn't More Ad Spend Fix a Weak Ad? The published films were made before the model's figures were redrawn left to right, and they are being remade. In the remake of the opening film, attention is its own point.

Questions about attention

What is attention in the Marketing Helix?

In the Marketing Helix, attention is the moment a customer in motion notices a marketing message. It comes before trust, relevance, and timing can matter, because a message the customer never notices cannot earn trust, prove relevant, or arrive on time. It is Principle 06 of the model's sixteen principles: Being there is not being noticed.

Is attention a fourth force in the Marketing Helix?

No. The Marketing Helix has three conditions: trust, relevance, and timing. Attention is not a fourth force and does not replace them. It is a principle of its own, Principle 06, and it describes what has to happen before those three conditions can matter for a given marketing message.

What is the difference between exposure and attention?

Exposure means a marketing message was put where the customer could see it, whether by a paid placement, a search result, or a published review. Attention means the customer noticed it. Exposure can be bought or earned. Attention is given or withheld by the customer.

Is attention only a paid media issue?

No. Every marketing message has to be noticed, however it arrives. Paid media buys delivery. Earned media, such as a review or a referral, arrives with borrowed trust. Organic media, such as a search result, is found by a customer who is already looking. In every case the marketing message still has to be noticed by a customer in motion.

Does attention lead to a sale?

Not by itself. In the Marketing Helix, attention is not conviction and it is not a sale. A marketing message can be noticed and still drift past if trust, relevance, and timing do not hold at the same moment. Attention makes a decision possible. It does not make one certain.

Who controls attention, the company or the customer?

The customer controls attention. A company chooses where a marketing message is placed, and the customer in motion decides whether it is noticed. Most marketing messages pass without attention, which is the ordinary case and not a failure of any single message.

Does the marketing funnel include attention?

Yes. The classic sequence behind many marketing funnels, known as AIDA, begins with attention, followed by interest, desire, and action. The funnel is a useful summary of the company's process. The Marketing Helix adds a description of what is happening to the customer when a marketing message is noticed or passes by.

Sources

These sources are context. The Marketing Helix is a conceptual model.

- Simon, Herbert A. (1971). "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World." In Martin Greenberger (ed.), *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. The quoted sentence runs across pages 40 and 41. Scanned copy of the chapter.
- Iwamoto, Akinori (2024). "The origin of AIDA: Who invented and formulated the AIDA model?" *Japan Marketing History Review*, volume 3, issue 2, pages 150 to 166. doi.org/10.51102/jmhr.3.2_53. The article is in Japanese with an English abstract. The AIDA sequence is commonly credited to E. St. Elmo Lewis. This article argues that the evidence for that credit is weak and points to Frank H. Dukesmith and Arthur Frederick Sheldon. This page takes no position on who formulated it. It relies only on the sequence beginning with attention.

marketing helix marketinghelix.com

A customer behavior model describing how a customer in motion gives a message attention, and how trust, relevance, and timing then shape whether it draws closer, drifts away, or returns.