GUIDE

The Marketing Helix vs. the Funnel Model

A structural comparison of two customer behavior frameworks: what each assumes, what each models accurately, and where each fails to account for observed behavior.

January 1, 2025 · 7 minute read

Framework Film

See the contrast in under a minute.



From the funnel to the helix

Chapters, transcript and notes →

Historical Context · Assumptions

The funnel was first drawn when media was controlled and exposure was bounded.

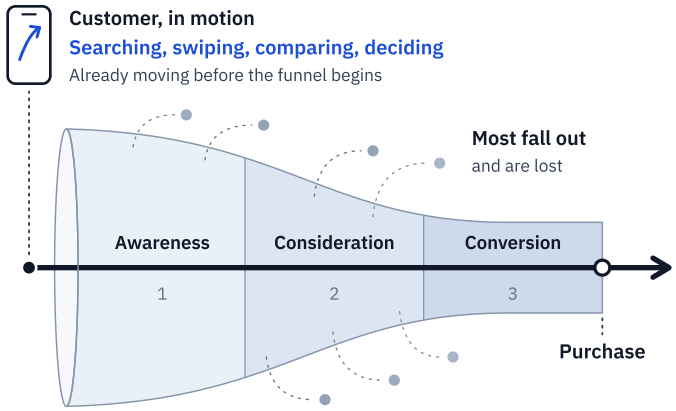
The purchase funnel as a conceptual framework originates with Elias St. Elmo Lewis, who articulated a linear model of customer persuasion in 1898 (awareness, interest, desire, action, later abbreviated as AIDA). Lewis's model was developed in the context of direct sales and print advertising, where customer exposure was largely bounded by the reach of a given publication or salesperson. The framework was influential because it was actionable: if a prospect was not converting, a practitioner could examine which stage was failing and adjust accordingly.

Throughout the twentieth century, the funnel was refined and institutionalized across marketing practice, advertising theory, and academic curricula. Its persistence reflects genuine utility: in environments where media exposure is controlled, sequential customer progression is a reasonable approximation. When a brand purchases a broadcast advertising schedule, it can reasonably assume that awareness precedes consideration, and that a customer who reaches the purchase stage has passed through earlier stages in sequence.

The funnel model requires several conditions to produce accurate predictions. First, it assumes that customer awareness is primarily controlled by deliberate brand action: that exposure occurs when the brand chooses it, at the intensity the brand determines. Second, it assumes that customer progression is sequential and observable: that awareness precedes interest, interest precedes desire, and that the brand can measure where a given customer is within this sequence. Third, it treats the conversion event as terminal: after purchase, the customer exits the model.

Each of these assumptions held with reasonable accuracy in low-fragmentation media environments. Broadcast advertising created bounded attention; a customer who saw a television commercial and then visited a retail location could be understood as progressing linearly. The measurement challenge was imprecision, not structural incorrectness.

Why Funnels Are Incomplete →



The funnel shows where the customer is in the company's process.

The Marketing Funnel

The funnel organizes the company's stages: awareness, consideration, conversion. It records where a customer is in that process, up to the purchase. It does not show what is changing around the customer on the way, or what happens after the purchase.

Fragmentation · AI Discovery · Funnel Limits

The funnel is a useful operational diagram. It is a poor description of behavior.

Funnels can be useful operational diagrams. They organize reporting, describe an internal process, structure campaign planning, and give a shared picture of a pipeline. The problem begins when the diagram is mistaken for customer behavior. Customers do not reliably advance through controlled stages. They move according to changing needs, trust, relevance, timing, and outside conditions, none of which the diagram contains.

The customer does not move through marketing stages. Marketing must adapt as the customer moves.

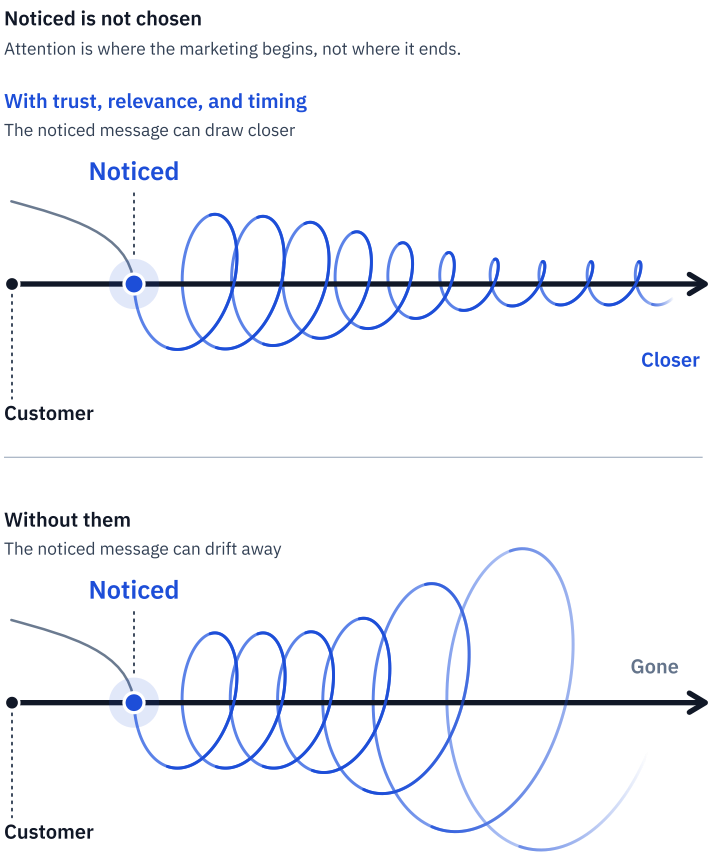
Several of the conditions that once made the sequential picture a reasonable approximation have changed. Search behavior allows customers to enter consideration at any stage: encountering a highly specific comparison article, a detailed product review, or a negative community discussion before ever encountering brand-initiated awareness content. Algorithmic recommendation surfaces competitors, substitutes, and critical perspectives in contexts the brand did not select and cannot fully predict. Social proof circulates asynchronously and at scale: a customer may accumulate dozens of trust signals, or trust-negative signals, over months of passive exposure, without any brand action occurring during that period.

AI-mediated discovery introduces a further structural complication. When a customer asks a large language model which product or service provider to consider for a given need, the model synthesizes across sources that may or may not include the brand's own content. The brand's placement in that synthesis depends on its semantic authority: the degree to which its conceptual territory is represented across the indexed information environment, not on the stage of the funnel in which it is operating. A brand can have full awareness and still not appear in an AI-generated recommendation if its trust signals and content authority are insufficient.

The net effect is that customer behavior is not adequately described as progression through controlled stages. Customers enter from multiple directions, pause and resume at irregular intervals, drift away without notice, re-evaluate after apparently final decisions, and distribute advocacy or criticism across channels the brand did not initiate. The funnel is a useful summary of the company's process. It doesn't show what is happening to the customer, and the two are easy to confuse because one of them is the one being measured.

A simple stage funnel does not show re-entry: the case in which a customer who previously reached a late stage returns to an earlier state and re-enters consideration at a different point. It does not show non-linear paths where awareness and consideration content are encountered in reverse or simultaneous order, and the illustrative funnel used here ends at the purchase. Modern funnels and lifecycle systems can represent some of these. What a stage count does not show in any of them is trust: how credible the company is to the customer at the moment a message arrives.

Trust as a Force →



Noticed Is Not Chosen

The funnel records the stage. It does not show this: a noticed message that carries trust, relevance, and timing can draw closer to the customer with every turn, and one without them can drift away and be gone. The Helix adds that picture to the funnel's.

The Helix Model · Signal Gravity · Where Funnel Remains Useful

The Helix does not discard the funnel. It expands the description.

The Marketing Helix describes customer behavior as continuous motion governed by three forces: trust, relevance, and timing. Rather than modeling where a customer is in a sequence, it models the conditions under which a message achieves alignment with a customer at their current state. *Signal gravity*, the pull effect experienced by highly aligned messages, replaces stage progression as the primary mechanism of customer movement toward selection. The term is an explanatory model, not a claim about physics.

The Helix places no requirement on where a customer starts. A customer can first encounter a brand at any point in their decision, and the brand's probability of achieving alignment is a function of its accumulated credibility and the relevance of the message at that moment, not of whether the customer has been formally progressed through earlier stages. Post-purchase behavior is integral to the model: advocacy and retention produce trust signals that re-enter the system as inputs for new customers who have not yet reached the point of alignment.

> The Marketing Helix does not discard the funnel's insight that customers move from awareness to selection. It observes that the path is not controlled, the pace is not set by the brand, and the conditions that determine whether selection occurs must be present at the same moment rather than in sequence. It adds one thing a stage diagram does not show: those conditions keep changing after alignment is reached.

The *funnel model* retains utility in specific, bounded contexts. In direct sales environments with controlled customer journeys (a regulated industry with a single sales channel, a trade show with a defined audience, a contained email sequence to a purchased list) sequential stage modeling produces actionable diagnostics. The funnel is also a sound operational framework for the final conversion step: when a customer has already achieved a high level of alignment, the mechanics of what converts them (pricing, offer structure, call-to-action clarity) are well-described by

funnel-oriented frameworks. The Marketing Helix does not replace the funnel, in these contexts or elsewhere. It adds a description of the customer for contexts where behavior is less controlled and less measurable at the individual stage level. It also carries a consequence: because the conditions that produce alignment keep changing, the response has to be observed and adapted rather than planned once. See Alignment Is Temporary.

The Three Forces →

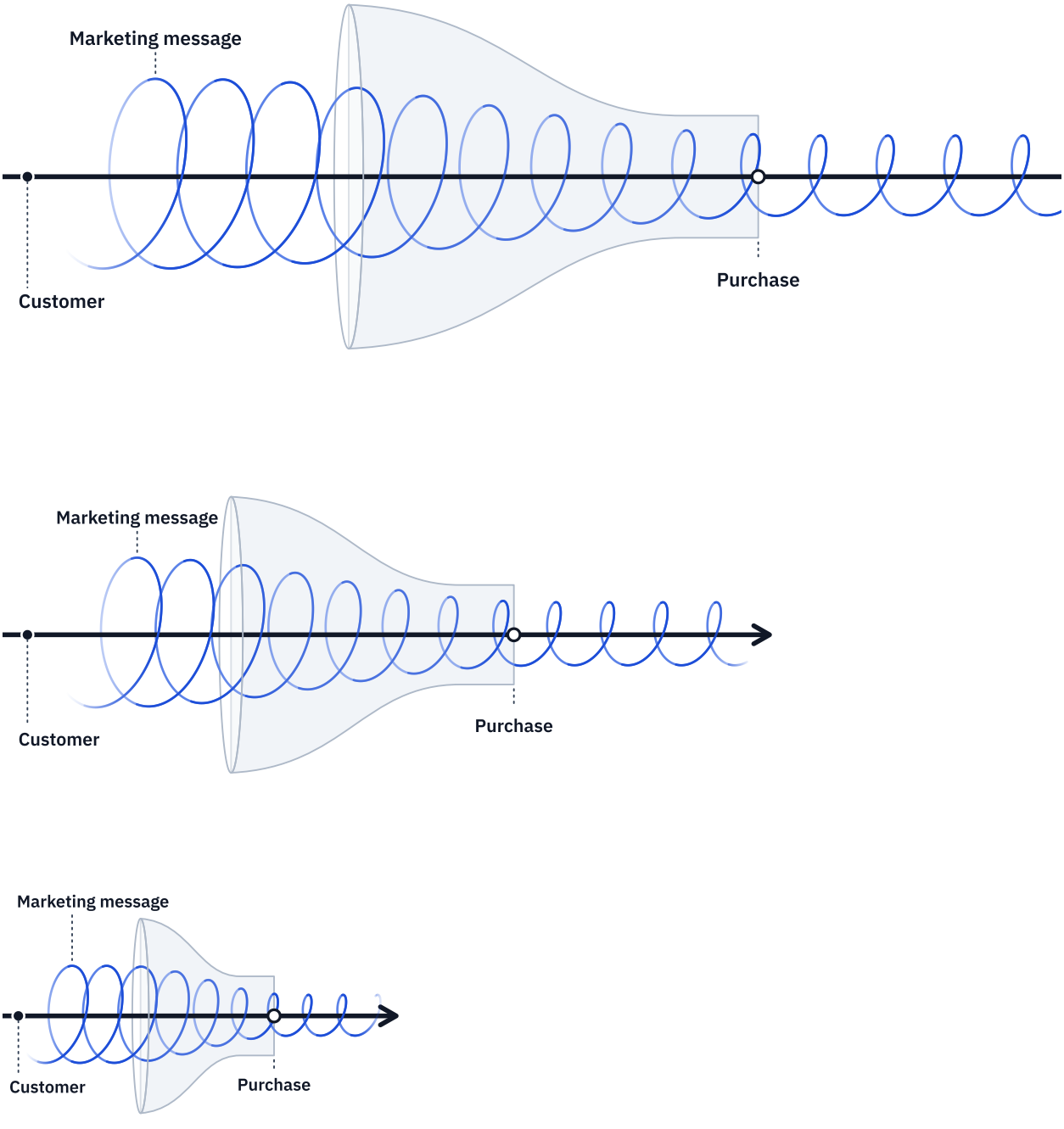


Figure 1: The Marketing Helix inside your funnel

The customer is the straight line, moving left to right. A marketing message moves around the customer and draws closer as trust, relevance, and timing align. The funnel shows where the customer is in the company's process. The purchase is one point on the line, and both the customer and the message continue past it.

Comparison Summary

Side-by-side structural comparison.

Dimension	Funnel Model	Marketing Helix
Customer state	Moves stage to stage	Continuously in motion
Entry point	Drawn at the top	Any point, from any direction
Driver	The company's process	Customer-driven
Trust role	Implicit	Primary force
Surrounding conditions	Not shown	Also in motion
Post-purchase	Usually ends at the purchase	Integral
Measurement	Conversion rate	Alignment frequency
Failure mode	Lead dropout	Message misalignment
Durability of a result	Treated as achieved	Temporary, requires maintenance
Response to change	Not addressed	Observe, interpret, decide, adapt, verify, learn
Suitable for	Bounded, controlled journeys	Fragmented, multi-touch environments

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.