ARS B2B Social Bridge

WHITEPAPER · 2026 EDITION

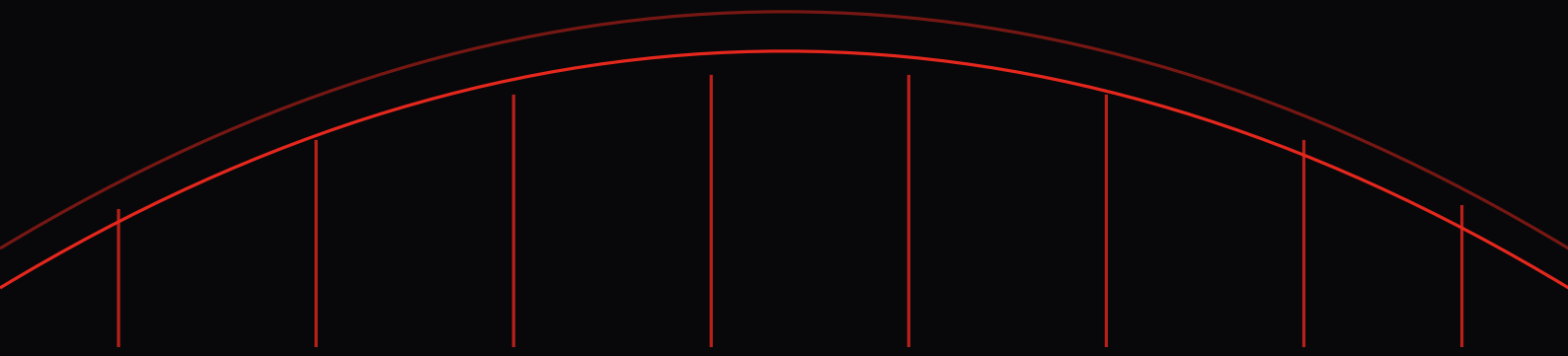
<1%

OF LEADS CONVERT TO CLOSED DEALS

From MQL to Verified Buyer

A qualification standard for B2B demand teams: Fit, Intent and a Human Check.

Forrester research cited by Simon Daniels, November 2023. The underlying study is not named.



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WHO THIS IS FOR

Marketing heads, demand generation managers, sales leaders and founders at B2B companies who have an MQL number their sales team does not trust.

HOW TO USE IT

Read chapters 2 and 3 to see the problem. Jump to chapter 4 for the standard, and use the checklist on page 17 to test your own lead definition today.

B2B Social Bridge

ARS B2B Social Bridge helps B2B companies reach verified buyers through qualified lead programmes built around quality.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The MQL is not dead. The lazy one should be.

B2B teams are asked to prove that marketing leads become pipeline. Most MQLs are built from one person's activity, scored by marketing, and passed to sales without anyone confirming that a real buyer exists. Sales stops trusting the number. This paper explains why, and sets out a practical standard to fix it.

<1%

of leads convert to closed deals

Forrester research cited by Simon Daniels, Nov 2023. Study not named.

94%

of buyers ranked shortlisted vendors by preference before contacting any vendor

6sense 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Study, nearly 4,000 responses. 6sense sells buyer-intent software.

46%

of B2B buyers were in a buying group of 2 to 3 people. A further 28% were in a group of 4 to 9.

Forrester, as cited in the same series.

99%+

of 114 B2B companies did not reply to a demo request within 5 minutes

Workato study. Workato sells lead-routing tools, so read it as directional.

The core argument

A lead is not a buyer until three things are true: the company **fits**, the buying signals are **real**, and a person has **confirmed** it. We call this the **Verified Buyer Standard**. It does not need a new tool. It needs a shared definition, a human check before handover, and one number both teams own.

What you will take away

- Why the MQL stalls, and the acceptance-rate test that shows it
- Three gaps: one person is not a buying group, the signal arrives late, follow-up is slow
- The Verified Buyer Standard: Fit, Intent and a Human Check
- How QBF and DualSignal run it, a scorecard, a 30-day plan and a 12-point self-assessment

DISCLOSURE

ARS B2B Social Bridge sells B2B lead generation services. GQL, QBF and DualSignal are ARS methods, not industry standards. Third-party statistics are named and dated, and where a source has a commercial interest, we say so.

CHAPTER 01 · THE PROBLEM

Why the MQL stalls

01

A MONDAY PIPELINE MEETING

Marketing reports 400 MQLs against a target of 350. Everyone is pleased. Then the head of sales says his team accepted barely 120 of them, and called even fewer.

400	350	120
MQLs reported	target	accepted by sales

Illustration, not a real client case.

Two people looked at the same number and reached opposite conclusions. Marketing saw a target beaten. Sales saw a pile of names with no buyers in it. That, in one scene, is the whole MQL debate.

The first number to check: acceptance rate

Acceptance rate is the share of MQLs that sales agrees to work. It is the cleanest test of whether the two teams mean the same thing by "qualified". The Pedowitz Group, a revenue marketing consultancy, gives these guide ranges.

<50%
too loose
The model is sending sales leads they see as unqualified.

65–75%
typical range
For a well-calibrated scoring model.

80%+
check the threshold
It may be too conservative, so good leads are held back.



Source: The Pedowitz Group, 2026. These ranges are the author's guidance, not measured data, and no sample is disclosed. Calibrate them to your own market.

Run this today

Pull the last 90 days of MQLs. Count how many sales accepted. If the answer is below half, your problem is probably the definition, not the volume.

ONE FUNNEL, THREE DEFINITIONS

"Qualified" means three different things

Most arguments about lead quality start here. The same word covers a click, a conversation and a confirmed buyer.

	MQL	SQL	GQL (ARS)
Says	"I am interested."	"I am ready."	"I fit, I am showing intent, and a person checked."
What was done	Downloaded a guide or clicked an email	Genuine purchase intent confirmed	Fit, intent and a human check together
Budget and authority	Not confirmed	Both confirmed	Fit and interest checked by a person; early-stage
Who owns it	Marketing	Sales	Shared handover
Measured by	Engagement and score	Pipeline value, close rate	Acceptance and progress to SQL

Source: ARS B2B Social Bridge, Qualified Buyer Framework and Growth Qualified Lead pages (October 2026). MQL, SQL and GQL definitions are ARS's working definitions.

Why sales distrusts the score

Pedowitz lists the usual reasons. They are about how the model was built, not about the idea of an MQL.

01

Sales was not in the design

The model reflects marketing's idea of qualified, so sales never owned it.

02

It counts activity, not fit

Sales judges fit, authority and timing. A score built on clicks measures none of them.

03

High scores never convert

Each miss erodes trust until reps stop opening the queue.

The ARS view

The MQL fails when nobody agreed what it means. The Starr Conspiracy, a B2B marketing agency, says teams that define qualified leads together often stop arguing about lead quality within one to two quarters. That is the agency's own observation, with no sample given, but it matches what we see. Agree the definition first. Then fix the signals.

02

CHAPTER 02 · THE GAPS

Three gaps behind the stall

01 One person is not a buying group

Lead scoring usually tracks one person's activity. A single person who downloads three assets looks the same on paper as three people from one company who each do one thing. The second case is far more interesting, because it looks like a buying group forming.

46%

of B2B buyers were in a group of 2 to 3

Forrester, as cited by Simon Daniels

28%

were in a group of 4 to 9

Forrester, same series

+50%

meeting-to-closed-won, when sales got 3+ buying group members

Forrester client feedback, not a published study. Treat as a signal.

Daniels argues that matching a single deal to a single MQL "makes no sense", because several people on the buyer's side usually contribute to one deal. Forrester's alternative is a revenue waterfall built on opportunities and buying groups instead of individual leads.

What it means for your CRM

Group leads by account. Three people from one company engaged in a month should rank above one person who downloaded ten PDFs. You can do this in most CRMs without new software.

02 The signal arrives late

By the time someone fills in your form, much of the decision may already be formed.

94%

of buyers ranked shortlisted vendors by preference before contacting any vendor

6sense 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Study, nearly 4,000 responses.

READ IT CAREFULLY

6sense sells buyer-intent software, so it has a reason to stress early signals. Even so, the direction is useful: an MQL is a late signal, not the first sign of interest.

GAP 03 · SPEED

A hot score is useless if nobody calls

Workato submitted a demo request to 114 B2B companies and timed the replies.

99%+

did not reply within 5 minutes

Of 114 B2B companies that received a demo request.

11h 54m

average email response

Only 1 of 114 sent a personalised email inside 5 minutes.

14h 29m

average phone response

Only 31% called at all. None called inside 5 minutes.

3h 32m vs ~13h

with a lead-routing tool, against without one

Companies using one replied in about 3 hours 32 minutes. Those without took nearly 13 hours.

Source: Workato, study of 114 B2B companies (study date not stated). Workato sells lead-routing tools, so read the figures as directional.

Speed is a qualification problem too

A fast reply to a lead nobody has checked only reaches the wrong person sooner. Speed matters most when the lead already passed a fit check and a human check. That is why the standard in chapter 4 puts all three together.

COUNTERPOINT: WHAT DEFENDERS OF THE MQL SAY

The Pedowitz Group suggests that a well-calibrated scoring model typically earns 65 to 75% sales acceptance. On that view, the MQL is not broken. It was badly specified and badly followed up. **Forrester's alternative, the revenue waterfall, needs account-level data that many teams do not yet have.** For them, a calibrated MQL with an agreed definition and quick follow-up may be the more realistic first step. Both views agree on one thing: one person's click is not enough evidence on its own.

CHAPTER 03 · THE STANDARD

The Verified Buyer Standard

A lead becomes a **Verified Buyer** only when it passes three tests. Fail any one and it goes back to nurture, not to sales.

FIT + INTENT + HUMAN CHECK = VERIFIED BUYER

01
Fit
The right company and the right person. Industry, size, role and region match your ideal customer profile, and the contact is a real, reachable person.

02
Intent
Real signs that they want a solution: repeat visits to key pages, pricing views, webinar attendance, content engagement and email clicks.

03
Human Check
A person confirms the facts in a real conversation: budget, authority, need and timeline. No robot can do this part.

The three tests, in one table

TEST	THE QUESTION	EVIDENCE	IT FAILS WHEN
Fit	Could this company and person actually buy?	ICP match, verified contact data	Personal email, no company, wrong size or role
Intent	Is anything telling us they are looking now?	Behaviour over a recent window	One old download, one open, no pattern
Human Check	Did a person confirm the project is real?	BANT confirmed in a conversation	Nobody spoke to them, or any one of the four is missing

THE RULE

No check, no handover. A lead that has not passed all three stays with marketing and keeps nurturing. This one rule changes what counts as a lead, and it is the reason sales starts trusting the number again.

Where this comes from

The standard combines three ARS methods: Growth Qualified Leads (fit, intent and a human check), the Qualified Buyer Framework (BANT confirmed before handover) and DualSignal (email first, then a real call). They are ARS methods, not an industry standard, and chapter 5 shows how each one runs.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Two leads. One is a buyer.

Lead A has the higher score. Lead B is the one sales should call.

LEAD A · SCORE 92

Priya M.

- Personal email, no company listed
- Visited the pricing page 5 times
- Opened 6 emails, downloaded 2 PDFs

Sales sees a number. Nothing else.

LEAD B · ACCOUNT, 3 PEOPLE

Northwind Software

- Mid-sized software company, second support hub opened
- Head of support, an engineer and a finance contact engaged
- A call confirmed budget, authority, need and a decision this quarter

TEST	LEAD A	LEAD B
Fit	**Fails: no company, no role**	Passes: right size, right roles
Intent	Strong activity from one person	Activity from three people, one account
Human Check	**None**	BANT confirmed on a call
Result	**Back to nurture**	**Hand to sales, with a brief**

Illustration. Both leads are invented to show the logic and are not client data. Northwind Software is a made-up company.

A starting scorecard

FIT · 50 POINTS · WHO THEY ARE

Role and authority	20
Company size and industry	15
Verified contact data	15

INTENT · 50 POINTS · WHAT THEY DO

Pricing, demo or trial action	25
Activity in the last 14 days	15
Depth of engagement	10

THE RULE OF THUMB

Fit 35+ and Intent 30+ means a qualification call the same day. Below that, keep nurturing. This is an ARS starting point, not an industry standard. Calibrate every weight against your own acceptance data.

05

CHAPTER 04 · THE METHOD

How to run it: QBF and DualSignal

The Qualified Buyer Framework (QBF) is the ARS qualification system. It combines real-time tracking, a custom qualification flow and prioritised, sales-ready leads. Here is the path a lead takes.

01
Track
Watch real-time signals: repeat visits to key pages, content engagement and email clicks.

02
Score
Scoring and thresholds agreed with you decide who is ready for a conversation.

03
Qualify
A real conversation confirms budget, authority, need and timeline.

04
Hand over
All four confirmed: to sales with a brief. Any missing: back to nurture.

The four confirmations (BANT)

A lead is passed on only when all four are confirmed. Each question decides whether a sales conversation is commercially viable right now.

CONFIRM	THE QUESTION	WHAT WE LOOK FOR
B · Budget	Does the company have the financial capacity to invest in a solution like yours?	No signed purchase order is needed. The money exists and a purchase is realistic.
A · Authority	Can this person make, or meaningfully influence, the decision?	Time spent on someone who cannot say yes is time sales cannot get back.
N · Need	Is there a genuine, active business problem your solution addresses?	A current pain point, not a future consideration.
T · Timeline	When do they plan to decide?	"Sometime next year" is still an MQL. "We are reviewing solutions this quarter" is an SQL.

Source: ARS B2B Social Bridge, Qualified Buyer Framework page (October 2026).

The line we hold
We do not count an outreach response as a qualified lead. Every lead is BANT-confirmed before it reaches your sales team.

A RAISED HAND IS NOT A READY BUYER
An MQL says "I am interested." It does not say "I am ready." **Passing every raised hand to sales is the most common and most expensive mistake in B2B lead management.**

QBF · YOUR RULES

Your criteria. Your qualification flow.

No two businesses qualify buyers the same way. QBF uses a custom flow built around your ideal customer and agreed with your sales team.

FIT CHECKS

- Industry
- Company size
- Job role
- Technology in use
- Region

INTENT SIGNALS

- Pricing page visits
- Content downloads
- Webinar attendance
- Email engagement

ALWAYS CONFIRMED IN THE CONVERSATION

- Budget
- Authority
- Need
- Timeline

Who owns each stage

Each stage has a clear owner and a clear exit condition. With that in place, leads move through the pipeline instead of getting stuck or dropped.

STAGE	OWNER	WHAT HAPPENS
1 · Awareness	Marketing	A prospect meets your brand through content, a webinar or targeted outreach.
2 · MQL	Marketing	Engagement crosses the agreed threshold. Marketing nurtures and watches for intent signals.
3 · Qualification	**ARS, with QBF**	Intent signals trigger a conversation that confirms all four BANT criteria. Leads either move on or return to nurture.
4 · SQL	Sales	All four confirmed. The lead moves to sales with a complete brief.
5 · Pipeline	Sales	After a productive first conversation, it becomes an opportunity.

Source: ARS B2B Social Bridge, Qualified Buyer Framework page (October 2026). The ownership model is ARS's recommended structure.

Why the agreement matters

The flow is built *with* your sales team, not handed to them. That answers the first reason sales distrusts a score (chapter 2): they were not in the design.

DUALSIGNAL · TWO TOUCHES

One channel leaves a gap. Two close it.

Most outreach relies on a single channel, usually email. Emails get opened, and then nothing happens. DualSignal pairs a targeted email with a follow-up call from a real person.

	EMAIL ALONE	DUALSIGNAL
Touchpoints	One: an email	Two: an email, then a call
When someone opens but stays silent	Usually nothing happens	A real person follows up to book the meeting
Interest is confirmed by	An open or a click	A human conversation
What reaches your CRM	A name and an email status	**A lead checked by a person, with call notes**

Source: ARS B2B Social Bridge, DualSignal page (October 2026).

A call that helps, not one that pitches

The second touch is a help-and-verify call made by a real person. It confirms the project exists and the context is right, in a way that feels consultative, not interrogative.

THE CALL IS

- A short, consultative conversation
- A check that the right person and project are real
- A way to understand the need and the timeline

THE CALL IS NOT

- A sales pitch
- A robocall or a pre-recorded message
- Pressure of any kind

What a help-and-verify call confirms

1. **Right person, right role**
   The contact can influence the decision.
2. **A real project**
   It is still active, not shelved.
3. **The need, in their words**
   Recorded for your sales team.
4. **Timeline and next step**
   Notes saved with the lead.

OUR POSITION

We do not sell appointments. We sell qualified conversations. A lead reaches your CRM only after it has triggered both a digital signal and a human signal.

RUNNING IT RESPONSIBLY

Touches in step. Persistent, never pushy.

A structured sequence can run over three to four weeks. Each email and call has a job, and the timing lets them support one another. Every campaign is tuned to its audience.

WEEK 1
Introduce
A personal email and LinkedIn engagement, written for the person's role.

WEEK 2
Follow up
A second email. A call to people who opened but stayed quiet.

WEEK 3
Add value
Useful content for engaged contacts, with a second friendly call attempt.

WEEK 4
Close the loop
A final check-in. Confirmed leads go to your CRM. The rest return to nurture.

Source: ARS B2B Social Bridge, DualSignal page (October 2026). An example sequence, not a fixed rule.

Standards every email and call must meet

1. **An honest subject line**
   Never a trick, such as a fake "Re:".
2. **Relevant to the person**
   Linked to their role and industry.
3. **A clear sender**
   Accurate routing information.
4. **A real postal address**
   The sending entity's physical address.
5. **A one-click way out**
   No login, no fees, straight to suppression.
6. **Real calls only**
   No robocalls, no pre-recorded pitches.

Gates before any campaign goes out

GATE	WHAT IT DOES
Frequency capping	Limits how often one person can be contacted, so outreach stays a polite business inquiry.
Do-not-call checks	Business numbers checked against regional Do Not Call registries and the CTPS in the UK. Requests to stop are honoured.
Clean, verified data	Role-based addresses such as info@, known spam traps and honeypots filtered out. Addresses verified in real time.
Authenticated sending	Every sending domain secured with SPF, DKIM and DMARC.

A note on the rules
Rules differ by country. See the ARS Anti-Spam Policy, EU GDPR Policy and UK GDPR pages, and take legal advice for your own campaigns. This paper is not legal advice.

CHAPTER 05 · THE HANDOVER

The hand-over brief

05

A qualified lead should reach sales with context. This example brief is for a made-up company, Northwind Software.

LEAD BRIEF · EXAMPLE

Northwind Software

BANT CONFIRMED

COMPANY BACKGROUND

A mid-sized software company. It recently opened a second support hub and is growing its support team.

STATED CHALLENGES

New support hires take too long to become productive, and onboarding is still done by hand.

QUALIFICATION STATUS

Budget	Confirmed
Authority	Confirmed
Need	Confirmed
Timeline	Decision this quarter

ENGAGEMENT HISTORY

Opened three emails, read the onboarding guide and took a call with our team.

RECOMMENDED ENTRY POINT

Start with onboarding time. Offer a short walk-through rather than a full demo.

Illustration based on the ARS lead brief format. Not client data.

The promise between the two teams

The standard only holds if both teams keep their side of it. This is an ARS suggestion, and you should agree the numbers together.

MARKETING PROMISES

- Only leads that passed Fit, Intent and the Human Check
- A brief on every lead
- The scoring rules, shown to sales
- One shared definition, in writing

SALES PROMISES

- First contact inside the agreed window
- Accept or reject every lead
- A reason code for every rejection
- Stage updates in the CRM

Reason codes for a rejected lead

Wrong role	Wrong company size	No budget	No need	Bad data	Already in the CRM

Treat rejections as data

A rejected lead with a reason code is feedback. Review the codes weekly and change the scoring rules. A rejection with no reason teaches nobody anything.

CHAPTER 06 · MEASUREMENT

The scorecard

Measure every stage separately. A single overall conversion rate hides the stage that is leaking. Where a published reference exists, it is named. Where none does, set your own baseline in the first 30 days.

METRIC	WHY IT MATTERS	REFERENCE
Sales acceptance rate	Shows whether both teams mean the same thing by "qualified".	65–75% typical; below 50% is too loose (Pedowitz guidance, not measured data)
Time to first contact	Shows follow-up discipline. Measure it from the CRM timestamp, not the team's estimate.	Observed average: 11h 54m by email, 14h 29m by phone (Workato, 114 companies)
Verified share	Leads handed over with all four BANT items confirmed, as a share of all leads handed over.	Target 100%. No published benchmark; set your own baseline
Multi-contact accounts	Shows how many accounts show a buying group, not one raised hand.	No published benchmark. Forrester: most buyers sit in a group of 2 or more
Reject rate by reason	Shows which rule in the score is wrong.	Track weekly; fall over time
Cost per verified opportunity	A better cost measure than cost per lead, which rewards volume.	Set your own baseline

Sources: The Pedowitz Group (2026); Workato; Forrester, as cited by Simon Daniels (Nov 2023). The remaining metrics are ARS's recommendations. Figures differ across studies because they measure different stages and markets, so use them as a starting point and replace them with your own 90-day data.

A simple monthly scorecard

QUALITY

Acceptance rate
Verified share
Reject reasons

SPEED

Median time to first contact
Time from qualified to handover
Share inside the agreed window

REVENUE

Lead to opportunity
Cost per verified opportunity
Pipeline from verified leads

One number to take to leadership

Report **cost per verified opportunity**. It shows what a conversation sales will actually value costs, and it stops volume from hiding a weak funnel. An honest acceptance rate will teach you more than a hundred extra MQLs.

CHAPTER 07 · ROLL-OUT

Your 30-day rollout

You do not need a new tech stack to start. You need agreement, discipline and a weekly rhythm. This plan is an ARS suggestion and should be adapted to your team.

Week 1 Agree

- Pull 90 days of MQLs and count acceptance
- Write the one-page definition with sales
- List fit criteria and exclusions

Week 2 Split

- Score fit and intent separately
- Let old activity expire
- Add a reason code to every rejection

Week 3 Verify

- Group leads by account
- Add the human check for top-tier leads
- Confirm BANT before handover

Week 4 Hand over

Use the lead brief

Agree the response window

Publish the first scorecard

Five quick wins for this week

1. **Export your last 100 accepted and 100 rejected leads.**
   Look for patterns in industry, size and role.
2. **Measure your real first-response time.**
   Use the CRM timestamp, not the team's estimate.
3. **Block free email domains on high-intent forms,**
   or route them to nurture instead of sales.
4. **Add a required "reason for rejection" field**
   that sales must complete before closing a lead.
5. **Book a 30-minute meeting**
   between marketing and sales to review the rejected list together.

Expect an adjustment period

Lead volume often dips early, as unverified leads drop out. Judge the programme on acceptance, pipeline and cost per verified opportunity, not on the raw count of MQLs.

THE POINT OF ALL OF THIS

The MQL is not dead. But the lazy version of it, one person, one score, one handoff, probably should be.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Is your lead definition verified?

Tick each statement that is true today. Be honest. Partly true counts as no.

DEFINE

- [ ] We have a written one-page definition of a qualified lead, signed by sales.
- [ ] Sales helped write the scoring rules.
- [ ] Fit and intent are scored separately and shown separately.
- [ ] Old activity fades and mismatches lose points.

VERIFY

- [ ] We group leads by account, not only by person.
- [ ] A human confirms top-tier leads before handover.
- [ ] Budget, authority, need and timeline are confirmed and recorded.
- [ ] Contact data is verified before a lead is counted.

HAND OVER

- [ ] Every lead reaches sales with a brief.
- [ ] Sales accepts or rejects each lead with a reason code.
- [ ] We know our real time to first contact.
- [ ] We report acceptance rate next to MQL volume.

Your score

0 to 4
Leaking badly
Start with the one-page definition and the acceptance rate this week.

5 to 8
Partly built
Add the human check and the lead brief next.

9 to 12
Strong foundation
Tune weights against acceptance data every month.

Your next step

Whatever your score, begin with one number: what share of your last 90 days of MQLs did sales accept? Everything else in this paper follows from that answer.

WANT A SECOND PAIR OF EYES?

Book a free lead quality review with ARS B2B Social Bridge.

We will look at your lead definition, your acceptance rate and your handover, and tell you what we would fix first.

arsb2bsocialbridge.com/contact-us

ABOUT ARS B2B SOCIAL BRIDGE

Verified buyers. Faster pipeline.

ARS B2B Social Bridge helps B2B companies reach the right buyers through qualified lead programmes: Growth Qualified Leads, the Qualified Buyer Framework, DualSignal outreach, account-based programmes and live webinars. We connect marketing effort to the pipeline your sales team can actually close.

Book a free lead quality review →

arsb2bsocialbridge.com

Sources and methodology

Statistics come from published sources, retrieved in October 2026. Where a figure is cited through a secondary source, the page says so. Figures differ between studies because they measure different stages and sample different markets. Where a source sells related products, the page says that too. Illustrations are labelled and are not client data.

SOURCE	USED FOR
Forrester, via Simon Daniels, "Saying Goodbye to MQLs" series (Nov 2023)	Fewer than 1% of leads convert to closed deals (study not named); buying groups of 2 to 3 (46%) and 4 to 9 (28%); a 50% rise in meeting-to-closed-won from client feedback; the revenue waterfall
6sense, 2025 B2B Buyer Experience Study (nearly 4,000 responses)	94% of buyers ranked shortlisted vendors by preference before contacting any vendor. 6sense sells buyer-intent software
The Pedowitz Group (2026)	Acceptance ranges (65 to 75% typical, below 50% too loose, 80%+ check the threshold); reasons sales distrusts scoring. Author guidance, not measured data
Workato, study of 114 B2B companies	Response times to a demo request; effect of lead routing. Workato sells lead-routing tools
The Starr Conspiracy	Teams that define qualified leads together often stop arguing within one to two quarters. The agency's own observation
ARS B2B Social Bridge, GQL, QBF and DualSignal pages (Oct 2026)	Definitions, BANT, the QBF path, the DualSignal sequence and standards. ARS methods, not industry standards

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