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DEFINITIVE GUIDE
TO THE B2B
DARK FUNNEL

SUMMARY

The sales funnel, despite technological advances in the past decades, remains a marketing staple and the framework upon which many campaigns are built on. However, due to its simplified nature, it does not fully account for lead behaviour from brand discovery to a sale.

This is where the dark funnel comes in; a new approach to the classic method with a view of what is not tracked by analytics platforms—and how you should effectively respond to this lack of data.

Combatting the dark funnel is essential for any B2B company that wishes to effectively nurture their leads, identify where they come from, and engage them when they are most likely to be sales-ready.

In this Definitive Guide, you will learn what the dark funnel is, the characteristics of dark social, and tactics to gain some light on invisible traffic.

What is the dark funnel?

The dark funnel is the part of the <u>sales funnel</u> that is not tracked by analytics platforms. In other words, it is the unseen buyer's journey, in which prospects become leads seemingly out of nowhere—and lead behaviour can not be identified by your Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform.

It is very common for many B2B companies to have a mysterious source of 'direct traffic' to specific web pages (such as blog posts), which were most likely not typed in by a prospect. This unattributed direct traffic is a huge part of the dark funnel.

Below we break down the audience of the sales funnel into tracked and untracked:

HOW THE DARK FUNNEL WORKS

The dark funnel (untracked)

The sales funnel (tracked)

The dark funnel (untracked)

Tracked and untracked leads at the bottom of the funnel

As you can see in the graphic above, the dark funnel and visible leads merge at the end of the journey. This means only looking at the sales funnel causes tunnel vision, in which several leads will apparently 'pop out of nowhere' in your CRM.

However, if you have the dark funnel in mind (and implement methods to track it), you will discover a large segment of your audience that is usually invisible. This will allow you to better determine your leads' behaviour, and therefore, the effectiveness of your campaigns.

What is dark social?

Dark social refers to social media traffic that is not attributed by analytics. In that sense, it is a part of dark funnel marketing (and perhaps one of the largest).

According to Statista (2019), **below are the most-used dark social media channels in the US and UK:**

- **63%:** Private messaging apps
- **54%:** Posts on social media accounts
- **51%:** Word-of-mouth offline/in-person
- **48%:** SMS (mobile phone)
- **37%:** Email

Indeed, since the time of the study, the increase of remote working in the past couple of years may have shifted more in favour of private messaging and social media accounts. This can be deduced by Hootsuite's and We Are Social's State of Digital 2021 report, with data showing that social media gained around 400 million users in 2021 (an increase of 9.9%).

Therefore, it is important to consider that most dark social happens on private messaging apps, which include Facebook Messenger, Telegram, and Whatsapp. **This means dark traffic originates from people sharing your links to others in their social circle.**

Analysing the many ever-changing factors shifting lead behaviour is one of the biggest challenges for marketers. Stay on top of the latest trends impacting leads with our Outlook 2022 report. ⟶

Our demand generation experts break down how to respond preemptively to changes in the B2B buyer's journey, the blurring line between B2B and B2C, and much more.

OUTLOOK 2022: WHAT'S NEXT IN B2B MARKETING?

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Internal vs. external dark funnel marketing data

The dark funnel is split into two categories of (untracked) data; your proprietary channels and external sources. Being aware of both helps you know where to start implementing strategies to monitor dark leads.

Internal dark funnel marketing data

- **Unidentified** visitors on your website.

- **'Buying Group Blindness'** (when CRMs track only one member of a buying group to the detriment of others).

- **Prospects** that have not filled in any forms yet.

- **'Second Lead Syndrome'** (when a second lead from a same account is not accounted for in your CRM, or marked as a duplicate by your sales/marketing team).

Verify your leads for free with the INFUSEmedia Lead Quality Grader ⟶

Powered by Let's Verify, our in-house team of lead verification specialists, our award-winning tool removes all non-qualified leads and duplicates from your database at no cost.

Get started now to receive your comprehensive Lead Quality Grader report on the status of your leads to guide your next steps.

External dark funnel marketing data

- **Product review** websites.

- **Unshared** data from content syndication partners.

- **Research** by prospects on competitors.

- **Industry blogs** or news outlets that feature your brand, but don't track/share analytics.

What is dark marketing?

Although it also uses the 'dark' terminology, this marketing method has no relation with the dark funnel whatsoever.

Dark marketing refers to segmented marketing campaigns that aren't public. For example, a personalised Facebook ad launched exclusively to followers that meet certain criteria.

That means it is 'dark' in the sense that it can't be seen by everyone online, rather than it being undetected by marketers.

Marketing campaigns rely on detailed knowledge of target segments, their needs, preferences, and essentially, how to reach them. Not sure where to start?

Read our Definitive Guide to B2B Market Segmentation for a full breakdown of segmentation methods, best practices and strategies to boost your campaigns. ⟶

An example of a B2B buyer's journey through the dark funnel

Visualising an abstract path through the dark funnel can be difficult. To ease the process, we have created a model of a possible B2B buyer's journey—and the touchpoints that will not be tracked by your CRM or analytics platforms.
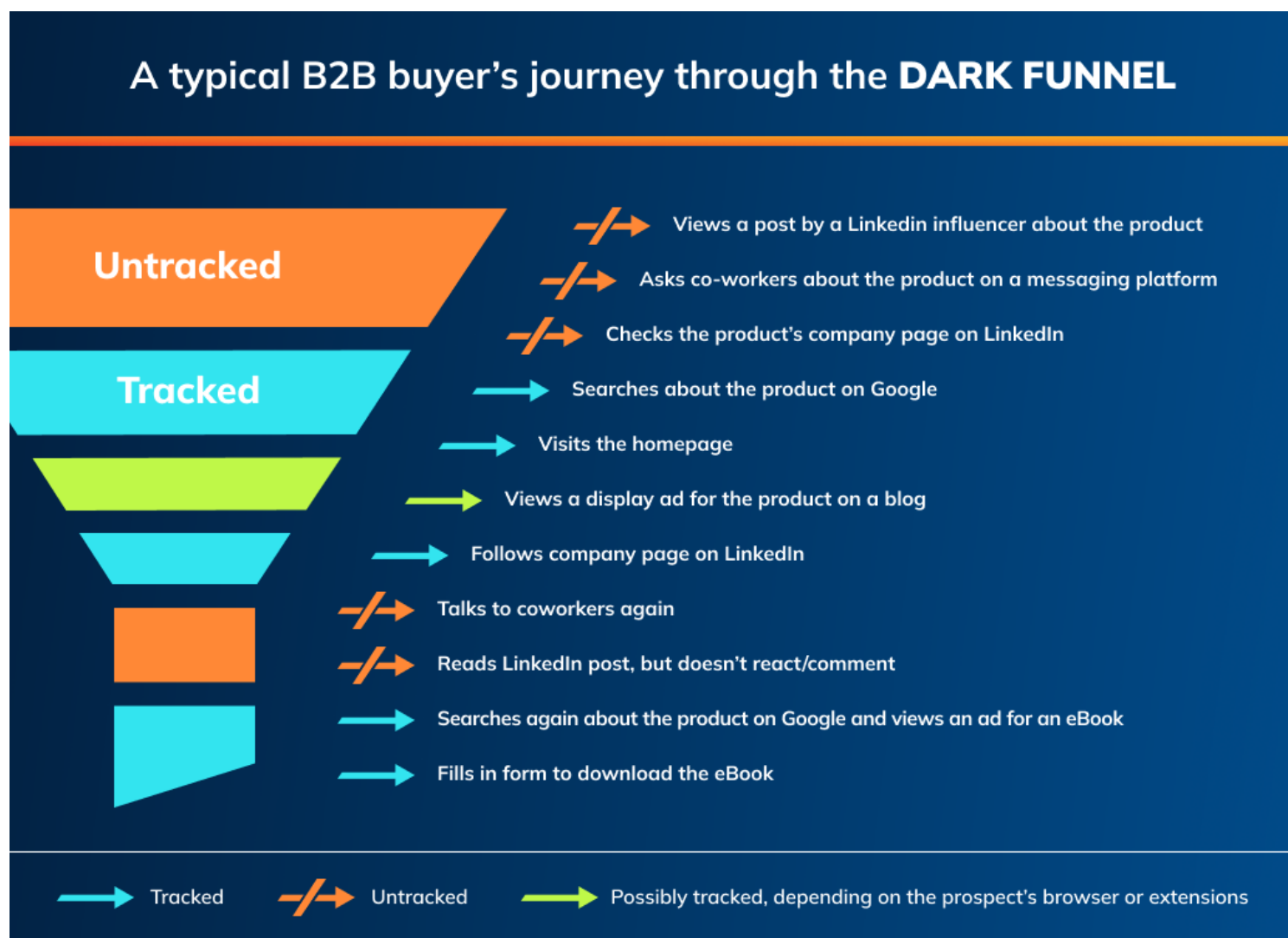
As shown in the breakdown above, **only 5 touchpoints out of 11 are tracked**, with one other potentially being tracked depending on uncontrollable factors (ad blockers, extensions, etc.).

In other words, without considering the possibility of a dark funnel, **the marketer might view the buyer's journey above as a simple (untrue), 5-step discovery process:**

- **Prospect** searches about the product on Google
- **Visits** the homepage
- **Follows** company page on LinkedIn
- **Searches** again about the product on Google and views an ad for an eBook
- **Fills** in form to download the eBook

This linear B2B marketing funnel is often too simple to be true, as each prospect discovers products in their own way and at their own speed. It is unlikely that their journey will be as convenient as them learning about the product little by little by searching on Google and LinkedIn.

Without knowledge of the dark funnel, marketers can be misled, and determine leads as sales-ready before the right time. Or even disregard possible interactions with co-workers and nurture them incorrectly.

Thus, it is crucial to fill in these gaps left by traditional CRM and analytics platforms to gain some understanding of lead activity in the dark funnel while discovering your brand.

Many marketing leaders are unaware of the hidden costs of bad leads on company revenue.

Watch this webinar with Alex Kesler, INFUSEmedia CEO, for insights into some of the surprising ways that bad data can impact your bottom line. $\longrightarrow$

How to shed light on the dark funnel: metrics and tracking platforms

Even if interactions in the dark funnel happen undetected by your analytics and CRM platforms, it is possible to start tracking what is going on beyond your predictable and visible sales funnel.

Below are seven tactics to track prospect behaviour in the dark funnel:

#1 Filter the 'direct traffic' on your analytics platform

A large mass of dark traffic appears as 'direct' on analytics platforms, as if the user typed in the URL themselves (or clicked a bookmark). This is rarely the case, especially if the URL is complex and hard to memorise.

If you are gaining significant traction on a blog post or webinar episode, take into consideration that its performance may have been influenced by peers sharing it on dark social media channels.

A workaround for this on Google Analytics would be to exclude direct traffic from any web pages that could have been memorised or bookmarked, such as a homepage or careers page. What will remain will then (mostly) be dark funnel traffic, and you can start to gain an understanding of how many visitors are coming from untracked URLs.

#2 Add user-friendly share buttons to your content

Considering that a large part of the dark funnel is because of dark social media sharing, one way to track these interactions is by displaying easy-to-use share buttons.

The more seamless the experience for the user, the more likely they are to interact. If sharing content with peers by clicking on a button is easier than copying and pasting the URL, then chances are they will opt for that. This way you will gain attributed traffic instead of staying in the dark.
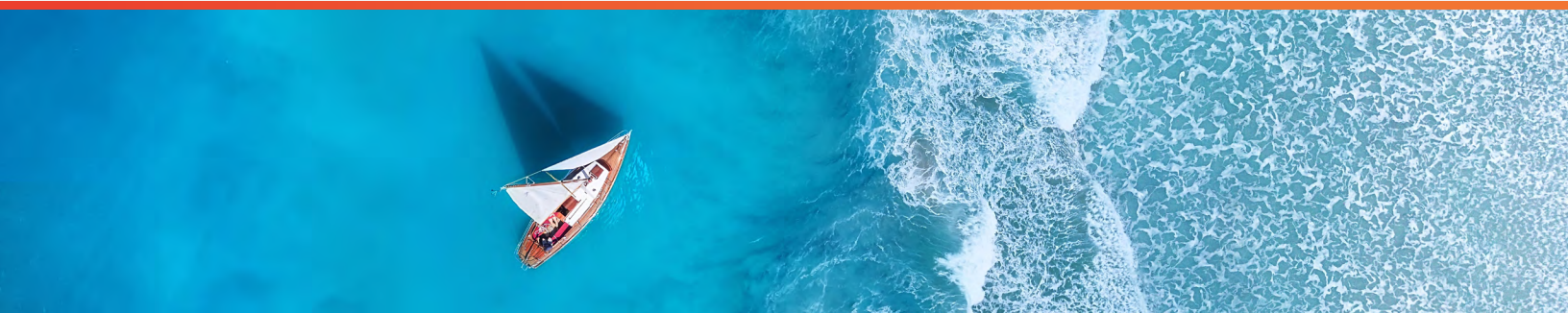
#3 Use social listening tools to track brand mentions

Social listening tools can be utilised to track brand mentions, as well as branded keywords. You can then set up alerts for whenever they are published on social media.

A platform that generates a substantial amount of dark traffic is Reddit, as many subreddits are focused on sharing content to start a discussion. While some of these Reddit users can be accessing your content undetected, you will have a better grasp of who they are if you are alerted of brand mentions on the platform.

It is also possible to logically attribute dark traffic this way. Imagine for example that a B2B influencer tweets about one of your blog posts. If after this, you gain a lot of direct traffic, you can probably deduce that it originated from this influencer's audience.

#4 Conduct surveys with clients gained from dark social

One way of identifying dark traffic is by learning from the clients you have gained from unattributed sources.

Interview these clients, or if you don't have time, simply add a 'How did you find us?' query to the sign-up forms on your website. This way, you can discover sources you didn't imagine, or gain some understanding of how many leads are coming from word-of-mouth marketing.

With this knowledge, you can start to implement tracking URLs (such as a referral code with a discount) to try to eliminate this dark traffic.

#5 Leverage big data tools

Big data platforms compile vast amounts of data to gain unique insights into lead behaviour. Also, some platforms have Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning algorithms, which can predict future behaviour.

In other words, it is possible to use this data to predict which leads will come from unattributed sources. You can also identify the characteristics of dark funnel leads to discover a 'dark funnel pattern' and where they discover your brand.

#6 Bridge the offline-online gap with QR codes

Part of the dark funnel comes from in-person events, such as trade shows. A way to track these interactions is by using QR codes, either on your stand, or any handouts your salespeople are giving to prospects.

By offering an incentive for scanning the QR code (such as a gift code or competition entry), you can guarantee that prospects will prefer to use it rather than type in the URL to access your website. This means another facet of your dark funnel has now become trackable.

#7 Distribute content on trackable content syndication platforms

Content syndication is perhaps one of the most important B2B marketing methods, however, many companies hire partners that don't efficiently track their readers.

This means you are left in the dark, with little insight into the success of content syndication, besides leads that: a) tell you that they discovered you on an outlet or; b) are part of a traffic spike shortly after publishing a piece on a syndication network.

However, estimating is not the best approach for combatting the dark funnel, so make sure to syndicate content solely with partners that are able to share actionable data on their readers with you. Including opt-in forms and trackable links in the syndicated pieces is also a way to combat this lack of data.

Read the CMO Guide to Modern Content Syndication for tactics to improve the ROI of your distribution campaigns ⟶

Is it possible to eliminate the dark funnel?

It is impossible to track every action of your leads and prospects, especially in an increasingly omnichannel space that is prioritising privacy and data encryption.

Whatsapp messenger for example encrypts its messages, which means marketing platforms are unable to collect any insights from keywords or user behaviour. The only trackable data is that of shared links with urchin tracking module (UTM) codes.

As privacy becomes a key priority for web users, evidenced by the announced death of cookies in 2023, marketing will become even darker as companies strive to find privacy-compliant methods of tracking lead behaviour.

So, to summarise, that means it is impossible to eliminate the dark funnel entirely. However, what you can do is employ an array of tracking tools to have as much visibility as possible.

How to prevent a dark funnel in the future

If you are lucky enough to not have a dark funnel in the time being,
or are starting a company from scratch, there are a few things you can
do to prevent the dark funnel from gaining any ground on your leads:

#1 Share all content with tracking codes

Promote all your content with UTM codes rather than a plain URL. Some platforms, such as HubSpot, do this automatically for content shared via email marketing and social media.

Even so, it is a good practice for your sales development representatives (SDRs), since they share a lot of content with prospects in LinkedIn messages or email in their nurturing campaigns.

If you want to get even more granular in your insights, each SDR can use a service such as bit.ly to make each of their links trackable and then you can pinpoint from which rep each lead is coming from.

#2 Create assets with unique URLs for Account Based Marketing campaigns

SDRs can share content with a unique URL for each account so you know the dark social comes from within a specific business (for example, sharing between buying committee members).

If your company is focusing on a set of specific accounts for an Account Based Marketing campaign, you can create unlisted content (that does not show up on search engines) with tracking codes for each account/group you are targeting.

This means you will be certain that you have gained engagement from those accounts, since they couldn't possibly come from anywhere else.

#3 Conduct polls with your audience (and industry-wide, if possible)

By conducting polls regularly, you can understand what content your audience is consuming and on which channels. If you do this with your leads and clients, then you will gain a better picture of the online behaviour of your audience and can adapt your tracking strategy.

For example, imagine that you conduct a poll and discover that 25% of your clients access a specific news outlet weekly. You can then launch display ads on that platform to gain some clicks, and thus track prospects that would otherwise remain in the dark.

You can conduct these polls on your own, but there are dedicated polling companies that can tap into more respondents in your industry for a more reliable analysis of their behaviour.

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Conclusion

The dark funnel will not vanish for B2B marketers, no matter how hard they try to track every step of the buyer's journey.

That being said, marketers should strive to fill in as many gaps as possible in lead behaviour throughout the buyer journey to gain transparency. By following the tactics mentioned above, you will have multiple trackers working in cohesion to identify as many leads as possible and shed light on irregularities, making the dark funnel less of a nuisance.

DO YOU NEED HELP TRACKING LEADS IN YOUR SALES FUNNEL?

INFUSEmedia has a proprietary network of 138+ million B2B decision makers, each tracked by our comprehensive ITCurated platform.

If you plan to distribute content with 100% visibility of every touchpoint, then contact our team of demand generation experts at **letstalk@infusemedia.com** $\longrightarrow$